

NELIA ALARCON

the  
broken  
note

REDWOOD KINGS BOOK THREE

# THE BROKEN NOTE

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WRITTEN BY NELIA  
ALARCON

THE REDWOOD KINGS Series

*The Darkest Note*

*The Ruthless Note*

*The Broken Note*

The Plutonian Warrior's Series

*The Alien Warrior's Mate*

*The Alien Warrior's Woman*

*The Alien Warrior's Heart*

*The Alien Warrior's Vow*

Mates Of The Plutonians

*Made For The Alien Warrior*



## ABOUT THIS BOOK

**This cruel king won't stop until he makes a queen of me.**

Dutch Cross is rich, powerful, and possessive.

I gave him too much of me and now it's too late to run.

Yet it's what I do.

Far, far from the villain of the story.

But the thing about villains is...

They always drag you back to the dark.

And when a secret that should have stayed buried rises from the grave, I have no choice but to join hands with the enemy.

Lust.

Desire.

Deception.

The very boy who destroyed me is now my only salvation.

There are more beasts at Redwood than I can count.

But I didn't fight my way into this elite world just to leave with nothing.

I've been broken into something stronger and I have Redwood's cruel prince in the palm of my hand.

They think I'm weak and powerless? Fine.

I'll bend all the monsters to my will and show Redwood what a queen looks like.

# CHAPTER ONE

CADENCE

“Mom.”

The name slips past my lips with a hint of fear and a swell of nausea. My fingers tighten on the door jamb—the one Hunter helped me switch a couple weekends ago.

The fixed lock. The barred exit. The change that lured mom out of the shadows.

If I’d known, I probably wouldn’t have made the effort.

“Daughter.” Mom tilts her head.

The living room falls into a deeper quiet as she stares at me. Brown eyes. Brown hair. Lips a dark red—the color of dried blood. Like the scabs I used to pick at obsessively when I was a child.

My skin starts itching.

I hear the rising notes.

D# major.

The saddest key in music.

The perfect background for mom’s haunting.

My mother rises from the couch. Always with that regal manner, even though we’re dirt poor and destitute.

She used to be beautiful. A pageant queen, mom always boasted. *I won the Miss Teen Pageant.*

One of her many stories.

Addicts are allergic to the truth.

What she won was the genetic lottery. But like all lottery winners who foolishly splurge their winnings and end up worse than before, mom's beauty is desperate. Like a fraying rope, tying together what little appeal her face and painfully thin body have left to give.

Under the weight of her bad decisions, the cracks always show. Makeup and a nice smile can't hide it.

"What are you doing here?" I snap. Despite my heated tone, my nail scratches against the glossy paint of the doorknob. The heel of my pumps slap the floor as my knee bounces uncontrollably.

"I found this under your bed." Mom whips up two fingers. Perched between them is a golden condom.

My heart slaps hard against my ribs.

A flood of images rush my mind.

Dutch with amber eyes burning as he growled, '*Take off your clothes and spread your legs.*'

Dutch cradling my face and kissing me. '*You're doing great, Cadey. Just relax, baby. You feel so good.*'

Dutch pushing into me and filling me with an explosion of pain and pleasure. So much I thought I'd burst.

My muscles coil and I subconsciously brush my hand against my school skirt, right over the deepest bruise on my hip. The strength of his hands when he'd gripped me left marks all over my body. Marks that soaked right through to my soul.

Mom arches an eyebrow. "I see." A slow, smug grin spreads across her face. "Good for you, Cadey. I thought you'd be a square all your life. You make me proud."

It's instant the way her words crush the memories. Twist and turn them into something crude. Ugly. Despicable.

Everything beautiful falls to ruin in her tainted hands. I shouldn't have expected this to be different. Yet all I want to do is shower until my skin bleeds.

“Was it your first time?”

My eyes lift to hers.

Can't she see? Can't she tell that I'm uncomfortable? That I'm angry? That I'm bleeding inside?

Or does she see and not care?

I've always wondered.

Is she that oblivious or is she that evil?

Mom's brown eyes light up with excitement. She used to look at me like that when payday rolled around and she had her dealer on standby.

“Oh, I can tell it was painful. Poor thing. It's always horrible the first time. Especially if he doesn't know how to please a woman. Next time will be better. Once you know what you like—”

“I told you not to come back here,” I hiss.

Mom's spiel dies a violent death.

She goes still and a flash of something cruel passes through her eyes. In a blink, it's gone and she's back to her smiley self.

“Why wouldn't I come here? This is my house.”

“*Your* house?” I scoff. “Rick and I are the ones paying rent and keeping the lights on. What have you done, mom?”

“Cadey—”

I cut her off with a sharp gesture. “I let you stay the weekend because Viola wasn't home. It's Monday. School will be over soon. I don't want her to see you.”

“Oh, loosen up, Cadey.” Mom tsks. “I let you yell at me all you wanted this weekend. Are you still not over it?”

*“Over it?”* My eyes bulge.

I shouldn't let her needle me. I should brush her off and let it go. But she's an expert at digging under the skin. She pushes at the cuts hidden deep inside. It's instinctual to react. To bawl out. To clamor for justice when someone presses on an open wound.

“What exactly is it that I'm supposed to get over, mom?” I hiss. “The fact that you faked your own death? The fact that you roped me into your ridiculous ‘suicide’? Had me lie to the police and burn some poor woman's corpse?”

“That corpse was a verified Jane Doe.” Mom sticks a pointer at me. “And why don't you yell a little louder for the entire apartment building to hear?”

I take a threatening step toward her and she inches back.

“I don't care why you had to die and I don't give a damn about the reasons you're alive again either, but for my sister's sake you need to stay dead. At least until I can find a way to explain this to Viola.”

“Explain what?” A sweet voice pours behind me and sends a cold shiver down my spine.

No.

Viola can't be here.

Not while mom is in the living room like a freaking ghost come to life.

Panicked thoughts bombard my head.

I reach desperately for a solution.

But it's no use.

Mom makes her move first. When she breezes past me to reveal herself, I smell death. I smell disaster.

I smell the end of everything I hold dear.

“Mom.” I croak. And then I react.

Desperately.

Without thought.

I wrap my arms around her and try to jerk her back, away from the doorway, away from Viola.

It's too late.

Vi's sharp gasp and the clatter of her cell phone on the ground are what I hear first. Slowly, almost painfully, my eyes move to my little sister's face. Pale skin. Dark hair. Pretty. Like mom.

Except her makeup isn't a tool to hide how tough life has been. My sister's makeup enhances her round cheeks and pretty lips. Her sweet, innocent eyes.

Eyes that are darkening with horror and pain as she stares at our mother.

"What... who is this? Why does she look like mom?"

"Vi—"

"It's me, baby." Mom coos. "I'm back."

"*Back?* But..." Vi's face turns as white as a sheet. "You were dead. You..." Her gaze shifts to me. "Did you know?"

My mouth opens, but no sound comes out.

Viola's eyes narrow.

Something shatters in my heart when I see her look of betrayal.

I take a step forward, but she whips around and takes off at a breakneck speed, sprinting down the hallway and dragging my heart with her.

\* \* \*

*Jinx: Dirty Secrets Don't Stay Buried*

*Redwood Prep has been known to cough up earth-shattering scandals, but I might have just stumbled on the biggest of them all.*

*You know what they say. Don't dig up the body in the backyard, or its ghost just might pay you a visit.*

*Until the next post, keep your enemies close and your secrets even closer.*

*- Jinx*

## CHAPTER TWO

CADENCE

I call Dutch.

Not because I want to.

In fact, he's the absolute last person I wish to talk to right now.

Especially after... that night.

But I don't have a choice.

My sister is missing.

"Have you seen Viola?" I cry, trying to keep my voice steady and failing.

Night has fallen. The shadows are thick around my neighborhood. Dark clouds choke out the stars so all I can see when I lift my head is a heavy smog.

"Vi? No." He sounds surprised.

"If you see her, call me right away," I beg. I'm frantic. Desperate. It escapes in my voice, but I don't even care.

My sister is missing.

Four hours ago, Viola thought mom was dead. Now, mom is walking, talking and turning our lives upside down like she used to.



I don't know what an impulsive teenager reeling with shock, anger, and frustration might do.

Scream?

Rage?

Throw a tantrum?

Fine.

She can do all that.

*With* me.

*At* me.

I don't care.

I just don't want her to get hurt.

My sister is the most important person in the world to me. If I lose her, no—I won't think like that.

If even the smallest hair on her head is harmed, it'll be my fault.

"Please," I add. My fingers tremble and the cell phone almost slips out of my hand. "Please. If she calls you, tell me."

"Braahms, where are you?" Dutch's voice is velvet-steel.

My heart pounds.

My head is swimming.

There's a relentless and pulsing fear blossoming in my stomach. Every part of me is aching with anxiety.

*Viola, where are you?*

"Cadence!" Dutch calls my name more forcefully.

I snap back to myself.

"I'm..." I inhale a shaky breath. "I'm in front of the convenience store in my neighborhood."

"Stay there."

My eyebrows tighten and I straighten instantly. "I'm not staying here. I need to find my sister."

“Damn it, Cadey. I want to help.”

“I don’t need your help.”

“And I don’t give a damn. I’m coming to get you. Don’t fight me on this.” I hear a door creak open and shut. A moment later, Dutch’s low murmur is met with another voice.

One of his brothers?

My phone buzzes with a text.

I hang up and eagerly check it.

It’s not Viola.

*Breeze: No sign of her at the mall.*

*Cadence: Would she have gone back to your house?*

*Breeze: I just texted my mom. Vi’s not there.*

I grit my teeth and squeeze my eyes shut, struggling to keep myself together. The world is tilting at the edges, crackling like paper held to the flame.

Disintegrating.

Bit by bit.

*Vi, please be okay.*

My options are dwindling. Vi isn’t at the mall—possibly her most favorite place in the world. Or the park. Or the library. If she isn’t with any of her friends, with Breeze or with her new buddies The Kings then...

I don’t know.

I’ve hit a brick wall.

Tears of frustration press against my eyes.

My feet hurt. I’ve been walking for hours, wondering if maybe Vi is hiding out right in our neighborhood.

She dropped her cell phone in the doorway earlier and she doesn’t have a lot of money. At least, not enough to go too far.

But being close to home brings its own problems.

Now that night is falling, those who like to play in the dark will be creeping out of their holes. Gunshots. Casualties. There's no need to be humane when the sun goes down and your sins are hidden in the black.

If Vi runs into some thugs looking for trouble—

My stomach feels sick.

I ignore my aching feet and jog forward, heading away from the light of the convenience store and turning down a dark alley.

*Please be okay, Vi. Please, please, please.*

I slip out of the alley's mouth and notice a group of guys hanging out at the corner of the street. Cigarette smoke blows from their lips and they laugh loudly.

Alarm bells clang in my head. I eye the group warily. I can tell, just from a look, that they're dangerous. Hardened eyes. Hardened smiles. Criminals with no sensibilities.

Fear trips through my veins.

I turn the other way, knowing better than to cross their path.

*Vi, where are you? Please tell me you didn't encounter someone like them.*

The streetlamp overhead flickers as I quicken my pace.

Footsteps thump behind me.

Damn it.

My body coils.

Fight or flight instincts rear to attention.

I dig my fingers into my skirt and increase my speed.

Answering footsteps quicken right behind me.

My heart flogs my ribs and I bite down on my bottom lip to quiet my rising panic. Self-preservation roars inside me.

*What can I use as a weapon?*

I swallow hard as I pat my skirt down.

Nothing.

All I brought when I tearfully fled the apartment was my cell phone.

I cast my eyes to the ground, looking for a brick or a rock that I can grab and wield, but there's nothing. Not even a beer bottle that I can smash into their heads.

A tall shadow spills in front of me, indicating that my stalker is getting closer.

My shoulders wind up to my ears.

I can't get dragged away.

Not when I still haven't found Viola.

The shadow extends. My pursuer is about to grab me.

I wait until he puts a hand on my shoulder and then I shove my arm back with incredible force. The bony point of my elbow connects with his stomach.

His grip on me weakens. I hear his soft grunt, but I don't wait around to assess the damage. My pumps slam against the ground as I take off.

I'm focused on making it to the bus stop ahead, when I feel a hand close around my wrist. I'm propelled in a sharp turn and, a minute later, I'm slammed against the side of a brick building.

Adrenaline courses through my veins when I feel a body covering mine. I fight like an animal, but something inside makes me pause. Strange. My attacker smells like Dutch. And his long, muscular frame feels like Dutch too.

My body adjusts under him, fitting into the places it had found that night. The night Dutch took off his clothes. The night he made me see stars.

It's familiar. This strength. These sinewy muscles.

I spot the tattoos creeping up tan skin and into the sleeve of a white T-shirt.

Unnerved, I lift my head and startle at a pair of glowing amber eyes hovering in front of my face.

“Dutch?” I breathe out.

Dutch’s nostrils flare. Full lips are slightly open, releasing a sharp, panting breath. His blond hair is wind-torn. His eyes hauntingly beautiful.

“I told you to stay put,” he growls.

My eyes bug.

“What if it wasn’t me who was following you? What if it was someone with bad intentions?”

“When have you ever had good intentions toward me?” I snap. As my mind clears and the panic gives way to embarrassment, I can’t help lashing out.

He distracts me.

Undoes me.

I’m worried about my sister and yet, with Dutch so close, my thoughts are getting cloudy.

His warm breath fans my face. Despite the anger in his tone, I sense genuine worry lurking beneath his stony expression.

“You’re killing me, Brahms,” he murmurs. To my surprise, he gently brushes a strand of hair away from my face. “Damn it.”

Extra footsteps thunder towards us.

Zane and Finn sprint into view. They’re not alone.

Sol is with them too. His eyes lock on mine and something strange passes through his expression. He looks heavy. Guilty. A little unhinged.

My gaze returns to Dutch. “What are you all doing here?”

“It’s not to see the sights, obviously,” Zane says, running a hand through his hair.

“We’re here to help,” Finn adds. His voice is deep and calm as always.

Dutch steps back and allows me to detach myself from the wall. His jaw muscles clench with determination when he growls, “We’re here to find your sister.”

## CHAPTER THREE

### DUTCH

I keep my mouth shut as my brothers, Sol and I flock Cadence and walk her through the dangerous south side streets.

I keep my mouth shut when I see her limping into convenience stores and computer cafes. Into high school gyms, ducking under chain link fences and crawling into graffiti-stained buildings.

I keep my mouth shut when Sol suggests we split up, and I even swallow back my words when he stupidly offers to go with Cadence.

As if I would ever let that happen.

And Cadey, smart girl, shuts him down right away.

Then she says she'll be better off alone.

A little less smart of her.

We both know that isn't an option.

"You don't have to come with me," Cadence mumbles, long legs eating up the sidewalk as she hobbles down the street.

It's late.

Late enough that everyone who sees us coming arches a brow—not at our faces—but at the watch on my wrist, the shoes on my feet, and the dollar signs they all amount to.

We're keeping to the main road, the one with a working lamppost and a few open bars. It's easy to imagine what would happen if we were traipsing through dark alleys at this time of night.

Dark alleys.

Kind of like the one I found Cadence in tonight.

At the memory of her scared and running, my knuckles clench and my body tenses with frustration.

I take it back.

She's definitely not a smart girl.

"I can handle it from here," Cadence insists. Her words are slow. Her eyes are at half-mast. White teeth sink into her plump bottom lip as she struggles to keep her pain hidden. "I'm—"

"Say 'fine.'" I tilt my chin up. My voice is deadly cold. Chilly. Threatening. "I dare you."

Other people would shudder.

Other girls would flinch.

Cadey doesn't.

My tone brings the spark of defiance alive in her. She stops in the middle of the sidewalk and whirls around with a spray of pretty hair and delicate fury.

"I don't care that you're following me around, but I won't have you growling at me and making an already terrible situation worse. If you're going to be like that, just leave me alone."

I stand, hands in the pockets of my jeans, as she rips the air from my lungs. With just one flash of her brown eyes, I'm right back under her spell.

Hell.

So much for giving her room.

After taking her virginity and leaving my version of handcuffs on her kitchen table, I figured Cadey would need



some space to think.

I gave her about twelve hours.

And it's all I can damn well give her.

This girl, straight, wind-torn hair all over, a top buttoned to the neck and a flared Redwood Prep skirt at mid-thigh is going to be my obsession for life. The sooner she accepts that, the easier all our lives will be.

I stalk toward her.

She eases back, a hint of apprehension in her gaze. "Dutch..."

I lower myself halfway to the ground.

"Don't even think..."

One arm closes around her back and the other sweeps her legs out from under her. She squeals in my ears and flails as she loses her balance.

I tuck her into my chest, propping her up against me.

"Put me down!" she yells.

I firm my grip instead.

The way she wiggles is a distraction. She's rubbing her backside all over me and making my blood hot.

I tighten my fingers on her back to keep my thoughts focused. If I start letting the animal in my pants take over, I won't be able to stay on task.

"Why was your sister upset tonight?" I growl, my heart beating fast.

I can't help it.

Once Cadey is close to me, my body goes berserk.

Taking a deep breath, I control my thoughts and add, "Did you two fight?"

"No, we didn't," she snaps. Then the light in her eyes dims. "It's complicated."

I take note of her expression. It's my first time seeing Cadence Cooper so defeated.

Even that first day, when she ducked away from my gaze and hid behind her textbook, there was still a spark. There was still a reckless courage.

But now?

It's like the fire's pattering out, on its last dying breath.

My heart tightens harder than my pants did. She's squeezing the freaking life out of my chest. A sign that, whatever *this* is, it's about more than just sex and revenge.

Seeing her hurting is enough to stop me in my tracks.

Seeing her in pain makes me want to burn the world down.

I pass the beaten-down community center and push the door of a small pharmacy with my shoulder.

A man with dark skin and skittish eyes jumps to his feet. He sees Cadey being held captive in my arms, sees the angry look on my face and his body starts shaking.

"I-I don't want no trouble," he mumbles in a heavy accent.

I advance anyway.

The door bangs shut behind me.

"What are you doing?" Cadey hisses.

I ignore her question and set her on top of the counter.

The shopkeeper's eyes widen.

Cadence scowls at me, presses one arm down and moves as if she'll hop off. "I don't have time for this. I need to find \_\_\_"

"Set one foot on the floor and you won't like what happens next."

She freezes, her chest heaving and her eyes burning me to a crisp.

I hold her gaze, letting her know that I'm good for the threat.

Cadey backs down, but she's not happy about it. Anger flushes her cheeks red and emphasizes the delicate line of her jaw.

The shopkeeper makes a sound of annoyance. "Hey, man. This isn't a playground. And you can't put her on the counter like that—"

I stick a hand into my pocket. His mouth snaps shut and he automatically raises both hands in the air.

When I take out a wallet instead of a gun, he sighs in relief.

Thumbing through the bills inside, I slam a stack on the counter.

The money disappears before I can blink and his tone becomes soft and accommodating.

"Would you also like to sit?" He gestures to the counter. "Sir?"

"I need medicine and band-aids."

"Coming right up." The guy flies around the counter.

I drop to a crouch in front of Cadey and grab her thigh.

She kicks at me. "What are you doing?"

I firm my grip and carefully wiggle her foot out of the worn shoes with the scuff marks all over it. She hisses and I move even slower, trying my best not to hurt her.

The shoe clops to the ground.

"Oof." The shopkeeper stops behind me with the items I asked for. His nose scrunches. His eyes are locked on Cadey's foot. "That must hurt."

Fury whips through me at the sight of the blood staining her white socks. I feel the volatile darkness thrumming through my veins, aching to erupt in as violent and loud a manner as possible.

Another deep breath.

Another.

Another.

Cadey's voice is soft, sheepish. "It looks worse than it feels."

I tilt my head up and pin her with a look so heated that she curls back.

"I'm really okay, Dutch." Her eyes skitter past me. Down. Up to the ceiling. To the condoms behind the counter. Her entire face turns red and she quickly looks away. "We're wasting time here."

"She'll need slippers," I address the shopkeeper in a thin voice. A false calm. Inside, I'm shaking. "And something to drink."

"You got it." He zips away.

I take the antiseptic and break the seal.

"Dutch."

"You've been looking for Vi without a plan, and that obviously isn't working." *Don't shake, Dutch. Focus or you'll hurt her.* I dip a Q-tip into the medicine and scrape it over her wounds.

Cadence tries her best not to flinch. Her teeth got caught in her bottom lip again.

I clean up the blood and blow on her cuts to help with the sting.

"What else was I supposed to do?" Her voice warbles. Her fingers dig into the edge of the counter. Running around for hours with this severe of a wound must have really hurt.

I feel the anger surging up again and force myself to keep it locked away.

"What were you two arguing about tonight?"

She opens her mouth and I know she's going to tell me off, so I speak ahead of her.

"Think about it. It might give us a clue to where she would go."

Plastic rustles behind me. A moment later, the shopkeeper delivers a package of cheap, plastic flip-flops. He hands Cadence the drink too. She accepts it, and takes a sip.

I'm glad I don't have to fight her on that.

"We were talking about..." Her throat bobs as she swallows. "It had something to do with my mom."

She looks away, but I hear the pain in her voice.

"Your mom? Is it her death anniversary?"

"No."

I shift through my mind for something to say. "You must miss her."

She glances down at me, seeming almost surprised.

I smooth the band-aid over her cuts. "You. Your sister. You must miss your mom."

Cadence hinted that her mother was less than pleasant, but that doesn't mean it's easy to live without a parent. I don't know what I'd do without mom. She and my brothers are what keep me sane.

"Miss her? I don't think..." Cadence's eyes widen and life floods into her expression. "That's it."

"What's it?"

She flings herself off the counter. "Did you bring your car?"

"I did."

"Then let's go."

"Brahms."

"What?" She spins.

I arch a brow and dangle the flip-flops from the tips of my fingers. "Are you going barefoot?"

She hurries back to me and reaches out to take the shoes.

I snap them away, kneel in front of her and slip them on her feet.

There.

“You folks have a good night.” The shopkeeper grins from ear-to-ear.

I don’t respond.

As we make our way to the car, I notice Cadey limping worse than before.

“You okay?” I ask, slowing my pace to match hers.

“I was fine before.” She flings daggers with her eyes. “As soon as you made a big deal with the band-aids and medicine, it started hurting.”

I chuckle and consider carrying her again. Then I spot my truck. “You were hurting the entire time, but adrenaline numbed the pain. Happens when I play guitar too.” The alarm chirps and I open the car door for her. “I get so caught up in the music, my fingers start bleeding. But it doesn’t hurt until I stop holding the strings.” I jut my chin. “Get in.”

Cadey ducks inside.

I round the hood, climb in and glance over. “Where are we going?”

“Gwendolyn Park.”

“The tree sanctuary?” I frown. “You think Vi’s there?”

“I have a feeling.”

*Vague, but we’ll work with it.*

Cadey plays with the collar of her shirt. “If she’s there...”

I smirk. “What’ll be my reward?”

“No reward.” She shifts in her chair. “But I never would have thought of that place if not for you.”

“There’s a ‘thank you’ somewhere in there.”

“Maybe,” she concedes.

I lean over her.

She sweeps her eyes closed and puckers her lips. Her mouth is the color of strawberries and I want to suck the life

out of them.

*You won't be able to stop if you kiss her now.*

I tap her nose with my thumb and reach for the seatbelt. “Buckle up, Brahms.”

Her eyes burst open and she flushes. “I’ll do it myself.”

“Too late.” I snap the seatbelt into place, pleased.

She thought I was going to kiss her.

She *wanted* me to kiss her.

And I will.

After we’ve found her sister.

I toss her my phone. “Call Finn and let him know where we’re headed.”

“Please.”

“Please for what?” I start the car and watch the speedometer needle climb.

She folds her arms over her chest. “I’m not your servant. I’m not that guy you bribed at the pharmacy.”

“I didn’t bribe him—”

“You asked me for a favor.” Her eyebrows knit. “You need my help. Even if you’re barking, say please.”

“Please.”

She huffs, “Was that so hard?”

I force my eyes back to the road because she’s sexy when she’s angry.

She’s sexy when she’s happy.

She’s plain freaking sexy and it gets on my last damn nerves.

I clear my throat as I listen to her one-sided conversation with Finn. The call doesn’t last long. Finn isn’t much of a conversationalist.

“They said they’ll meet us there.” Cadey hands the phone back to me.

I nod.

We don’t say much on the way, but I notice her tapping her leg and watching every movement outside her window as we near the sanctuary.

The park is dark with only a couple solar lights planted like rocks in the soil. There’s something creepy and other-worldly about the tall, monstrous trees clawing at us with their branches.

“Watch your step,” I tell Brahm, taking her hand as she tries to maneuver the terrain in flip-flops.

An owl hoots nearby.

Toads croak so loudly, it’s like they’re using microphones.

“You know where we’re going?” I whisper. There’s no one around, but this feels like the sort of place where you don’t shout.

“Mom’s grave.”

“This is a graveyard?”

“Not exactly.” Cadence grips my fingers tightly as she shuffles over moss. “My mom’s body was... uh... cremated. It was her last wish. We couldn’t afford a tombstone anyway, so it worked out.” She gestures to a small cluster of trees up ahead. “But Vi really wanted somewhere to visit when she missed mom.”

“And you chose here?”

“The sanctuary allows you to dedicate a tree to a loved one. We tied a ribbon around mom’s. I told Vi she could visit whenever she missed her.”

“Do you know where the tree is?”

She shakes her head. “I’ve never been here. I forgot about it until the pharmacy.”



I mull over her words. Was she so busy with life that she forgot where her mother's memorial was? Or did she hate her mom so much that she tried to forget?

The mystery tugs at me. I want to know everything about her. Her past. Her pain. I want to own her darkness. Just as much as I want to own her pleasure.

Cadey gasps and points. "I think I see her."

With the help of the moonlight, I can faintly make out a small figure sitting in front of a tree.

"Viola!" Cadey makes a beeline for her sister.

I'm right behind her.

"Thank God, you're safe." Her voice cracks painfully. She throws her arms around the kid.

"Get off me," Viola yells. She heaves Cadey back and makes her stumble. I catch her before she hits the ground, but it's only because I'm close enough to break her fall.

"The hell are you doing?" I bark.

"Dutch, no." Cadence touches my hand. "Stop."

My teeth on edge, I release her and watch her approach Viola again. I don't want to hurt Cadey's sister, but I'm also not going to stand back while anyone flings her around.

Not now.

Not. Freaking. Ever.

I don't care who the hell it is. No one is allowed to hurt her.

Eyeing Viola sternly, I notice the tear tracks on her cheeks and the pain in her eyes. A part of me softens.

"How could you?" Vi hisses. "How could you keep the truth from me?"

Cadence hangs her head. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry? You lied to me! Right to my face. You lied for *months!*"

Confusion wrinkles my brow. What are they talking about?  
Lied about what?

Cadey sniffs. “I’m so sorry, Vi. I didn’t want you to worry.”

“It’s too late for that now, isn’t it? There’s a freaking corpse in our living room and you were in on it.”

A corpse?

I study Cadence’s pinched expression and a shudder goes down my spine. Whatever I’ve stepped into feels more serious than two bickering sisters mourning their dead mother.

My brothers and Sol arrive in a blaze of concerned eyes and sweat-stained faces.

Cadence places a finger on her lips and gestures for her sister to be quiet. Viola scoffs, tosses her hair and folds her arms over her chest, but she doesn’t utter another word.

The air is tense, but Zane, as usual, cracks a joke to lighten the mood.

“I didn’t think creepy meetings in the middle of the woods was your thing, Vi.”

Viola blushes.

“We were worried about you.”

“You were worried about me?” Her voice is hopeful.

“Of course we were.” Zane coaxes another smile from her. But that smile flattens when he adds. “Especially your sister. She was tearing that neighborhood apart looking for you.”

Viola’s eyes swerve to Cadence and go dark again.

I step forward, sensing that Vi might hurl more unpleasant words Cadence’s way.

“It’s been a long night. I’ll take the girls home.”

“Glad you’re safe,” Finn says, nodding at Viola.

She gives him heart eyes.

Sol walks forward and sticks out his hand. “Hey, I’m—”

“Sol. The fourth member of The Kings,” Viola gushes. “I know who you are.”

“We haven’t met, but I’ve heard a lot about you.” I stiffen when Sol glances at Cadence with a thoughtful look and mumbles, “I hope I’ll see you around more often.”

I set a hand on Viola’s shoulder and tug her back a step. “Thanks for joining the search.”

“Of course.” His jaw is set in a hard line. “Cadence is important to me too.”

Something uneasy stirs in my gut.

His lips arch up in a smile. “Later, C.”

“Thanks again, Sol.”

I watch my best friend traipse off into the night, and I can’t shake the sense that something’s very wrong.

Now that Sol’s gotten a taste of setting fires, he might torch something even more precious than a building.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### CADENCE

I'm trembling on the way back home. Dutch shrugs out of his jacket and drapes it over me, but it doesn't chase the chill.

Viola is in the backseat.

I glance in the rearview mirror. We pass a lamppost and the light splays over her small face. Eyes as hard as marbles. Lips set in a firm line. Hair in a messy ponytail.

She's pissed off, but safe.

It's better than the alternative.

My teeth chatter.

My heart pounds.

Everything worked out, yet I get a persistent sense that I'm walking into the middle of a terrible hurricane. It's like losing Viola was me playing the game on easy mode. A side quest. A tiny obstacle to get me warmed up.

Now, the real crap is about to hit the fan.

I could be wrong, of course. This could be my royal pessimism kicking in and making me feel like the sky is falling. I'll admit that I'm jaded. It's a fact of life that when something good happens to me, something even worse follows.

The proverbial boot that drops always crushes me into the dirt.

But maybe it won't happen this time.

Maybe finding Viola is the only struggle I'll face for the foreseeable future.

Maybe everything is going to be okay.

I shiver again and burrow further under Dutch's warm leather jacket.

He slows the car in front of our apartment.

The kitchen light is on.

A shadow moves the curtain aside. A near imperceptible movement, but I see it.

Mom's still here.

I grit my teeth and shrug out of Dutch's jacket. So much for a calm after the storm. It was stupid of me to even *think* I could catch a break.

"Keep it," Dutch says, fingers closing over mine.

For a second, there's warmth.

For a second, it feels like I can weather through what's coming and survive.

Foolish dreams.

There's no use being coddled or cared for. Why the hell should I get used to that? Especially when the care is coming from someone like him—Dark. Ruthless. A creature with golden eyes and magic fingers.

I know Dutch.

He's one inch away from a raging beast.

I sensed his danger all through the night.

Anger lashing right under the surface, as close as the tattoos on his skin.

Even the thugs in my neighborhood knew not to get too close.

It's not just Dutch, but everything that comes with him too. I think of Jarod Cross's proposal and my head starts aching.

Dutch is a complication in my life. One I don't need. Especially with everything else I'm balancing.

"I'm fine." I push the jacket over his lap. "Viola, let's—"

My sister springs out of the car and slams the door so hard that the entire vehicle rocks. A gasp tears from my lips. There's no way I can afford to pay for even a scratch on Dutch's fancy ride. What the hell is she thinking?

Fingers clenching, I glare at her through the window.

Not that she notices.

Her ponytail swishes from side to side as she angrily jogs up the stairs and disappears from view.

I scramble onto the sidewalk to follow her.

Dutch's car door slams shut, a soft thud in the star-lit night. A moment later, he's beside me. His fingers close around mine.

I feel the warmth again. I feel something snapping into place. Like he's buried inside me. Somewhere I can't reach to dig him out and throw him away.

He tugs me forward and into his chest. His arms surround me. Big hands covering my back and waist.

He hugs me so close, I can smell the musky scent of his cologne.

The heat I worked so hard to fight begins to creep into every single cell in my body.

"I don't know what's going on," Dutch murmurs. "And you don't have to tell me, but I'm here for you."

His words are gentle, but his grip on me is firm.

Damn. It.

Damn, damn, damn.

I don't want to feel a thing.

I want to be numb.

I want to be alone.

Caring for someone else means taking more from me to give to another. And I don't have any pieces of me left to give. Not right now. Not ever.

For the briefest of seconds, I allow myself to be held.

And then I push Dutch back.

The weight of his gaze presses around me. He's staring at me. Trying to figure me out. I wonder what he sees when he looks at me. A girl disheveled. Muddy. Bruised. Bleeding.

Whatever game he's playing with me right now, I don't have the energy to figure it out. Silently, I leave him on the sidewalk and hurry up the stairs.

The front door is open.

Viola is standing there, frozen.

All the warmth that came from being in Dutch's orbit flees immediately. I sprint the remaining distance between me and my sister, wondering what despicable sight is holding her captive.

The moment I skitter to a stop beside her and look inside, I go frozen too.

Mom has the dinner table set.

Three plates. Three forks. Three servings of spaghetti.

Cold drinks. Probably the pink lemonade flavored Kool-Aid. The one we were saving for a celebration.

She smiles at us, one of her pretty smiles that crinkles her eyes and makes her seem like less of a backstabbing drug addict and more like the moms we see on TV. The ones with the flower aprons and forehead kisses and zero childhood-inflicting trauma.

I feel this sharp ache between my ribs when I take her in.

"What are you both just standing there for?" Mom pulls out a chair at the head of the table. "You must be hungry. Sit

and eat.”

I notice goosebumps running up Viola’s arm. It’s understandable.

In her mind, mom was actually dead. Why would she question that? We saw them burn her corpse. I held Viola as she wept and wept for days, releasing so much water from her body I thought she’d die of dehydration.

We adjusted to the life of orphans.

Parent-less.

Alone.

We survived.

And now, mom is here in our living room pretending to be normal. Pretending everything’s okay. Pretending all this isn’t messed up.

“Come on.” I tell my sister, nudging her elbow. It’s not like mom will go away if we stand here all night.

“Don’t touch me.” She jerks her arm away.

The snap in her tone cuts me to the bone. So does the flash of hatred in her eyes.

I lower my gaze to the ground and follow her as she stomps to the table.

Mom takes a seat and picks up her fork. “The pasta’s cold. You girls took so long to get back.”

Viola stands behind her chair. Her fingers close around the back of it and she glares into her plate of spaghetti.

“What the hell is this?” my sister hisses.

“What?” Mom plays oblivious. Eyes wide but not innocent. Those eyes can never be innocent again.

Just like mine.

We’ve seen too much of the darkness this world has to offer. Peeled back the layers of civility and touched the worm-infested, underbelly.



There's no going back once you've seen the hopelessness.  
Felt the pain.

It's why I want to protect Viola.

It's why I didn't want her to know about any of this.

Once that innocence is stripped away, it can never be restored. It's fragile. Easily shattered. That's what makes it precious.

"Do you think this is funny?" Viola asks as her knuckles turn white. "You were dead, mom. *Dead*. And now you're just..." She sputters. "Sitting here eating spaghetti?"

"You're right. It's not that good." Mom spits out pasta into a napkin, crumples the heap and sets it on her noodles.

I cringe, calculating all the ingredients she wasted. Pasta, tomato sauce, onion, sausages. All the things I'll have to replace. All the things that cost money to buy. Does she think groceries grow on trees?

Viola slams her hand on the table and screams, "What the hell is going on?"

I cringe.

And mom?

Mom laughs.

At the sound of her hoarse, impish cackles, Viola's face fractures. I can see the childish hope crumbling inside her. All the beautiful castles she'd built in her head of mom, our family, all the ugly memories she'd swiped away to leave only the good ones, I see it shifting.

It's funny how our perspective can be so far from reality. If we believe really hard that something is the way we want, it can become our truth.

But our truth...

Isn't *the* truth.

And the truth is that our mother is a lunatic.

I just didn't want Viola to ever realize that.

“Mom, that’s enough.” I drag Viola away from the table and behind me. “You need to leave.”

Her laughter dies quickly. Mouth snapping shut, she gives me a sharp look. It’s frightening the way she switches on and off. Like someone possessed. Like someone who isn’t fully human.

“I already told you, Cadey. I’m not going anywhere. This is my home.”

Viola’s breaths are loud and panicked behind me. She’s shaking like a leaf.

I give her arm a squeeze, despite the fact that my heart is thundering inside my chest.

“Since you’ve been sneaking in here for a while, you already know that Vi and I have no money. All I have left is my school laptop and my phone. Pawn it for cash. Stay out of our sight.”

“Wait...” Vi squeaks. “That was mom who took my tablet and dad’s necklace?”

“Sorry, baby. I was in a tight spot. But mommy will buy it back for you.”

A humorless laugh puffs out of Viola’s mouth.

She used to believe that. She used to believe everything mom told her.

Yet another castle in the clouds falling apart.

“Why are you both so angry?” Mom’s head swings between us. Her voice is high-pitched, as if she genuinely doesn’t understand what the big deal is. “Do you know how many kids would love if their parents came back from the dead?” She taps a finger on the table. “I did it. I made that miracle happen for you. And you can’t even thank me?”

Acid burns my stomach.

I glare at her. “I’m going to ask you one more time, nicely, to leave.”

“And if I don’t?” Mom leans back, smug.

But I'm not the same girl who cleaned up all her messes and stumbled behind her while she dragged me into her low-life cesspools. While she painted nightmares over my piano and made every brush of my fingers on the keys turn to shadows.

I'm a student at Redwood now.

I went up against Dutch Cross and his brothers.

And I won.

I will do *anything* to protect Viola and, by extension, I'll do anything to survive so I can *keep* protecting her.

Folding my arms over my chest, I tilt my chin up. "If you don't, I'm sure I can find some cops who'd be happy to escort you out."

The smugness drains from her face.

She watches me with new eyes, fearful eyes.

I tilt my chin up and soak in her newfound humility. No wonder Dutch, Finn, and Zane carry themselves with such arrogance. No wonder they have no problems instilling fear into everyone at school.

There's something hypnotic about having the upper hand.

Something addictive about holding someone else's fear. Inhaling it. Tasting it.

It's delicious.

Mom swallows hard, trying and failing to pretend she's still in control.

"You wouldn't do that to me, Cadey," she purrs.

I stare at her blankly.

Mom's bottom lip trembles. Her eyes go sharp. "I see." Chair legs scrape the ground. The table trembles as she rises.

"*Wait!*"

I whirl around.

Mom's eyes land on Vi too. A slow, insidious smile spreads on her face as if she senses a new weakness to exploit.

Addicts are so good at that. At looking into a crowd, picking out the ones who can't say no, the ones who can be coaxed into believing lies, the ones who need a friend and will take anyone for the position.

Mom was the best at fitting herself through even the smallest cracks, the mildest invitations.

"I want to know." Viola lifts her head. "Why mom's here. Why she had to fake her death. Why *you* went along with it." Her eyes slice through me. "I want to know everything."

"Viola..." I frown.

"No more secrets!" she shrieks.

"Exactly." Mom tilts her head and smiles at me. "No more secrets. That's what I want too."

Viola nods sharply, pulls out her chair and sits.

I remain where I am.

Both Vi and mom look back at me.

My little sister's expression makes her seem like a stranger. Her lips are taut, eyes hooded, fingers still.

Pain claws at me.

My heart bleeds through my ribs.

It's at that moment I realize... I never found Viola tonight. The chirpy, innocent, fun-loving thirteen year-old who walked home from school today fled at the sight of our dead mother.

And that chirpy, innocent thirteen year old never came back.

\* \* \*

*Jinx: It's been a while since I've sent you a private message, New Girl. I have a deal for you. It involves something you want and something you don't.*

*Jinx: Care to share a secret?*

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CADENCE

My phone buzzes, but I don't glance at it. Mom is sitting across from me. Viola is beside me. It's so quiet that I can hear each coarse breath rattling in my lungs.

"What happened last year, mom?" Viola whispers. "What happened that night?"

"That night... I decided to take a shortcut home when I heard grunting and the sounds of a struggle." She inhales deeply, fingers moving into her pocket for a cigarette.

Viola leans forward.

I hold my breath as mom puffs out smoke.

"I should have run away, but I didn't. Stupid of me. But I did the next best thing. I hid behind a dumpster and stayed out of sight. When I heard things go quiet, I figured the fight was done and the guys had left."

"And?" Viola croaks.

"I was wrong." Mom's brown eyes glaze over as if she's reliving the moment. "There *he* was. Covered in someone's blood. Knife in his hand. Looked like the devil come to life. And he was staring right at me."

Viola shivers.

I frown. I don't know if I believe her.

I don't believe anything that comes out of her mouth.

But Viola is transfixed.

"If you witnessed a murder, why didn't you tell the police? Why run away and play dead?" My sister's eyes are earnest. A glimmer of her innocence rising from the ashes.

I'd be relieved—but that innocence is bordering on naïveté. An ignorance that would allow a child to play with fire.

Or with a snake.

"You know my history," mom says, sighing in a way that makes her look pitiful and frail. "I've been in and out of rehab. No matter what I said, the police wouldn't have believed me. And I couldn't take the chance. What if that guy came after you two? He didn't seem like the type to let a witness walk."

I scoff.

Mom pretends not to hear. "I made the choice that would keep you both safe and, thankfully, Cadey agreed to cover for me."

"I guess you both didn't feel the need to share that with me."

I open my mouth but mom steps in before I can. "Sweetheart, we just wanted to keep you safe. That's all."

Viola's eyes soften on mom.

"If the situation was so dire, how is it okay to come back now? Isn't that guy still out there?"

"I've already proven that I'm not going to be a problem." Mom taps the cig on the table and it burns out. "I could have gone to the police by now, but I didn't. And the case is closed. There were no witnesses. I'm free and clear."

"Are you sure? It feels a little too easy."

"I'm very sure." Mom's eyes dart to the side. Her hands are getting fidgety. Some would call it a sign of nerves, but I know exactly what that means.

It's been too long since she's gotten a hit. The cigs aren't keeping her urges at bay anymore.

"Everything is fine now." Mom smiles and pulls her hands under the table. Probably to scratch. Sometimes, she scratched herself to the point of bleeding. It was the scariest thing to see as a kid. No six-year-old wants their mom to be hurt, but when she's the one inflicting her own pain...

"Vi, it's time for bed." I check my watch. "It'll be hard to wake up for school tomorrow."

Mom rises. "I'll get some rest too."

"Where are you going?" I stop her with a cold look.

"To bed."

"We only have two bedrooms."

"Mom can room with me," Viola says.

"Absolutely not."

"She's right," mom agrees. "I'll take Cadence's room. You and Viola can bunk together like you did before I left."

My mouth pinches tightly. "You're not—"

"Please." Viola touches my arm and gives me a pleading look. "Mom's supposed to be dead. She can't just get a motel room. And it's not like we haven't slept on the same bed before."

Everything inside me wants to argue, but I can tell that this means a lot to Vi.

"Fine," I give in.

Mom smiles.

"Just for one night."

"Of course." Her eyes glitter.

The alarm bells in my head won't stop ringing. Letting mom back into our lives is the *last* thing I should do.

But what other choice do I have? Turn her back onto the streets so she gets into more trouble? What happens if the



police find out I helped disguise her death? What if they start investigating further and realize that we live alone? Or worse... live with an active drug addict who faked her own death? Will they take Viola away from me?

I can't risk that happening.

Besides, I don't believe mom gave us the full story tonight. Something isn't adding up and the only way to make sure her stupid decisions won't come back to bite me and Vi is to ask more questions.

I glare mom's way. "Refrain from stealing anything in my room while I'm sleeping."

Mom laughs. "Goodnight, Cadey."

I follow Vi down the hall and tug her into the bathroom, insisting that she brush her teeth. She's half-sleeping when I put her to bed and pull the comforters over her.

"I really hate you for keeping it a secret, Cadey," Vi mumbles, half-conscious.

My heart pricks. "I know."

"You always do things alone," she murmurs, her eyes sinking further shut. "You always take the pain by yourself."

"I'm okay." I run my fingers over her hair.

"I want to help you," Vi mumbles.

*Damn it, Cadey. I want to help you.* Dutch's voice rings through my memories.

Did he mean it? Is that even possible? He spent every day making my life a living hell. Now, suddenly, he wants to help me?

I chew on my bottom lip until another thought strikes.

Dutch.

Ring box.

Super expensive diamond cut engagement ring.

Mere inches away from a drug addict with nothing to lose.

As Viola sinks deep into slumber, I tear a path down the hallway. Thankfully, I see the bathroom door is shut, which means mom isn't in my bedroom.

I throw the door open and stalk to the dresser. Shifting under my panties, I feel around until my fingers hit a velvet box.

Yes.

It's still there.

"What are you looking for?" Mom's voice echoes behind me.

I jolt and quickly shove the ring box into the pocket of my school skirt. Pretending to shuffle around in the clothes, I murmur, "Underwear. I want to shower before I change into my pajamas."

"I see." Mom gives me a knowing smile.

Tugging at the hem of my skirt, I clear my throat. "I meant it, mom. You only get one day under this roof. Go back to wherever you've been hiding the past few months."

"Was it here?" Mom sits on the edge of my bed and bounces on the mattress. She eases back, arms falling behind her.

"What are you talking about?" I huff. Did she even hear what I said?

"Did you have sex here? On this bed?" Her smile gets a little more excited. "Right here?"

My nostrils flare. I can't do this with her.

Turning, I stride for the door.

"He should have taken you to a nice hotel. Candles. Music. A little romance. You deserved the five star treatment, especially since you were holding your virginity tight with those pretty piano fingers."

I put my hand on the door knob.

Turn.

Open.

“With a car like that, he could afford flowers at least.”

I stop in my tracks.

Panic seizes my throat.

I whirl around as my chest heaves in fear. “What? What car?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know.”

“Mom!” I shriek.

She curls into the bed and closes her eyes. “I’m tired. It’s been a long day, Cadey.”

I stalk over to her and wrench her to a sitting position.

Mom yelps and claws at my hand. “That hurts!”

I don’t care.

My face bears down over hers and I hiss, “Whatever you think you saw, whatever you think you know about me, you’re wrong. You stay out of my life, do you hear me?”

“Strong, brave, *perfect* Cadey.” Her eyes turn dark and calculating. “Did attending that fancy school make you think that you’re as privileged as them? Did you forget who you are?”

She laughs in my face. Her dank breath wafts over me and makes me sick to my stomach.

“You came from me. You and I are in the same boat. And if you have even a hope of climbing out of this hell, you’re taking me with you.”

I release her shoulder and back away from the bed.

Her words are too cryptic for me to understand, but I know two things with distinct clarity.

Mom has no intentions of leaving this apartment.

And she has plans... plans that involve Dutch.

## CHAPTER SIX

DUTCH

Zane yawns so wide I can look down his throat all the way to his lungs. He runs a hand through his dark hair and it flops back over his forehead.

A bunch of cheerleaders giggle. Each of them look at Zane as if his mere existence is enough reason to get on their knees and worship him. Even when he's not trying, my twin can plow through half the female population.

The cheerleaders are sending smiles my way too, but I'm not looking back. My eyes are intent on the horizon, waiting for a pair of long, pale legs to clamor down the sidewalk.

I check my phone again.

Cadey's late.

"You can still smell the sulfur," Finn mumbles.

I glance behind me and notice my brother lounging on the stairs. One leg is propped on the railing and the other is so long that it touches three steps below us. An e-reader is in his hands.

"From the fire." His sharp brown eyes slide toward me. "You can still smell it."

I firm my lips and look away.

"They rebuilt as much as they could, but it's not like they could hide everything. Some damages are there for life." Zane

stretches, long arms reaching over his head. “What the hell are we even doing at school today? We should have taken a page out of Sol’s book and slept in, but nooo. *Someone* insisted on coming.”

“Dutch has his reasons,” Finn says knowingly.

I pull out my phone and call Cadence again.

Nothing.

Damn it.

Why the hell does this girl not answer? Did she think I was joking when I told her to pick up my calls?

I have important things to ask her. Like... is she okay? Did she and Vi smooth things over after I left last night?

And what the hell was that talk about a corpse?

“Maybe she doesn’t want to see you,” Finn says, not lifting his eyes from his tablet.

“Why wouldn’t she want to see him?” Zane scoffs. “He went to that dumpster of a neighborhood to look for her sister and convinced us to join him.” He gestures between himself and Finn. “She should be kissing his feet in gratitude.”

“I’m sure Dutch has other ideas on where she can kiss him.” Finn clicks a button to turn his ‘page’.

“Totally.” Zane smirks.

I whirl around and send my brothers a frigid glare. “Can it.”

Finn shrugs, unperturbed.

Zane studies me. “Untwist your granny panties. We’re just joking around.”

I grunt and pace the front steps.

“Finn? Caveman translation please?”

“He slept with her and now he’s hooked,” Finn mumbles, eyes still on the tablet.

I freeze.

Zane does too. “Bro.”

I give my brother a stunned look. *How the hell did he know that?*

“Did Jinx tell you?” I growl.

“I don’t care enough to pay Jinx for that information.” Finn rolls his eyes. “It was all over your face when you came back home... the next morning.”

I flinch. Oh right.

Zane covers his mouth, eyes wide. “That night after she trashed our practice room... were you and Brahm...damn! No wonder you said we didn’t have to get her back. You’d already taken the price.”

I scowl.

Zane slaps me on the back. “About time.”

I knock his hand off.

“Wait,” he scrunches his nose, “why are you so anxious to see her? Girls are usually the ones acting clingy after se—ah!”

I grab his shirt collar. “If you keep flapping your mouth, I’ll stick my fist in it.”

Zane chuckles. “Try it and see what happens.”

I wheel my hand back.

“Enough, Zane. Go easy on him.”

“Why should I?”

“Don’t you see he’s been rejected?” Finn unfolds himself from the steps and tilts his neck from side to side, massaging the kinks. His eyes meet mine when he straightens. “For the first time in his life, Dutch genuinely cares about someone and that person would rather die than be involved with him.”

My anger surges.

My cheeks burn.

I release Zane and swing at Finn.

He blocks me with one hand and looks at me with bored eyes. “Compose yourself. Your woman’s walking toward us.”

Immediately, I whirl around.

Finn’s right.

Cadence is stalking toward Redwood Prep. She’s wearing one of her old uniforms—the really short skirt with the white top. I pause for a moment and glance over her, noticing her big brown eyes rimmed with dark purple circles of exhaustion.

What the hell happened?

How do I fix it for her?

Who do I have to kill to make her smile?

Behind me, I hear Finn sigh.

“Dad is trying to take over Redwood and Sol tried to burn the whole thing down, but one guy can’t take his eyes off the new girl, and the other is in love with our step-sister. We’re screwed.”

At once, Zane’s smile collapses.

The air gets tense.

I can feel a fight brewing.

Turning to my brothers, I speak confidently. “We’ll handle dad. And Miss Jamieson, she...” My eyes flick to Zane and back. “It’s not like she’s a biological sister—”

“Forget it.” Zane knocks into my shoulder as he heads down the stairs.

“Class is that way,” Finn says.

Zane flips us off. “I’m going back home. And I’m taking the car.”

Cadence nods at him as he passes.

My twin nods back and disappears around the bend.

Finn tucks his tablet under his arms. “I’ll be in the library. I’m not feeling classes today either.”

Finn greets Cadence, just as Zane did.

It's a high honor to be acknowledged by either of them, but especially Finn. Brahms doesn't run in our circles and we all tend to ignore other people—especially girls we've already slept with—it's easier to keep them away. But Cadence is different. She's important to me and that means she's important to my brothers too.

Even if Zane, Finn and I fight like sumo wrestlers, we know what's important.

Family.

*Is that why I feel so intensely protective of Cadence? Is she my family now?*

It's a meaty thought, but I don't have time to dwell on it because Cadence *freaking* Cooper walks right past me.

As if I haven't been standing here waiting for her all morning.

As if I haven't blown up her phone.

As if she's got no idea that she's been the only thing on my mind since I first laid eyes on her.

As if I can *freaking* breathe without having her close to me.

The.

Hell.

Is.

That?

“Take one more step and see what happens,” I drawl. My voice is calm, easy. But beneath it is a layer of steel that stops her in her tracks.

She whirls around, her dark ponytail long enough to whip me in the face. Brown eyes brim with fury. The sight of it reminds me of the days when every mouthy response from her made me want to smash her into a nearby locker and drop her skirt to her ankles.

That defiance of hers always did something to me.



Made my blood pound with frustration. With need.

Now, it just worries me.

Something's wrong.

And screwing her won't get to the bottom of it.

No matter how loudly my straining pants is screaming the opposite.

I've only had shallow flings with girls before. I don't know much about dating, but I know that screwing like rabbits isn't enough to keep a relationship alive.

Or else dad wouldn't be such a massive freaking disappointment as a husband and father.

If anyone has a hard time keeping it in his pants, it's him.

Musical chimes rush through Redwood Prep.

Our last warning.

"Class is about to start," Cadence says. She averts her gaze and stares straight ahead.

*I called you. Why didn't you answer? Did you sleep well? Did you have breakfast? Did you and Vi work things out?*

I clench my jaw and swallow the words back.

Zane was right. I *am* acting like one of those girls who beg me to call them again after I'm through taking what I want.

This isn't me.

I don't cling.

I don't plead.

I make demands and I take what belongs to me.

And this girl, she's mine.

It's only a matter of time before she accepts it.

Tilting my chin up, I walk until I'm beside her and then I walk ahead of her. When she doesn't follow me, I turn back.

Cadence eyes me warily.

I beckon her with my fingers. “I thought you didn’t want to be late for class.”

She scoffs and stalks past me, her skirt flaring around her upper thighs and almost flashing a butt cheek. My fingers tingle, eager to palm that stretch of skin, but I dip my hand into my pocket instead and follow her to the classroom.

She throws angry eyes over her shoulder. “What are you doing?”

“Going to school.”

“You’re not even *in* this class.”

“Of course I’m in this class.” I scowl at her and open the door so she can walk through. “I just don’t attend.”

She makes a disbelieving sound in her throat.

When we step inside, the algebra teacher stops mid-sentence.

I motion for him to continue his lecture.

He goes red and stammers out the rest of his lesson.

Cadence heads down the row of desks but, when she sees that her usual chair is already occupied, she tightens her fingers around her book bag and turns the other way.

I watch the punk in her seat smirk as if he won something and my blood pumps faster. How dare this bastard take my woman’s chair and gloat about it?

I grab Brahm’s elbow to keep her in place.

She glances at me, her eyebrows pinched.

Wordlessly, I lead her to the chair she usually occupies. Why the hell should she walk away? Why the hell isn’t she demanding what she wants? She always freaking sits here. Since that first day of algebra, she’s always taken a seat in the back.

No freaking way is that changing.

Not while I’m around.

Cadence realizes what I'm doing and her eyes widen. She pushes at my hand. "Dutch, I'm fine. I'll sit somewhere else."

"You." I point to the punk.

He trembles like an idiot. Now isn't the time to be scared. He should have thought twice before acting smug.

"Dutch," Cadence hisses.

In the background, the math teacher is droning on about calculus.

I tune them both out.

Pointing a finger, I draw an imaginary line from the first chair in the row to his. "This all belongs to her." I jut my thumb at Cadence. "No one sits here until she decides what chair she feels like occupying that day. Understood?"

"Dutch!" Cadence is whispering, but she might as well shout her objections.

The kid hops to his feet, grabbing his bag to his chest. In his haste to get away, his books fly out of his unzipped backpack and thud to the ground.

Silence falls.

Everyone in class stares at us.

The kid's face turns red and he scrambles to put his books away.

Cadence drops to her knees to help him.

My eyebrows knot. I reach down to grab her hand and haul her up.

"Get off!" She snarls.

My eyes widen.

Cadence gives the kid his books back, mumbles an apology (for what, I have no freaking idea) and shoots me a glare so frigid, it would make Siberia feel like a Caribbean cruise.

I gesture to the seat she usually likes, indicating that she should take it.

Cadence pulls her lips into her mouth as if she's trying not to curse me to space and back. She whirls around sharply and takes the only unoccupied seat at the front of the class.

The hell?

She never sits at the front.

Someone laughs at the obvious rejection, but that chortle ends quickly when I send a frigid stare his way. No one dares to even breathe after that.

Reaching deep for patience, I point to the chair right behind hers. It's occupied but I give exactly *zero* damns.

I watch as the kid flees in a heartbeat and I calmly slide into the chair behind Cadence. She knows I'm behind her. I can tell by the way she clenches her little fists. By the way her neck tenses. But she refuses to turn around.

Fine by me.

I don't care either way.

Slouching in my chair, I focus on what's really important. Cadence. From this point, all I can see is her shiny brown hair spilling out of her high ponytail. Small tendrils are out around her cheeks.

I remember how it felt sliding past my fingers. Long and silky. Carrying the fragrance of fruity shampoo. If I lean closer, I can catch a whiff of it now.

Damn.

She's sexy as hell from the back too.

I content myself with watching her and I don't feel the time fly.

It's not until the musical chimes sing through the room that I realize class is over.

\* \* \*

*Jinx: Prince Charming Or Prince Werewolf?*

*All eyes were on our Royal Bad Boy during first period today, but his eyes were on one person.*

*To all those broken-hearted step-sisters out there, don't be discouraged. Redwood's Prince might be wagging his tail, but the girl who slipped the collar on his neck didn't bat an eye at him.*

*Is his devotion a dare gone wrong? Or is our Prince Charming making up for his past misdeeds?*

*One thing is for sure. Whether he's in the shape of a man or a personal pet, I hope Cinderella knows the leash in her hand is tied to a powerful beast.*

*Until the next post, keep your enemies close and your secrets even closer.*

*- Jinx*

## CHAPTER SEVEN

CADENCE

Living with my mother is a nightmare. One that I want desperately to wake up from.

Early this morning, she was dancing naked in the living room and playing music so loudly, someone from the apartment below us had to bang on the ceiling with a broom.

She stank up the bathroom with cheap weed—where she got the money to buy it, I don't even know.

When the hunger pangs hit her, mom made a mess of the kitchen. Sticky egg shells. Flour-spattered footprints. Dirty pots and pans. It would have been slightly acceptable if breakfast had been edible, but it wasn't.

This is the second time I've had to throw away a meal.

Which means I had to throw away damn good groceries.

Which means I basically threw away money.

And guess who had to clean up the kitchen after all that?

Not only did mom manage to spoil my entire morning the *first* day she came back, but she turned my bedroom upside down too.

I tiptoed in to get my uniforms and found all my clothes on the floor, dirty and wrinkled. My sheets were ripped from the mattress. Everything under my bed was dug out. Mom claimed

she was looking for her wedding ring—as if I didn't know she'd pawned dad's ring ages ago.

Because all my clothes had been tossed, the only clean uniform I could find was the old one I'd folded up in the back of my drawer.

I squeeze the strap of my book bag tighter and grit my teeth.

*Why did mom have to come back? Why?*

“Careful,” a deep voice says.

Moments later, I smack into someone's palm.

I wake up from my stupor, tapping back into my surroundings. The crowded hallway. The students whispering and watching us. The posters on the wall. The open locker two inches from my face. *What? Why am I so close to the locker?*

I blink, but the locker's still there. Open. Razor sharp. It's only Dutch's hand cupping my forehead that kept me from smashing into the metal and cracking my head open.

Stunned, I turn around.

Dutch is behind me, face stony. He crosses inked arms over his Redwood Prep sweater vest and stares at me with his predator eyes. Amber honey. Like a lion's. Not quite golden but close enough. Especially when he stands in the sunlight like he's doing now.

These prep school uniforms don't suit him. He's a freaking beast. A monster, several inches over six feet with two dark slashes of eyebrows and a mouth of pure menace on the bottom of his frighteningly attractive face. With a bone structure so chiseled, and an aura so dark, his bright, blond hair like spun wheat doesn't belong. And yet it makes him even more arresting.

Light and shadows.

Beast and man.

Both at once.

“What the hell are you thinking about that you can’t even walk straight?” Dutch growls, leaning in close so his minty breath washes over my face.

My body shudders, aching with need for him.

And that makes me angry.

My life is such a freaking crapshow right now, dealing with mom on top of everything else. I don’t have space in my head for another complication.

And Dutch Cross, with his violent presence and his hands that can make me see stars, is the *definition* of complicated.

I look up at him, falling into eyes so golden, they may as well be endless pools of honey. “Why are you following me around?”

“Following you?” He laughs darkly. “Does it look like I have nothing better to do, Brahms?”

“It *looks* like you’re stalking me.”

His eyebrows twitch. Suddenly, he slams his fist into the open locker and it bangs in my ear. I jump but, before I scold him, his fingers close around my wrist and he pushes me back, slamming me into the locker. He doesn’t use much force, but I still feel the breath knock out of my lungs when he steps into me.

I expect him to yell or punch the locker near my ear.

Something.

But he doesn’t.

“What’s wrong?” His voice is low, coaxing. Unexpectedly gentle. “You look like you didn’t sleep well last night and you’re totally out of it this morning.”

I blink in shock.

“Did you and Vi fight again?”

I watch his ripe mouth turn down into a frown and my mind goes blank.

*Stop beating so fast, you stupid heart. This isn’t a big deal.*



“Cadey.” There’s something in the way he says that name that’s different than when he calls me ‘Brahms’. Something softer. Something more urgent.

My heart picks up speed despite my instruction.

I want to wrap my arms around his neck, curl into his chest and tell him everything. Not necessarily because I want him to fix it but because I want someone to assure me that I’m not alone. That everything will get better. That mom won’t make my life hell all over again.

But I won’t.

I’ve given Dutch the one thing that no one else has ever had—my virginity.

And it’s made me feel closer to him.

But he also feels further away.

My world is so removed from his.

My crazy mom. A midnight murder. A killer who knows her face, who knows our family.

I have so much to figure out and I can’t do it if Dutch shatters me to pieces and takes over everything.

His fingers trace my cheek and he pushes my hair behind my ear the way he did that night in the alley. He’s so tender that tears press against the back of my eyes.

“Tell me what’s wrong,” Dutch whispers.

I want to.

But I can’t.

The one thing this world has taught me is that trusting anyone but yourself is a mistake. And it wasn’t so long ago Dutch was desperately trying to kick me out of Redwood. Who’s to say he’s changed? Who’s to say he won’t put the target back on me? Who’s to say it’s not there still?

I firm my stance and push at him.

He doesn’t budge.

“I have Lit in ten minutes and I need to use the bathroom,” I mumble.

Not technically a lie.

His eyes scour my face as if he wants to read every one of my thoughts. Eventually, he steps back.

I hurry down the hallway, taking note of the crowd that parts for me. It doesn't matter that Dutch isn't behind me anymore. With the way he's acting, everyone thinks we're dating. Once they see me, they see Dutch—the ruler of Redwood Prep, a guy who's insane enough to kick someone out of a chair they were already sitting in.

*Crazy bastard.*

Desperately, I duck into the nearest bathroom, pool my hand under the cool water from the sink and splash my face.

I'm too hyper-aware of him. Too caught up in his spell.

“Get it together, Cadey.” I smack my cheek. The sound of wet palms slapping against skin is loud in the bathroom. “Get it together.”

The door creaks open.

I mind my own business and grip the edge of the sink, my head tucked to my chin. Water drips down my nose and plops into the sink.

“Well, if it isn't Dutch Cross's *whore*,” a high-pitched voice scratches my ears.

In the reflection of the mirror, Paris and her cheerleading minions prance around me. Tan skin. Bouncy hair. Expensive highlights. Caked on makeup. Redwood's idea of perfection.

The air trips with danger and I straighten, my eyes locked on Paris. She smirks at the mirror, revealing bright white teeth. Veneers. They're way too perfect to belong to her naturally.

I glare at her.

Paris sashays forward, hips swaying in her tiny skirt. She stops at the sink, pulls out a fancy makeup kit, and rummages inside for a tube of lip gloss.

I don't want to stand there and watch her, but two of her minions press themselves beside and behind me, locking me in place.

Paris smears the gloss on her lips and smacks obnoxiously. "You know," she murmurs, admiring herself in the glass, "Jinx wrote a post about you today."

At the mention of Jinx, my mind snaps to that vague text she sent me last night.

*I have a deal for you. It involves something you want and something you don't.*

Why would Jinx want to strike a deal with me now?

I brush the curiosity away.

Jinx is the last thing I'm worried about right now.

"She said you were holding Dutch's leash." Disbelieving laughter spills out of Paris's mouth. The sound lacks any warmth or joy. "But we both know the one who's holding the leash is him, don't we, *Brahms?*"

She plops her lip gloss in her open makeup kit and turns to me. Her eyes are dark. Frigid. Full of spite as they drag down my secondhand uniform.

"No matter what, you can't chase the *stink* of poverty on your skin and you can't change the fact that you're a charity case. You will never be good enough for him."

I bob my head. "You're right."

Shock ricochets through her eyes.

I gesture to her. "Since I'm so beneath him, why don't you take him from me?"

Her eyes widen.

"Seriously. I'm begging you." I grab her hand. "Flash some skin. Pledge your undying devotion. Have at it."

Her eyelashes flutter and she wrenches her arm back. "You think I'm joking?"

“I’ve been trying to get away from Dutch Cross for months. I’d be so grateful if you could do what I couldn’t.” My eyes slide down her outfit. I quirk a brow. “But... word of advice, ease back on the desperation. I may be poor, but you, Christa 2.0,” I step toward her, “you’re just cheap.”

Paris’s eyes narrow. Her mouth twisting cruelly, she raises her hand to slap me.

I grab her wrist before she can and drive her into the wall near the mirror. She screams and tries to grab my hair. I struggle to keep her from scratching me in the eyes.

She’s surprisingly strong, but I’m stronger.

And pissed off.

I wrestle both her arms down, breathing heavily.

“South side trash!” Paris spits in my face.

My patience cracks like a twig and all the frustration that had been lashing in my chest explodes out of me.

“Listen you piece of crap,” my voice snaps, “my life is such a train wreck that this petty high school drama means literally nothing to me. Your brain’s the size of a grape, so I’ll speak slowly. I have *bigger* things to worry about than whether you got your feelings hurt because Dutch didn’t choose you as his prom queen.”

Paris’s mouth goes slack.

“I suggest you get your insecure, trash-talking face out of my sight before I show you how we fight on the south side.”

Paris shrieks at her minions, “Guys, she just threatened me! What are you doing? Get her!”

“Try it.” I whirl around and pin them both with a sharp look. “I can promise you that I’ve been in more fights than either of you put together and I *will* leave scars.”

The girls hesitate and glance fearfully at each other. They must decide that Paris isn’t worth the permanent damage because they scurry out of the bathroom.

“Nice talk.” I step away, but turn back to say, “Oh, and be sure to let me know when you find a plan to get Dutch away from me. I can give you some pointers.”

Paris stomps her foot, face redder than flames, and lets out a shriek of frustration.

Smiling slightly, I leave the bathroom and hurry around the corner. I’ll be late for Lit, but at least I got to put Paris in her place.

It felt good, even if my arms are stinging.

Damn. She must have paid premium for that fancy manicure because her nails were like claws on my skin.

As the musical chimes ring, I freeze. There’s a tatted lead guitarist leaning against the wall outside Miss Jamieson’s class. Dutch has one foot propped behind him and both arms folded over his chest.

“Thought you were skipping class without me, Brahms.” He straightens.

I stop and hide my arms behind my back. “Dutch.”

He notices and, immediately, his expression darkens. He grabs me by the arm and drags it forward. I hiss in pain as his thumb squeezes one of the scratch lines.

“What the hell is this?” he barks at me, lifting my arm to the sunshine and staring at the scratches that drew blood in some places.

I glance away. “Nothing.”

“Nothing?” His voice is low and tight as a guitar string.

*You’re not good enough for him.* I turn away. “I just... got into a fight with a nasty cat. Nothing you need to worry about.”

“Where’s the cat?”

“It’s gone now.” I pull my arm back. “I handled it.”

“Dutch, Cadence.” Miss Jamieson calls to us. “Is there a reason you’re not seated and ready for class?”

Dutch stiffens. Out of all the teachers at Redwood Prep, the Cross brothers show the most respect to Miss Jamieson. It could be because she's the most attractive teacher at Redwood—slim and curvy with brown skin and curly hair. Or it could be for other reasons. Who knows what the Cross brothers are thinking.

“We'll be right there.”

“No we're not.” A muscle in Dutch's jaw clenches. “Cadence got hurt.”

“You did?” Miss Jamieson abandons her classroom and rushes over.

I blush, noticing the way the students inside are looking at us. “It's really not a big deal.”

Dutch's amber eyes slam into mine and I swear, lightning snaps out of his gaze. “You're bleeding.”

“You should have seen the cat,” I joke hoarsely.

Dutch turns my wrist over and examines the skin on the underside of my arm. He does not look amused.

“Dutch, take her to the nurse's office. And Cadence.” Miss Jamieson stops me with a concerned look. “After class, I need to speak to you for a few minutes.”

I mumble an agreement and allow Dutch to whisk me away.

He paces like an expectant father in the nurse's office and doesn't stop even when the medic tells him she needs room.

“He was like this after that time too,” the nurse mumbles, sending him an angry glare. “He brought you in from the pool and he was breathing over my shoulder. Delirious with worry. Making it difficult to work.”

My heart slams against my ribs. *He was?*

It's hard to imagine Dutch being worried about me. The day when Christa pushed me in the pool, we were deep in a war against each other.

The nurse throws another scolding glance over her shoulder. “Your girlfriend is fine, young man.”

“I’m not his girlfriend,” I say.

Both the nurse and Dutch ignore me.

“Hello?” I wave a hand.

“Did you use antiseptic on the cuts? She can’t get infected,” Dutch says.

“Are you telling me how to do my job?”

“I said I’m not his girlfriend,” I repeat myself.

“If you did your job right, you wouldn’t be so defensive right now,” Dutch says.

The nurse narrows her eyes.

Since getting either of them to listen is a lost cause, I stand.

Dutch springs over to me. “Cadey, take it easy.”

“I told you she’s fine,” the nurse insists.

Dutch opens his mouth.

I speak up before he can say something stupid. “I’m going back to class. I don’t want to miss the quiz.”

The nurse gives me instructions on keeping the scratches clean. After, Dutch escorts me to Lit. He’s too busy brooding to bother me during class and I take my quiz in peace.

The bells chime and Miss Jamieson gestures for me to meet her at the front.

“I’ll wait for you outside,” Dutch says.

“You don’t have to—”

His answering glare is so dark that I just shut my mouth.

Miss Jamieson gives me an amused look when I draw closer to her table. She doesn’t look as tired as she did a few days ago, but there’s still something heavy about her. Something that wasn’t there before.

I wonder if everything's okay.

"You and Dutch are dating?" She folds her arms over her chest and leans against the desk, her dark lips rising at the corners.

"No, we're not," I say vehemently. "I'm not his girlfriend. We're not together. That's not happening."

Her lips tremble but she doesn't outright laugh at me. "I see."

"What did you want to talk to me about?" I shift from one leg to the other. My scrapes are starting to burn because of the antiseptic and it's hard not to scratch.

"It's about Serena."

Immediately, my body tightens with guilt and I drop my gaze to the ground. When I suspected that Dutch and his brothers were responsible for the fire that got my friend kicked out of school, I completely destroyed their practice room.

And then Dutch came over to my house to confront me.

And then mom showed up to prove she wasn't dead.

And I haven't had time to think about or visit Serena.

Call me the worst friend ever.

"I spoke to a few more security guards. I was trying to find more information on the person who left The Kings' practice room around the start of the fire." Miss Jamieson taps a manicured nail on the desk. "It turns out that person was their private cleaner, Martina."

I frown. "They sent her to clean early in the morning?"

"She chose to go that time. She said it was more convenient."

As someone who does her work service early in the morning to avoid people too, I can't argue with that.

"And she didn't see anything?"

Miss Jamieson shakes her head. "I hit a dead-end."



“Without evidence, we won’t be able to bring Serena back to school.” I chew on my bottom lip, my stomach swirling. “I told her not to tell her mom about being expelled. I promised her I’d get her back.”

What if I got her hopes up only to disappoint her? How do I face Serena now?

“And we will. Don’t worry.” Miss Jamieson squeezes my shoulder. “I’m still advocating for Principal Harris to give her another chance.”

“He’s not going to do that if we can’t find the real culprit behind the fire.”

“There’s something else.” Miss Jamieson shifts.

I brace myself.

“Serena had a provisional scholarship. Although the school won’t charge her for the damages caused by the fire, the board has decided to sue for the money that they invested in her.”

My heart drops to my toes. “How much?”

Miss Jamieson rattles a figure that makes my head explode.

“They can’t afford that! Serena’s mom is getting treatment for cancer and they can barely keep up with the hospital bills. A law suit will ruin them.”

“It’s happening.”

“When?”

“We have about a week,” Miss Jamieson says. “If we can’t find the culprit...”

“Serena will be ruined.”

“I don’t believe this is the end. I know we’ll find a way out. We just have to look hard enough.”

Her words are meant to give me hope, but all I feel is darkness. I can barely keep my head above water and now Serena is counting on me too.

Between mom, Viola, Serena—it all feels overwhelming.

I shuffle through the hallway, my vision blurry.

Silence falls as I enter another hallway.

Everyone is watching, peering, surveying my every move.  
I'm a walking exhibit. A show for their own twisted pleasure.

It's surreal.

Annoying.

Lonely.

I've always had a dark respect for Redwood Prep, only because I know what a cut-throat place this is.

But now?

Now, I hate it with a passion.

The pretense. The blind greed. The unspoken competition.

I know why they're watching. Not because they care about me. It's because they don't want to miss the moment that I fail. They want to be there to laugh. To point at me. To tear me apart until there's nothing left.

For a long moment, I walk alone.

And then, a warm hand closes over mine.

When I lift my head, I see Dutch's face. Sharp lines. Devastating angles. Pure poetry in the shape and symmetry.

And then the eyes.

When Dutch pins those amber eyes on me, I feel a strange, tingling sensation all over my body. It reminds me of that time I tried the upside down rollercoaster and felt all the blood rushing to the top of my head. Like my world, everything I was and knew, had become something new, different and uncontrollable.

"Hungry?" Dutch asks. His tone is calm. This is normal to him. Being on display. Being poked and prodded by their eyes, even in his most vulnerable moments.

I almost feel sorry for him. What hard lessons did he have to learn to become so callous? How much of his heart did he have to bludgeon until it no longer cared?

He leads me to the cafeteria. There's a long line, but we don't stand at the back of it. Instead, Dutch leads me right to the front. Everyone makes room, abandoning their trays and skittering back as if there's an orbit around him they can't touch.

The cafeteria ladies smile. They place steaming hot bowls on our trays. I glance over the spread of food behind the glass domes, realizing that there is no soup on today's menu.

I eye Dutch suspiciously. "Did you ask them to make this?"

He says nothing.

But my suspicions are confirmed when the lunch lady grabs my wrist and squeezes. "Hope you feel better, sweetie."

"Uh, thanks."

"This way." Dutch grunts.

I follow without argument.

He leads me to the table where I usually sit with Serena.

My heart pangs painfully.

Dutch pays close attention to my face and says, "We can sit somewhere else."

"No. I want to stay here."

I don't want to forget Serena just because she's not at school anymore. I want to feel that sting. That guilt. I want the reminder because I don't ever want to forget her.

Dutch sets both trays on the bench and picks up a spoon.

I expect him to eat, but he pushes a spoonful of soup at me instead.

My eyes widen. "What are you doing?"

"Your hands are injured."

"It's just a scratch. It's not like it's broken."

"I saw you flinch."

"No, I didn't."

“When you move your arm back and forth, it rubs against the side of your shirt and irritates the skin. I saw it, Cadey.”

What is he? A CSI?

Dutch stubbornly nudges the spoon at me. I squirm, noticing the cell phones that are being whipped out to spy on us. From what Paris said in the bathroom, Dutch and I are still hot topics on Jinx’s app. Him acting like this won’t help the rumors that we’re together.

“Open your mouth, Cadence,” he barks.

I open.

Dutch feeds me the soup and though I’d intended on spitting it back out just to teach him a lesson, I don’t.

An explosion of flavor dances on my tongue.

I cup my mouth and swallow. “This soup is amazing. Oh my go—how is this so delicious?”

Dutch doesn’t smile. He doesn’t even blink.

Awkwardly, I grab my bottle of orange juice. “What?”

“When are you going to trust me?” he whispers thoughtfully.

“Trust you?” My back muscles coil.

He drops the spoon and it plops back into the soup. “Did you really get mauled by a cat today?”

“Of course I did. Why would I lie about that?” My eyes slide away from his.

He leans back and stares at me with his cool dark gaze. He’s simply terrifying. Without effort. Without any strain on his part.

I flick my attention to the soup to ease the tension in the air.

“You’re mine. I’ve made that clear. If someone hurts you, they hurt me.”

“I belong to myself. Not you. I can handle my own business.”

He gives me a long, studying look. The picture of royalty with his Disney prince blonde hair, amber eyes and inked body. Paris was right, even if she is annoying. Dutch Cross definitely doesn't look like he belongs with someone like me and I can't take him seriously. I can't let myself believe any of this is real.

“Cadence—”

“Who the hell are you?” I hiss.

He watches me, expression going blank again.

I dig my fingers into the tray. “You spent weeks making me miserable. You did everything in your power to drive me out of school. You ruined my teacher's life. You pushed me and goaded me and made fun of me. And now you want me to trust you? Do you think I'm *stupid*?” The word snaps with the vehemence of a rubber band flying from a slingshot. “You can't decide one day you're going to hate me and randomly switch to liking me. That's not how this works.”

“You think I wanted this?” He hisses. “You think I woke up one day and thought I want some girl to have my heart by the freaking throat?”

My breath hitches.

“I didn't have a freaking choice in this either, Cadence. The minute you walked into my life, my whole universe shrank down to the size of a single point and I haven't been able to see anything else.” He rises and glares down at me. “So yeah, continue to be freaking uncomfortable. Because so the hell am I.”

“Dutch!” I shriek. Anger makes me shake and if I had the spoon in my hands, I'd probably fling it at his obnoxious head.

He climbs out of the bench with his tray, eyes an angry storm. “Whether you trust me or not, it won't change the fact that you belong to me.” He tilts his chin up. “And I always take care of my property.”

Enraged, I pick up the spoon and throw it at him, but Dutch is already walking away.

\* \* \*

*Jinx: Redwood Prep Might Have A New Owner*

*It turns out our were-boy Prince isn't the only one with sharp teeth. The head of the Pompoms had her backside handed to her by a Cinderella with fangs. It turns out, you don't mess with the queen in her own kingdom. A lesson Miss Pompoms had to learn the hard way. Why else would she storm out of the bathroom with tears in her eyes and her hair frazzled?*

*And the reward for Cinderella's valiant battle? Prince Charming feeding her by hand in the courtyard.*

*These two lovebirds are syrupy sweet, but the day is still young and there are a few more beasts Cinderella and Prince Charming must slay before they can skip off into the sunset.*

*Until the next post, keep your enemies close and your secrets even closer.*

*- Jinx*

## CHAPTER EIGHT

DUTCH

I dump my food in the nearest trash bin and stalk down the hallway. People press themselves against their lockers. Probably because they see the wrath on my face and know I'd step on their heads if they don't clear out fast enough.

My blood is roaring in my ears.

Fury makes me gnash my teeth.

I've spent my life learning to control that rage, pouring it all into my guitar instead of being the type of bastard that punches for sport instead of necessity. Music helps with that. It focuses all my energy. Funnels it into a mess of chords and tangled notes that don't make sense to anyone but me.

It's much more satisfying to control the emotions than letting them rule me.

But with Cadence?

Screw that.

Whatever control I thought I had goes slipping through my fingers like sand. It's infuriating to lose my own balance.

I've always been on top of the world. No one above me. No one ruling me.

But all that girl has to do is bat her eyes and I'd wage a war.

Not that she wants me to go to war for her.

The way she looked at me—like I was a freaking annoyance, it got under my skin. Even more than that, her words dug at me, unearthing a truth that bites like a million mosquitoes descending at once.

I did make it my mission to ruin her.

And I failed.

In the end, she's the one who ruined me.

Some part of my brain is aware that I need to give her time. Time to see that we're right for each other. Time to prove that I'm never going to hurt her again.

But why do I feel so freaking torn up inside? Why do I want to bust someone's head off their neck?

I turn down another hallway and stop short. Lucien and Ron—my dad's personal bodyguards—are standing outside the music lecture room.

Ron, the one on the right, is dad's favorite meathead. He's nothing but a big, hulk of muscle and an empty can for a head. Anything dad says, Ron does without question.

Lucien is a little slimmer than Ron, but what he doesn't have in mass, he makes up for in cunning. There's something about Lucien's eyes, the way they slice into you like a knife, that's always set me on edge. I would prefer to pick a fight with the brainless shark Ron, than to tempt fate with Lucien.

A crowd of students are in front of the classroom, eagerly peering inside. Some of them have signs.

*'We love you, Jarod Cross'*

*'Marry me'*

*'Jarod Cross's Number One Fan!'*

Brainless zombies. All of them. Clamoring for someone who doesn't give a damn about them. Breathless and waiting on his every move.

Idiots.



I storm toward the classroom. The crowd goes silent and, like they did in the hallway, they move out of my way.

Ron gives me a grim nod.

Lucien doesn't bother acknowledging me. Not until I get close.

He suddenly bars me with an arm out. The snake.

"Sorry, Mr. Cross," Lucien rasps. "You can't go in."

"Try and stop me," I hiss. Slamming his arm down, I stalk past him. Dad lifts a finger, a quick but powerful gesture to his underlings. Lucien adjusts his suit jacket and returns his attention to the crowd.

I stalk toward my father, my anger bristling in my veins. I haven't spoken to him since that disaster of a 'family introduction' dinner. The one where he announced Miss Jamieson as our step-sister and crushed my twin's heart with a freaking stone. Zane's stopped his destructive drinking binges, but he still hasn't recovered from that.

Maybe he never will.

"What a pleasant surprise, son. I was told you and the others didn't often attend this lecture." Dad's voice is smooth. Oily. He's made an unbelievable amount of money peddling that voice to women hungry for the fantasy. The dream that a man with everything—money, looks and talent—could be singing to them and only them.

If they knew what their dirty fantasy does in the dark, would they still worship him?

Something tells me they would.

I glower at dad. "What are you doing at Redwood?"

"I told you I'd be teaching a class." Dad tilts his head, showing the tattoo behind his ear. "Yesterday was my first lecture. I was a little rusty, but I've been told I did well for my first—"

"I meant," I step closer, "what are you *really* doing here?"

My eyes scour his face, searching for any signs. We both know that nothing dad does is a coincidence.

Slowly, the facade of the warm-hearted father disappears. Dad's eyes glint with the cruelty I know lurks deep in his bones.

"I heard you've been talking to Miller," he growls.

My lips quirk. "Is there some reason I can't talk to the chairman of the board?"

"What are you planning, Dutch?"

"Nothing you need to know."

"You've been getting on my nerves."

"That was intentional."

His eyes go dark. "Don't force my hand, son."

"You've already forced mine." I clench my jaw. "Let's not hold back anymore, dad. I'd like to take a proper swing at you."

Musical chimes flood the speakers.

Class is about to begin but neither of us moves a muscle.

Through the window, I notice the crowd multiplying. Some are fans here to watch Jarod Cross from a distance, but others are students.

Cadence is among them.

I can't see her yet, but I know she has this lecture and I know she'll be here soon.

"Leave." Dad steps back. Slipping a pair of thin, circle glasses out of his pocket, he puts it on like a costume. "I have work to do."

"I'm not going anywhere."

He glances over me, his tone dry and mocking. "You're suddenly interested in school?"

"I'm sure there's a lot I can learn if I keep my eyes on you."

His mouth twists into a bigger smile, but his gaze is as cold and frigid as winter. “My goodwill ends here, Dutch. I’m holding myself back for your reputation’s sake, but if you insist on staying, I’ll have to throw you out in front of everyone.”

My back goes ramrod straight. I give him a look that’s pure hell.

“The teachers here at Redwood are scared of you, aren’t they? But I’m not, little boy. I’ll show you what power is,” dad’s voice is raspy and threatening. “And when I embarrass you, when I show them how weak you really are, you’ll lose all the respect these airheads have for you. Do you want that, Dutch?” Dad reaches out and fixes my collar. His thick fingers, calloused from years of playing guitar, scrape against my skin. “Do you want your kingdom to crumble?”

“Sir,” Lucien twists his neck and looks into the classroom, “do we let them in now?”

Dad’s eyes remain trained on me. “In a minute. Dutch was just leaving.”

The fury inside snaps and crackles. But he’s good for the threat.

We both know it.

My vision goes red.

My body tightens like a spring.

I pick up a desk as I leave and send it rocking over to its side.

Wood thuds and splinters.

Metal bangs.

Dad’s laughter flows eerily into my back, following the clatter of the overturned desk. I stumble outside, gritting my teeth so hard I’m sure they’ll crack.

The crowd makes room, but one person can’t step into the background if she tried. And hell, she *is* trying.

I stop in front of Cadence who's hiding behind a tall guy with a giant backpack.

"Come out," I growl.

She inches forward, her steps slow and shuffling, her eyes wide.

I stare straight ahead, not trusting myself to look her in the face. There's no way dad has anything good planned for Redwood or for us now that he's here. I'd rather cart her away than let her get close to him.

But I know that would be pushing it.

I can't let dad see how much she means to me or he'll place a target on her back.

"Meet me in the practice room after class," I bite out.

She frowns and, for a second, I think she's going to protest.

Thankfully, she nods her understanding.

I take off like a storm, footsteps pounding down the hallways until I get to the practice room.

I send my brothers a text.

*Dutch: Miller's on board. We just need to point and shoot.*

*Finn: Agreed. I've already commissioned Jinx. We need a secret dad can't worm out of.*

*Zane: I'm in. I've been itching to see that old man burn in flames.*

My jaw works and I reach roughly for my guitar, plopping it into my lap and running my hands down the strings. A discordant note plays, a perfect reflection of my heart.

Dad needs to go.

Redwood Prep is too small for the both of us.

Besides, he doesn't deserve to have total control over the lives and futures of the students here.

And no one knows that better than me.

## CHAPTER NINE

CADENCE

“Have you thought about my offer?” Jarod Cross asks me, standing up from behind the teacher’s desk and staring me down through a pair of circular-framed glasses. With his dark hair and aristocratic face, he would fit perfectly into the country clubs where golf clubs are swung and million-dollar deals are made.

Except for his tattoos.

The ink on Jarod Cross’s skin is a physical reminder that his entire life is art. His music lives on the flesh of his arms and legs. They creep out of his neck. A walking canvas. A painting in human form.

“Cadence?”

“Uh...” I can’t help but squirm at his direct gaze. Eyes as blue as Zane’s. The ocean trapped in his skull.

His lips curl up, but as charming as he is, there’s something sharp about his smile. I picked it up the day he asked me to spy on Dutch and it’s even sharper now. A black cloud. He can’t hide it. Or maybe it’s the fact that I’ve seen too many shadows with these eyes of mine and now I’m finding darkness everywhere.

Either way, I know better than to blurt out a response.

I need to move carefully.

Jarod Cross slides a slender hand into the pocket of his trousers. He's wearing a collared shirt and pressed pants that are perfectly tailored to his athletically lean frame.

"I thought," he leans against the desk and crosses his ankles, "that you didn't jump on my offer because you might not be interested in going to school for music. Perhaps you'd like some other kind of reward." He arches a brow. "Maybe a more monetary gift."

My throat bobs as I swallow. I choose my words carefully. "I'm not sure how much you know about me and Dutch, Mr. Cross, but we're not friends."

He chuckles. "Yes, I heard of your wild... escapades."

I'm alarmed by the thought. How much is he aware of? "I'll need some time to think about it."

"If it's because you're afraid of Dutch—"

"It's not that."

He pops an eyebrow.

"When I commit to something, I go all the way. I need to make sure this... job is something I can do properly."

He rubs his chin and looks at me, pleased. "You're a smart, young lady, Miss Cooper. I think you'll go far... if the right doors are open for you."

"Thanks," I wheeze out.

Jarod Cross looks me over, scanning me with his otherworldly blue eyes. My breath gets trapped in my throat until he finally nods.

"Alright. I'll give you another day to think about it. I'll need an answer soon." His eyes flash and the cold undertones in his voice make me shiver. "Since I'm waiting this long, the answer better be one I want to hear."

*Is he threatening me right now?*

Fear makes me tighten my fingers in my skirt.

He straightens off the desk and saunters out of the classroom. His bodyguards—two big, fierce-looking men—stand to attention. Jarod Cross leaves without a glance back, but one of the guys turns and stares at me.

A shudder runs down my spine.

Something isn't right about any of this. Just like I knew the first time mom dragged me to that opioid den and forced me to play, I can feel it in my bones. Like I'm brushing close to death. To the devil himself.

After they're gone, my phone buzzes.

It's Dutch.

*Class is over now. Where are you?*

I grit my teeth and contemplate throwing my phone across the room. *That annoying, obnoxious bastard.* What does he want now?

I don't have time to run at his beck and call. I was planning to go and visit Serena this afternoon before I head home to see what disaster mom has made of our apartment.

Plus, I need to tell Rick mom is back.

Somehow.

I am *not* looking forward to that conversation.

“Deep breaths, Cadence.” I coach myself the way the therapist at the free clinic once taught me. “Just take one step at a time.”

Twisting my neck, I unzip my backpack and open it wide. The ring box is nestled inside, perfectly safe.

Thankfully, I was smart enough to remove Dutch's ring before mom could get her grubby hands on it.

Might as well return it to him now.

It's not just because mom might steal it if I take it back home.

I need to end things with Dutch once and for all.

The walk to the practice room feels longer than usual. With every step, I remember the night when I snuck into Redwood with a baseball bat in my hands and vengeance in my heart.

The bitterness I felt when I thought Dutch had set the fire nearly tore me in two. I ended up being wrong, but that doesn't change the fact that Dutch isn't a good person.

I can't afford to fall deeper into him than I already am.

If I do...

I won't ever find a way out.

My fingers tremble as I pull them into fists and knock on the door.

The lock clicks.

The knob turns.

It opens immediately.

Dutch leans against the door, his big body filling the doorway, hands in his pockets and eyes on me. When our gazes collide, my world rocks a bit.

I shudder like I'm standing in the rain.

Dutch Cross is not just a bad boy.

He's a natural disaster—a force of nature that can level cities.

And he'd been waiting for me.

I freeze, but my heart doesn't follow suit. It's pounding like a war drum.

"Come in," Dutch says, stepping aside.

I move into the practice room, stunned to see everything is cleaned up and set back in its place. His guitar has new strings. I know better than to point that out.

Instead, I ask, "Where are your brothers and Sol?"

"They were tired from all the excitement last night," Dutch says plainly.



Guilt squeezes my lungs. I stare at the ground. “Last night was... tell them I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have bothered them.”

Rough fingers brace my chin and lift my head. I meet Dutch’s fierce gaze. “We make our own choices and we own the consequences. It’s no one else’s burden but ours. So drop that look. You did nothing wrong and I won’t stand here and let you pretend like you did.”

His words are sweet, but his tone is so freaking harsh.

I snap my chin out of his hands.

He lets me back away, but his eyes remain fixed on me, studying my every move.

If we were something close to friends, if he wasn’t a possessive lunatic, I would take this last chance to ask him some questions. About his friendship with Sol and how they got close enough that Dutch would torture me just to save him. About his dad and the tension I saw between them in the classroom. About music and if he feels any closer to an answer than he did before.

Instead, I say nothing.

The only sound in the practice room is the rip of my zipper as I tug my bag open. I dip my hand inside and emerge with the ring box.

Dutch’s eyes flick to the box and return to my face. There’s a hopeful gleam in his gaze, almost as if he thinks that I’m here to accept.

The crazy thing is... I probably would.

In another life.

In another world.

The connection between us is undeniable, but it isn’t enough to survive in this life.

And I can’t be distracted right now.

Mom is a full-time job. Even worse, she brought a killer with her.

Although I don't believe all of her story, I know that a woman as self-absorbed as mom would never leave her life behind over nothing. She *did* see or uncover something that was big enough to make her run.

But why come back?

That question needles at me. If the matter was really over and done with, mom would have shown up on her own and made things clear. She was sneaking around instead. The only reason she bothered to show her face was because I changed the locks and she couldn't get into the house to steal.

My instincts are screaming that whatever she's involved with isn't over.

Viola's still in danger.

And by accepting mom back into our lives, we might have just invited the killer to our house.

Dutch's shoulders get tense and he touches my cheek. "What's wrong? Did my dad say something to you?"

I shake my head.

The gravity of the moment falls heavy on me.

I open my mouth, but no sound escapes. Damn. Why is this so hard?

I hate Dutch.

I hate him... right?

Yes.

I do.

But I don't. Not as much as I should.

And it's been that way since the beginning.

The push and pull.

Hate and want.

Lust and loathing.

Nothing with him is ever simple. Did I think that pushing him away would be simple too?

Since words fail me, I simply extend the ring box to him.

His eyes drop to the item I'm offering. He doesn't say a word, but I can tell he'd rather destroy the box with a hammer than take it back from me.

"This was ridiculous, Dutch. We both know it." I set the ring box on the arm of the sofa, since he won't accept it from my hands. The words burn like hot cigarettes, branding my esophagus. My hands are trembling and I clench them into fists. "I don't want to marry you. I can't even stand the sight of you."

Silence rings out while the words hang in the air, dark clouds full of toxic rain and hail.

"I will never forget what you did to me, and I don't want anything to do with you," I whisper hotly.

He tilts his head up to the ceiling and I can't see his expression but, when he glances down again, he looks contemplative. "Prove it."

"What?"

His face remains stoic. His blond hair catches the sunlight and burns like gold. I watch him sink into the couch, eyes never leaving mine. He motions to me. "Come and sit in my lap."

I choke. "Why would I do that?"

"You said you can't stand the sight of me. You want nothing to do with me." He tilts his head. "Then it won't matter."

"The hell is wrong with you?"

He looks unruffled. Totally in control. "Are you that scared of how I make you feel, Brahms?"

My mouth purses. "Screw you, Dutch."

"We both know you walking in here and making demands isn't going to stop me. You want me to leave you alone?" He arches an eyebrow. "Prove that you don't want me."

My lips fall into a firm line.

This is a risky game, but the one thing I hate more than Dutch Cross is walking away from a chance to shut him up.

*Don't go over there. Don't go.*

I ignore that tiny voice in my head.

I must be insane, but I want him to eat his own words. I want him to know that he doesn't control me and if I have to think about new-born kittens and C-sections and boogers to win this dare, I will.

Dutch Cross will *not* have the satisfaction of being right.

\* \* \*

*Jinx: Will This Fight For The Throne Draw Blood?*

*The moment our OG Bad Boy announced he'd be serving a royal term at Redwood, the streets were flooded with whispers. In a battle of the royals, who will stand on top—the ruler with experience or his young, impulsive son?*

*Today's first round was fought in front of a crowd and the votes are in. Prince Charming was made to bow before his more powerful father. But he made sure to leave a mess in his wake after walking away.*

*Even more intriguing? The OG Ruler took Cinderella aside again today. Does the Prince know what his father and his princess are cooking up? Something tells me there's a chaos brewing in the kingdom.*

*Until the next post, keep your enemies close and your secrets even closer.*

*- Jinx*

## CHAPTER TEN

### CADENCE

Stalking forward, I let my book bag slip off my shoulders and thud to the floor.

Dutch's amber gaze strikes me as I stomp over and settle myself on his lap. His smug little smile when I straddle him is a gunshot to the heart. I feel like I'm playing right into his hands, but my runaway temper won't let me back down.

I dig my fingers into his shoulder, my eyes like flint. "See? Nothing."

That's not true.

In fact, it's the farthest thing from the truth.

My body is instantly hot and the way his hard, muscular form feels beneath me makes me wonder if I set myself up for failure. Maybe I accepted this challenge, not to prove anything to Dutch but to grab an excuse—any excuse—to be close to him.

I realize my mistake, but I can't take it back. Dutch grips my hips with two rough hands, pinning me in place.

My breath catches as he begins to tease a circle over my hip bone. Every so often, the pad of his thumb catches the skin of my upper thigh, which is exposed thanks to the ridiculously short skirt.

I shouldn't have worn this stupid outfit today. In this position, I might as well have taken my skirt off. The skirt is crushed around my waist. I'm practically sitting on Dutch in my underwear. Only a thin strip of fabric between me and the coarseness of his trousers.

"It's too late for regrets, Cadey." His eyes are sharp, studying me with calculation. As if every step was predetermined. As if he'd known, before I walked into this room, exactly how he was going to trap me and exactly how I was going to fall for it.

"The only thing I regret is meeting you," I whisper arrogantly.

He snaps my wrist and pulls my left arm to rest on the back of the sofa. In this position, I'm leaning even deeper into his hip. With the heat of Dutch's body wedged between my thighs, it feels like my skin is about to melt off.

"I don't know when it started for me," Dutch purrs. A hint of his cologne swirls in the air between us and makes my already heightened senses turn delirious. He smells *so good*. "I don't know the exact moment I fell for you, but I know that I did and I know it wasn't random." His eyes flash, endless honey. Sharp golden pools. "This is real."

"You never fell for me. You fell for a fantasy. For someone you thought you could control."

"Control?" His voice is a violently beautiful husk, like a predator luring his prey in for the kill.

I tremble, even though the sun is draped over my back and the tension in the air is thick enough to start a fire.

He chuckles. "You disobey every one of my orders."

"Who the hell gave you the right to issue orders?"

Our eyes lock. I narrow mine in anger.

He stays where he is, waiting, holding my gaze. "I don't want to tame you. Not anymore. But I also want to make myself clear. Whether you keep the ring or not doesn't matter to me. You were mine, even before the handcuffs."

“Bastard.” I wield my free hand at him.

He captures it and smiles. “Keep that up and I’ll start confiscating your clothes as punishment.” Dutch leans in close and whispers, “Starting with your panties.”

A flood of heat rushes my body, but I scowl at him, refusing to let him see. “You think I won’t fight?”

“That doesn’t scare me.” His eyes run down the length of my body before returning to my face. “If you weren’t such a fighter, you wouldn’t have lasted this long at Redwood Prep. And you wouldn’t have caught my attention.”

My lips and tongue start to tingle as his gaze caresses my mouth. Dutch releases my hands and returns both of his to my hips. His cocky demeanor, his certainty that I won’t slap him or push away, makes my body tighten with fury. He’s so sure of himself and it pisses me off.

“You still haven’t proven your point, Cadey.” He tuts. “I’m not convinced.”

Fire and anger burn through my veins. I can’t retreat. If I do, it’ll prove that he has a hold on me.

I grip his collar in my tight fingers, desperate to show him that I’m not his pony. I’m not his property. I’m not his to own.

I’m my own person.

And I can take what I want too.

I drag him toward me. “Your words mean nothing, Dutch. Not to me. Not anymore.” I lean forward, but Dutch stops me, gripping my jaw in his tight fingers.

His eyes cut me to my soul. More black than amber. More beast than man.

The full extent of his brutality is rising to the surface, held back with only a thin thread of restraint. If I push him, if I take that next step, he won’t be gentle.

And that excites me rather than terrifies me.

I must really have lost my mind.

“Why are you dragging this out?” I snap. “Shut up and let me prove how much I hate you.” I grind my hips down. “Unless you’re the one who can’t handle it.”

His fingers dig harder into my face. “I don’t have protection.”

It’s scary that I wasn’t even thinking of that. It really didn’t affect me as much as my need to feel his body filling mine.

“Who said I was going to take my clothes off?” I lean in to press my mouth to his.

His full lips fall into a frown. He jerks me back. “Kiss me now and I won’t stop, Cadence. Kiss me now, and you will never escape me. Not in this life or the next.” His voice is low, humming with a dark promise that makes my throat feel tight.

I’m dangling right over an active volcano. Any moment and the rope might snap, sending me plummeting into the abyss. But I don’t care if I get burned. I don’t care if my body turns to ash.

I felt this way that night too.

The night I opened my legs for Dutch Cross and let him take all of me.

Unbalanced.

Delirious.

Aching with need.

This is the last time.

The last, *last* time I’ll allow myself to get this close to the fire again.

My fingers wrap around his neck and I shut my brain down as I pull him closer.

One kiss.

Just one kiss and I’ll slap him, push him off, leave him wanting more.

I’ll show him who’s in control.



But when I slam my lips to Dutch's and that ripe mouth of his brushes against mine, all the lines I drew turn to dust. Heat slices me open and burns me to a crisp.

Dutch gathers me to his chest, big hands pressing into my back and holding me there, his tongue sliding into my mouth and plundering me.

I might have initiated this kiss, but it's not mine anymore.

It's his.

And it's a demand for everything I have, everything I don't. Everything that didn't exist before and now won't exist for anyone but him.

This kiss is dark. Nothing like the fairytales. Cinderella and Prince Charming—Jinx's code names. All wrong. All turned on its head. This is the kiss between the pauper and the villain. Two lost souls reaching for each other. Dragging each other down to their destruction.

It shouldn't be this satisfying, this heady. This... perfect.

But it is.

Dutch kisses me so deeply that I can feel it in my toes. His body hardens beneath mine and I rake my fingers through his hair, loving the way I can be rough and broken and ruthless in his arms. He can handle it. He can handle that darkness in me.

"Clothes. Off." He grunts the words out. Not bothering with full sentences. All caveman. All primitive beast.

I hiss when he slides down to a lying position, his hands disappearing under my shirt and searing me with heat. His fingers tease my chest before he grabs one of my buttons and tears it aside.

Breaths impatient and thick, I reach down and tug at his shirt. He grunts his displeasure, but I can't wait for him to undo every one of my buttons before I feel him.

I need his hot flesh under my hands.

My palms scraping over his abs.

My nails digging into his jeans.

*I need it.*

Dutch glances over my face. I don't know what he sees, but he allows me to haul his T-shirt up without protest. He's the one who tugs it over his head though and, as his arms stretch over the edge of the sofa, he knocks the ring box to the ground.

At first I don't notice.

Dutch is shirtless and sitting up again. He's kissing my neck hard enough to leave a bruise.

I slide my hands down his muscular back, my hair in my face, mouth open in hot pleasure and eyes unseeing.

Until something comes into focus.

The ring box.

It's on the floor, open... but there's no ring inside.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

CADENCE

I frantically climb off Dutch's lap and drop to my knees in front of the sofa. He sits up, his brow wrinkled and his eyes hot on me. There's a flush on his skin. His hair is mussed from my fingers and he's breathing heavily.

"Brahms."

"It has to be in here." I stick my hand under the sofa and feel around in the dark. "It must have rolled out. There's no other way."

"Cadence." Dutch calls my name more forcefully.

I freeze and look up at him with pure panic.

His expression shifts from belligerent to concerned. "What's wrong? What are you looking for?"

"The box had a hook to keep the ring from falling out. It was clasped. I made sure I locked it tight last night just in case it fell out of my backpack at school." I scramble to my feet and keep my eyes on the floor. "But these things break, right? It could have fallen out."

"What are you talking about? The ring?" He runs a hand through his hair. His mind is still, clearly, on where things were going in the sofa. I can see him wrestling to switch gears. "You're saying the ring fell under the chair?"

"I don't see it, Dutch."

“It’s fine. I’ll get you another one. My grandmother had plenty. She never could find Mr. Right.” He gets up and slides his arms around my waist.

I push him back, my heart pounding. “You don’t understand.”

“What don’t I understand?” He sounds frustrated.

“Can you move the chair for me?”

His eyebrows pinch together.

I don’t wait for him. I push at the chair myself.

It doesn’t budge.

Dutch sighs and shoves the sofa aside. I turn on my cell phone’s flashlight and shine the light behind the sofa.

Nothing.

I hunt around the table legs. Check the restored trophy case.

Nothing.

I look around Zane’s drums, even though we were nowhere near it.

I check behind Finn’s guitar.

And then Dutch’s.

Nothing.

“Cadence, stop.” Dutch wraps strong fingers around my upper arm. He holds me in place. “Explain. Why is this such a big deal?”

My chest feels hollowed out.

I stare into the wall, terror overtaking me.

I’m thinking about this morning. The stench in the bathroom. Mom’s smiling face.

She wasn’t scratching anymore.

“Oh my go—that’s how she got the money to buy weed.” I gasp.

“What?”

“She stole it.” My throat tightens until I can’t even swallow. “She stole the ring last night.”

“Who stole the ring?”

“I need to go.” I wrench away from him, hurrying to the door.

Dutch’s ring didn’t look cheap, but it’s not like that matters. Mom wouldn’t be worrying about getting a fair price. She would have sold it for any amount of cash she could get her hands on.

*Oh no. Oh no. Oh no.*

How much did that ring cost? What if I have to pay that back? I can’t afford another bill right now. I can’t even afford groceries until my next pay day.

Dutch easily catches up to me. He grabs my hand, bringing me to an abrupt stop.

“Let me go!” I snap at him, unleashing my panic, my anger at my mother, and my helplessness all at once.

“Dammit, Cadey.” There’s a harsh bite in his words, but I’m sensing that it’s from impatience more than anger. “I’m not letting you go. I am *never* letting you go. I warned you when you kissed me and I meant it. Whatever’s going on, you either tell me or don’t. I don’t care. But I’m in this.”

Tears flush my eyes. I’m not sure if they’re angry tears or relieved tears.

I just know that it’s starting again—the cycle of me cleaning up mom’s messes and taking responsibility for all the ways she screws up.

For a few blissful months, I’d forgotten what this weight felt like.

For a few blissful months, I was free.

But it’s over now.

“Where are you going?” Dutch asks soberly.

“Home.”

He gestures to me. “Fix yourself up first and then I’ll take you.”

Heart thundering, I stuff my blouse back into the hem of my skirt and Dutch pulls his shirt back on. After we’re dressed, he leads me down the hallway.

I climb into his car, barely noticing the trees and buildings blurring outside my window. My fingers are tapping my pants. My heart is pounding in my throat.

Mom isn’t answering her cell phone.

Not a surprise. She stopped answering that right after she ‘died’. I’m guessing one of the first things she pawned while laying low was the phone.

*How the hell did she get the ring?*

I snuck it out of my bedroom last night. I checked it right before I went to sleep and made sure it was still there.

“Dammit!” I explode suddenly.

Dutch glances over, his lips twisted.

I ignore him and rub my chin. Mom must have spotted the ring when I tried to hide it in my pocket. I can practically see her plotting her theft, crouching outside Vi’s room, biding her time, waiting until I fell asleep before sneaking in and taking it out of my backpack.

How foolish of me.

I thought I’d gotten one over her, but she turned out to be the victor instead.

“Am I heading into a fight?” Dutch stares straight ahead.

“What?” I ask distractedly.

“How many of them will I need to take out? If it’s more than five, I’ll have to call my brothers.” His eyes shift to me. “I’m not a ninja.”

His words are so ridiculous that a small smile trembles my lips. “You think I’m going to fight someone?”

“You have that look in your eyes,” he says, returning his attention to the road. “It’s that face you make when you’re going to shatter someone’s world.”

My eyebrows hike. “I do?”

He nods. “It’s hot as hell.”

I stare at the side of his face, and I can feel it. Attraction. Wild desire. Destruction. The tension between us is hot and sticky, thick enough to hold in my hands and stroke. And I’m desperate to touch it, but it’s not the right time.

Jerking my eyes away, I mutter, “It’s better if you don’t ask questions.”

“Fine. But I don’t want you throwing the first punch. You’ve already got a scarred heel from those shoes you wore and now your arms are scratched. The next person who bruises your body is not going to survive.”

My eyes narrow. It genuinely sounds like he would kill someone for me.

Possessive bastard.

“That isn’t funny.”

Amber eyes meet mine. Still. Determined.

A predator’s eyes.

“Who said I’m joking?”

In that moment, I realize how serious Dutch Cross is.

I tell myself it should scare me.

But it doesn’t.

And that lack of fear, that brutal recklessness, is the scariest thing of all.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

DUTCH

I hate being interrupted.

Not when I'm talking.

Not during practice.

And sure as freaking hell not when I'm about to plunder Cadence Cooper to within an inch of her life.

Any other girl made me hot like that just to break it off, I wouldn't have batted an eye before I sent them packing and ignored them cold.

But Cadence?

One jerk of my chain and I've got no choice but to come running.

This girl has me wrapped around her pinkie finger and I'm storming into her crappy apartment in this crappy side of town, the sun beating down on me and making me sweat while my rock-hard body protests every freaking step.

Damn. *Damn.* This is torture.

I should be plastering her to a wall and delving inside her like a maniac.

*Keep it cool, Dutch.*

I step into the apartment, passing the table where I made myself a sandwich and waited for Cadence to arrive that night.



She stumbles right past it, heading for her bedroom.

One look at that bed and it's over. My mind thickens with more memories of holding her. Biting down on her ear. Plunging into her mouth. Taking her hard and fast.

*Calm down.*

But at this point, not even a cold shower will do much.

"You need me here for this part?" I ask.

"What?" Cadence says as if half her brain is already beyond this moment.

"Good," I mumble. Hurrying to the bathroom, I adjust myself and dunk my head under their tiny faucet. It's not much, but it'll have to do for now.

I can't be screwed up in the head. If Cadey needs me to fight, I need my brain firing on all cylinders.

Once I feel like I'm in control again, I glance around the bathroom. Small towels are folded neatly. The shower curtain is pushed back and I force myself not to imagine Cadey getting undressed and stepping under the water.

Everything is small and rusted, but it's clean.

I sniff. Strange. The faint smell of weed is in the air.

It sure as hell isn't Cadey's. She's wound up so tight that I could pluck her like a guitar string and she'd ring a note.

Is it Viola? Was drugs what caused the fight the other night?

That doesn't seem likely either. Viola's smart, much smarter than even her sister gives her credit for. I can totally see her turning that makeup channel into the real deal, getting sponsors, and making an empire for herself. She isn't as fragile as she looks.

Her sister either.

I open the door, curious but clearing every single shred of emotion from my face.

A rustling sound is coming from Cadence's bedroom. I head there and find her on her knees, letting out a shocked cry as she stares intently at something in a duffel bag. My eyes drift to the bag too and I stop short.

A stack of bills fill the case.

Cadence's brown eyes slide from the bag to me and back. "How much was that ring?"

"About twenty grand." It was my grandmother's. Vintage. I didn't want to see it on anyone else's fingers but hers.

Cadence makes that helpless cry again. Her bottom lip trembles. "Why would you give such a valuable piece of jewelry to me?"

"Because I wanted you to have it." My tone is matter-of-fact.

The stare she levels me would have made me wince if I were a smaller guy.

I blink as if none of it freaking matters.

Probably the wrong move.

Curses sputtering past her pretty lips, she thrusts to her feet and storms past me. I stop her by slamming my hand against the door.

She jerks to a stop and tips her chin up, meeting my eyes with a challenging stare.

"I'm not upset, Cadey. If you needed the cash—"

"I *will* punch you," she snaps.

My lips quirk up, but I don't laugh. Instead, I rub her shoulders. "Who took the ring, Cadey? And why does it make you so upset?"

"It's..." She sighs. "It's really complicated."

"Let me un-complicate it. I'm good at that." I keep touching her and I notice the tension in her shoulders start to fade.

She closes her eyes. "Actually, my mom—"

My phone rings.

Cadence stiffens and steps back.

I check the caller.

Finn.

Damn.

“I need to...” I gesture to the phone.

She turns away from me.

Irritated, I slap the phone to my ear. “This better be good, Finn.”

“You think I would have called you to discuss the freaking weather?”

I cringe. That’s not good. Finn sounds like he’s at the edge of his patience. My stoic brother rarely loses his cool.

“What’s going on?” I ask urgently.

“Zane just called me. Dad’s home. He’s saying he’s moving in.” Finn pauses. “And he invited Miss Jamieson to move in with him and her mother.”

*Holy freaking...*

We *just* got Zane to recover from that bomb dad dropped on our heads at the restaurant. It’s one thing to see the woman he loves but can’t have waltzing around at school. It’s another freaking thing entirely to have her in the same house, using our showers, prancing around in a nightgown in the kitchen.

Hell, I don’t even live with Cadence and I already find it hard to keep my hands off her.

“Dad’s going to discuss it tonight over dinner. He’s already there with Marion.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “Alright. Alright, dad wants to make this uncomfortable? We play the same game. I’m calling mom.”

“Will it make a difference?”

“She’s better at controlling him than we are.”

Finn goes quiet. “Why is dad going so hard on Zane?”

“*Do you want your kingdom to crumble?*” I think about our exchange in the classroom and wince. “I told him to come at us.”

“So he made another cheap shot,” Finn hisses.

“He can’t go too far. We know too much of what he’s done.” I hear someone shuffling toward me and turn around. Cadence is approaching the living room, the bag of money on her shoulder and a frown on her lips. “I’ll be there soon, Finn.”

“Hurry. I’ll meet you at the house.”

I hang up. “I have to go.”

“Here.” She sticks the bag out at me.

“Why are you giving this to me?”

“Some of the money is still there. I’ll find a way to pay you back for the rest.”

“You don’t have to—”

“Take it.” She shoves the bag harder.

My phone buzzes again.

Zane.

He’s probably going to tell me the same thing Finn did.

The urge to help my brothers is strong, but I don’t feel right about leaving Cadence alone.

Wrapping my fingers around her wrist, I push her arm into her stomach so she can’t force the bag on me. Voice low and stern, I tell her, “Call your friend over. The little blonde one.”

“Breeze?”

I nod.

“I was planning on doing that anyway,” she grumbles. And then she tries to push the bag at me. “Dutch, take it.”

I step back and keep walking away. “I’m not going to ask you to tell me who pawned the ring. And I’m not going to ask you to admit you have feelings for me either.” I stop at the

door. “The only thing I’m going to demand is that you call me if you’re in danger.”

“I’m not in danger.”

“Call me if you want to fight then.”

“You’re not funny.”

“If anything happens, you pick up your phone and you dial my number.”

“Dutch...”

“*Call* me.” I open the door and memorize her face for a second before I let it slam behind me.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CADENCE

“It’s about damn time.” Breeze pushes her fries away with one hand and peers up at me with her big blue eyes. “Do you know how long we’ve been sitting here, waiting for your fifteen-minute break?”

“I told you to come over when I was finished with work. You’re the one who insisted on showing up beforehand.” I scowl at my best friend.

Breeze is usually bubbly and cheerful, but today she looks like a war general on a mission. Even her makeup got the memo. Dark lipstick. Dark eyeshadow. Her nails are painted forest green and she’s wearing baggy camo pants along with a crop top and sneakers.

The outfit shouldn’t work, but Breeze has a way of making Goodwill clothes look like a million bucks.

“I’m keeping up with your school’s little gossip app.” She jabs her straw at me and soda plops to the table.

I sigh, snap my rag from the pocket of my uniform, and mop it up immediately. Later, it’ll dry and get sticky. At that point, it’ll be a headache to clean.

Breeze sees she’s making a mess. Her eyes widen in apology and she swings her straw back over the cup.

But she doesn’t stop scolding me.

“Everyone is talking about you and Dutch. When were you going to tell me—your *best friend*—that you’re dating the guy who literally made your life hell at Redwood?”

My eyes snap guiltily. “I’m not dating him.”

“Explain why there are several—not just one, Cadey, but *several* pictures of his tongue five-meters deep in your throat.”

I blush.

“According to Jinx,” Breeze continues, “he’s even following you around at school.”

“He’s not.”

“He is. And I quote—‘Cinderella’, which is you,” Breeze gestures to me, “‘has a powerful puppy on her leash’.”

“I think the term was ‘werewolf’,” Serena says, smiling tiredly.

My eyes switch to hers. Earlier, I texted Serena asking if I could stop by the hospital. She begged me to meet her somewhere else instead. *‘I’m tired of smelling Clorox and sickness all the time.’*

“No, she said puppy,” Breeze argues.

“Jinx called him a werewolf. *Werewolf*. Dutch Cross is nothing close to a puppy.”

I groan. “Not you too, Serena.”

“What? I like Jinx.”

“She’s scary.” I plop into the seat beside Breeze and steal a fry from her plate. My best friend is fuming, but she still pushes the plate at me and even sprinkles extra salt, the way I like it.

“She’s entertaining. I don’t have anything better to do while mom is sleeping, so I read everything she posts.”

“Everything?” Breeze gasps.

Serena tugs on her leather jacket. Her fingernails are painted a dark black. As usual, her eyeliner is extra heavy and her lips a blood-red.

“It feels like I’m still at Redwood Prep when I hear the drama.”

My heart flops in my chest. Despite her makeup and her armor of thick leather jacket, a black shirt and black jeans, she looks worn out. I can tell by the slump of her shoulders that the recent events have been hard for her.

Getting expelled is one thing, but she was falsely accused. Not only will she have that stain on her record forever, but Redwood Prep is about to devastate her and her mom with a giant bill.

Everything that’s happened to Serena is unfair. And although it’s okay for *me* to get beaten with the short end of the stick, I hate seeing people as sweet as Serena getting kicked down too.

“How is your mom doing?” I ask quietly. “Will she get chemo?”

“She’s good. And no, we haven’t raised enough funds yet.” Serena squares her shoulders and forces a smile. “Don’t try to change the subject. We were talking about you and Dutch, remember?”

“Exactly!” Breeze shrieks.

I scrunch my nose. “Can we not?”

“Cadence, open your eyes and smell the damn coffee!”

I sniff her drink. “It smells like iced tea.”

“We talked about this!” Breeze shrieks, smacking her hand on the table and making all the cups and cutlery dance. “We don’t date jerks, remember? We don’t date people who treat us badly. That’s not chic. It’s not romantic. It’s just heartache waiting to happen.”

“I said I’m not dating him,” I mumble.

“So you just waltz around tonguing hot bad boys in dark stairwells for fun? Is that it? Because that’s not the Cadence I know.”



I nab another fry. My stomach's starting to growl. "Are you going to spend my entire break yelling at me over gossip?"

"It's not gossip if there are pictures."

"Like pictures can't be taken out of context?"

"How else can you explain a photo where Dutch Cross, the very recognizable leader of The Kings, has his hands buried under your skirt?"

I clear my throat. The red flush is spreading from my face to my chest. "Photoshop."

Serena dunks fries into her milkshake. Laughter shakes her shoulders. "Very plausible."

"Thank you."

Breeze huffs. "You're stuck, Cadey. You're head over heels and now you're totally blind to all the red flags."

"I'm not blind to them, Breeze. I'm just... dealing with a lot. And Dutch is stubborn. Even if I tell him to bug off, he always shows up."

"And harasses you?" She peers at me. "Does he still harass you?"

I keep quiet, but the truth is I don't know how to answer that. Dutch helped me find my sister. He bought me shoes when he saw I was limping. He took care of me during lunch. Today, he could have flipped about the ring, but he didn't. He didn't even want the money back.

The Old Dutch—the beast who was trying to run me out of Redwood Prep, would never have been so calm and understanding.

"Why aren't you answering?" Breeze scowls.

"Because I've already told you I'm not dating him. Anything I say won't change your mind."

Breeze narrows her eyes at me.

I narrow mine back at her.

“Ehem,” Serena raises a hand, “not that I’m Team Dutch or anything, but he wasn’t *always* a bully to Cadence. There were times he was almost sweet.”

“Name one.”

Serena scrunches her nose, a sign she’s in deep thought. “He upgraded her meal card. She gets the VIP treatment at lunch now. First in line. First choice. All the best food.”

“Food? He’s a nice guy because he gives her food?”

I nudge Breeze in the side. “Food is Serena’s love language.”

“Whatever.” Breeze rubs her forehead. “I’m getting a headache.” Her eyes flash on me. “Just know that if Dutch Cross ever shows up in front of me, I’ll karate chop him in the neck. I don’t care that he and his brothers are hot as hell. Or that his eyes are pretty. Or that he’s talented with a guitar. Or that he’s rich and—”

“Are you bashing Dutch or complimenting him?” I ask, my mouth full of fries.

Breeze gives me a dark look.

I check my watch. “Five minutes left. If you’re done with gossip, I have something I want to tell you both.”

“What?” Breeze leans in.

Serena does too.

I pause for a minute. The urge to tell Breeze my mom is back curls on the edge of my tongue. But that’s way too complicated to explain in five minutes.

So I turn to the second, equally pressing matter.

“Jinx offered me a deal.” I show them the text.

Breeze’s eyes double in size. “Jinx texted you? Personally?”

I nod.

“I didn’t know she did that. I thought she was only on the app.”

“Before she had an app, Jinx was trading secrets with the elite at Redwood,” Serena informs her. “She used to text people personally.”

“Did she ever text you?”

Serena freezes and then stammers, “No, I wasn’t important or rich enough for Jinx to notice me.”

I study her and she avoids my gaze.

“Anyway,” Serena juts her chin at me, “did you make the deal?”

“Not yet, but I’m thinking about it.”

“No way!” Breeze whisper-shouts. “An anonymous person that blasts the secrets of the rich is not someone you want to get involved with. I have a really bad feeling about this, Cadence.”

“She said she has something I want.”

“And?”

My eyes lock on Serena. “I want to ask her for evidence... evidence that you didn’t set the fire.”

Serena’s jaw drops. “What?”

Breeze goes quiet. Her gaze slides from me to Serena.

Blinking rapidly, Serena stammers. “N-no, Cadence. You don’t even know what Jinx wants from you yet. You can’t blindly agree to work for her because of me.”

“Can you ask her what she wants before you agree?” Breeze nervously chews on the side of her thumb. “What if she wants you to sell your virginity or something?”

I flinch. If I ever tell Breeze that I lost my virginity to Dutch Cross, she’d probably explode.

“I don’t think she’d do something like that.”

Breeze’s eyes scour my face. Slowly, she backs off and nods. “Okay. I have your back. Whatever your mission is, if I can help, I will.”

“Wait? You’re letting her consider this?” Serena balks.

“Cadence has been my best friend since grade school. I know her better than anyone. Once she’s set her mind on something, there’s no taking it back.” A frown tilts her lips. “And she’s decided to do this.”

“That’s why I wanted to see you today. To talk about what working with Jinx means,” I admit to Serena.

“You want my permission?”

“I want to make sure that you’re okay with being her target.”

Serena goes pale.

“When I ask for what I want, you’re going to be on Jinx’s radar. All your secrets. Maybe even your mother’s secrets. I don’t know how far she’ll go.”

“But it’s just for evidence, right? It’s just for that night of the fire.”

“You know how powerful Jinx is. You’re only safe if you’re not in her line of sight. If I ask for evidence, she’s going to know you. She’s going to know you’re important to me. She might not stop at just the evidence for the fire.”

Serena swallows hard. Her fingers tremble so much she sticks them under the table.

I drop my gaze to the fries and admit the real reason I’m considering this. “In a week, Redwood Prep is going to sue you for the scholarship’s value.”

“What?” Serena’s eyes rip away from her jeans and find mine. Fear swims in their depths.

The desperation in her gaze is palpable and I find myself fighting back tears of my own. “I’m sorry, Serena.”

“How could they... how could they do that? I didn’t set the fire. I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I know.”

“My mom... if she finds out, she’s going to take all the money we saved up for chemo and she’s going to pay them.”

Tears spill down her face. “Cadence, if my mom doesn’t get treatment, she’s going to—”

I bite down hard on my bottom lip, my heart pounding. This is my first time seeing Serena break down.

“Go.” Breeze waves at me.

I give her a helpless look.

“Go hug her.”

Awkwardly, I scoot around to Serena’s side of the table and give her a hug. I didn’t grow up with PDA. The way I show care isn’t through touch. Serena doesn’t seem like the type to appreciate much hugging either. But, to my surprise, she turns and hugs me back as if it’s truly comforting her.

I pat her back, feeling her pain like it’s my own. “I promise you. If Jinx really does have evidence, I’ll do whatever it takes to get my hands on it.”

Serena eases back and wipes at her eyes. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to lose it like that.”

“It’s okay,” Breeze says kindly.

Serena inhales. “I don’t mind Jinx looking into me.”

I arch an eyebrow. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.” Serena swallows hard. “She can destroy my entire life. If it means I get to keep my mom alive for one more day, I’ll do it.” She winces. “I’m just sorry that you’re the one who has to pay the price. Is there any way we can switch? I don’t think it’s right for you to suffer when I’m the one who’ll benefit.”

Breeze shakes her head. “Jinx doesn’t seem like the type who’d take a stand-in.”

“Breeze is right.” I hand Serena a napkin and she thanks me with a trembling smile. “And I really don’t mind. I hate feeling helpless. This way, I have a chance at making things right.”

“Thank you so much, Cadence.” Serena squeezes my hand.

“Cooper!” One of the waitresses gestures to me and then points at Frankie.

I look through the kitchen window and see my boss staring me down from behind the grill.

“Your fifteen minutes must be up,” Breeze muses.

“I’ve got to get back to work, guys.” I check my phone and confirm that I’m running five minutes over the fifteen Frankie gave me. He showed a little grace this time. Probably because he saw Serena crying.

“I have to head out too,” Serena says. “I need to check on mom.”

“I’ll take you to the hospital. My mom let me use her truck today.” Breeze swings her key around her middle finger and wiggles her eyebrows.

I wave goodbye to the girls and finish my shift at the diner.

On the bus back home, I check my phone.

I have several messages.

*Serena: I don't know what I did to deserve a friend like you. Thank you so much, Cadence. Even if it doesn't work out, I'll never forget what you've done for me.*

*Dutch: You start any fights yet, Brahms?*

In spite of myself, I chuckle. Who does he think he is?

There’s one more text.

It’s from Vi.

*Viola: Do you know where mom is?*

My shoulders stiffen and I swipe through my phone.

Nothing.

Mom hasn’t contacted me and, since I don’t know if she even has a phone—much less a phone *number*—I can’t contact her either.

Frustration boils in my gut.

I send Vi a text.

*I'll be home soon. We can talk then.*

Fifteen minutes later, I open the door to my apartment and Viola springs on me.

“You don’t think that killer guy got her, do you?” My little sister chews on her bottom lip. She’s wearing make-up again today. It looks tasteful rather than overdone. She’s really starting to find what works for her.

“No, I don’t.” Exhaustion drags me down, but I shake it off. “Have you eaten?”

Long lashes batting over her big brown eyes, Viola follows me to the kitchen. “How do you know? What if mom’s in a ditch somewhere? What if they cut her body to pieces, stuffed it in a garbage bag and threw her in a river?”

I’m stone-cold inside. A part of me thinks mom disappearing for real would make our lives easier. I’ve gotten a taste of what life would be like if she wasn’t in it. It was hard, but it wasn’t horrible.

Vi and I survived.

We will keep on surviving—with or without mom.

Vi smacks my arm. “Cadey, are you even listening to me?”

“Yes, I am,” I say wearily, pulling out the bread. At least mom didn’t finish this loaf during her ridiculous attempt at breakfast. There’s just enough for Vi to have a full sandwich. I can eat the last slice of bread along with a couple pieces of sausage.

“Do you even care?” She accuses.

“Of course I care.” Or at least, I want to. But my heart is calloused. I have to be numb. If not, I’ll break down and cry every time life punches me in the face. Which it does. Often. If I let myself feel all the time, it’ll truly be over. I won’t have the strength to go another day.

Viola’s still watching me with angry eyes.

“What?” I ask, spreading mustard on the bread.

“You’re not keeping any more secrets from me, are you?”

“No.”

“I can’t even trust you when you say that.” She scoffs. “You lied about mom being dead. You let me believe what you wanted me to believe. I was completely in the dark.”

Vi’s in a mood, but I’m too tired to keep my frustration at bay. “What did you want me to do, Vi? Did you want me to drag you into the room while mom laid out this stupid plan and convinced me it was for the best? Did you want me to bring you along while she showed me the corpse I was supposed to report to the police? Did you want to lie to the authorities with me? Did you want to burn someone else’s mother? Someone else’s sister? Someone else’s friend? Did you want to live with the guilt that brings? Did you want to let that part of yourself that still believes there’s good in the world die all together?”

Her eyelashes flutter. Her eyes fill with tears. “I wanted you to trust me! I wanted you to share your freaking burdens and stop acting like you’re the only one who can sacrifice herself!”

“I didn’t want you to worry—”

“I’m not a child!” She flings the words at me. Hot enough to scald. “And you’re not my mom.”

Usually, I’m indestructible.

But my emotional defenses are down. The words hit their target.

“I’m going to bed.” I shove the plate at her. “Eat. Don’t go to bed hungry.”

“Cadey...”

I saunter to my bedroom and shut the door.

Mom might sneak back in tonight and I want her to see me. I want to look her in the eyes and ask why she did that. I want to ask why she didn’t just abandon us in an orphanage to fend for ourselves rather than dragging us into this hellish world with her. I want to ask why she even bothered having kids in the first place.



My mattress creaks when I sink my weight into it. I curl my body forward, literally incapable of lifting my head. There's a big weight on my chest. It's too painful. Too much.

My eyes slide to the keyboard in the corner. It's so worthless that mom didn't bother trying to pawn it. Easing off the bed, I stumble to the ground, plug in my headphones and let my fingers stroke the keys.

Silence shudders and dies.

Music fills my ears.

My own creation. My own twisted beast. I form it from nothing but my own pain and torture. Dark, pulsing notes. Lashing chords. A song that's all about bleeding and destruction. It twines with my heart and gives me energy when I had none before.

I play until my fingers start throbbing.

Then I stop.

Spent.

Limp as a dried rag.

My legs have fallen asleep, so I can't even stand. Undeterred, I crawl into bed and pull my phone off the dresser.

It's time.

I text Jinx.

*I'm in. Tell me what you want me to do.*

\* \* \*

*Jinx: Trade a secret for a secret. In the deepest caverns of Redwood Prep, the royals reveal their secrets. What is Jarod Cross hiding in the dark? Inquiring minds want to know. But watch your step, Cadence. Those who dig holes to bury their secrets won't like those graves disturbed.*

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

DUTCH

Dad reminds me of a snake. Glittering scales. Fangs hidden before he bites. Smooth when he moves. So smooth he's almost oily.

We're the only ones who can see it.

His family.

The people who *should* matter but don't.

To the world, he's glittering, not because of his scales but because he's made of gold. To the world, his fangs aren't venomous. To the world, he's charming, glowing. Perfect.

A snake in sheep's clothing.

I adjust in my chair and the loud creak snaps through the silence.

Marion, dad's clueless new wife, lifts her head and smiles at me. Dark skin. Short hair. Fancy dress. And giant diamond ring on her finger. She looks so proud of it. Of him.

I wonder if she's that innocent. I won't give her the benefit of the doubt just because she's Miss Jamieson's mother.

They always want something—dad's women.

Whether it's money, fame, the prestige of sleeping with a musical legend. It's always about them.

I think Marion likes dad.

But loves him?

I don't know.

"Is something wrong, Dutch?" Marion says.

I shake my head.

She smiles.

I don't.

Her smile falters and eventually disappears.

For a moment, the only sound in the dining room is the cut of knives into steak so raw, I can hear the cows mooing.

Dad likes to see the blood ooze out. It brings him joy to know that his meal had, only moments before, been slaughtered.

I don't eat the meat.

Neither does Zane.

Although my brother might be starving himself for other reasons.

He's sitting at my right, his eyes burning into Miss Jamieson—who looks like she's about to choke on her salad.

I'm not sure how she feels about all this. Since dad's announcement, she kept her distance at school and remained stoically professional. Could be because she's embarrassed or because she genuinely hates this as much as we do. No one knows.

Finn is to my left. He's not eating either. His eyes are glued to a book under the table as if all this is beneath him.

But I know the truth.

Finn is distracting himself to keep quiet. Seeing Zane lose it and smash his drums to pieces in the garage made us both uneasy.

Dad is tearing into one of our own.

Finn wants action. He wants dad's pain *now* rather than later.

It's hard to be patient. To play the long game.

Neither of my brothers enjoy this farce.

I don't either.

But if we get emotional, dad wins.

He knows he can control us. He knows which buttons to push. Which wounds to dig his fingers into and make it hurt worse.

We need a win right now.

My eyes slide over to the woman eating daintily at the foot of the table. She's wearing long, glittering earrings. Her hair is in a fancy bun. Her dress is similar to Marion's, but it sits differently on her. Like she was born to wear it rather than simply taking it off the shelf because it was the most expensive.

"The meal is good," mom notes, chewing daintily.

Marion smiles wide. "Thank y—"

"It's the company that's lacking."

Marion chokes.

Dad's eyes widen.

Miss Jamieson frowns.

Mom doesn't flinch. Her expression is blank. The complete opposite of dad. There's no pretense with her. No lies. She only knows how to be direct and honest. It's a perk of growing up as an heiress. Mom did whatever she wanted, said whatever she wanted and bore none of the consequences for it.

It's made her fearless.

Finn smiles for the first time.

Zane laughs under his breath.

I give mom a proud look.

I'm glad she got here in time.

Dad wipes his mouth with a cloth napkin and shifts in his chair. "Jacqueline, how did you manage to make it tonight?"

“I hopped in my private jet and came over, Jarod. Are you asking that question because you don’t know or because you’re disappointed I’m here?”

Marion coughs.

Dad huffs and glances away.

“Well, I think this is *wonderful*. I’ve always wanted to have a big family meal.”

“Oh, are we family?” Mom looks amused.

Marion scrambles to save face. “Of course we are. Jarod’s said so many good things about you, Jacqueline. And your boys are so... uh... precious...” Marion glances at me as if she’s scared I’m going to jump over the table and stab her, “in their own way.”

Finn snorts.

Miss Jamieson lifts her head and pins her mother with a nervous stare. “Mom.”

“What?”

She sets a hand over her mother’s, a silent instruction to be quiet.

Despite her daughter’s warning, Marion slips her hand away and keeps yapping her mouth. “As Jarod’s new wife, I want to create a harmonious environment. I don’t see why everyone can’t get along.”

“We don’t usually meet the wives,” mom says calmly. She sticks a carrot slice into her mouth. “They don’t stick around long and it’s a bother to keep remembering the names.”

Marion stiffens.

Dad scowls. “Do you have to go this far?”

Mom swirls her wine around. Her eyes meet mine, a glinting hazel. Like the single flame that flickers over a candle. “I’m stating the obvious, Jarod.”

“If you were just going to complain, you should have stayed away.” Dad rolls up his napkin and tosses it into his

plate.

“Believe me, I wanted to. But when I received my invitation, I couldn’t say no.”

Dad curls his fingers into fists, saying nothing more. The power balances are slipping. They always do when mom enters the room. Dad might have been the young, rebellious rockstar who caught mom’s attention, but she was the one who got him knocking on the right doors and meeting the right people.

She *made* Jarod Cross.

Part of me is hoping she can finish him too.

Dad’s new wife suddenly rises from the table. Her smile is trembling. Any minute now, it’s going to collapse. “I’m feeling a bit weak. I’ll go lie down until it’s time to return home.”

“I’ll come with you,” Miss Jamieson says.

Zane leans forward as if he plans on escorting her. At the last minute, he catches himself and remains seated.

Our Lit teacher loops her arm around her mother’s elbow and walks with her up the stairs.

Zane’s eyes are trained on them, brimming with a longing that I know well.

Because I feel it every damn time I look at Cadence.

My fingers close around his shoulder in a comforting squeeze.

He brushes me off and draws his chair back. “I’m done too.”

I glance at Finn. My brother and I share an unspoken communication before Finn gets up and goes after Zane.

Mom motions her fingers to dad. “Jarod, let’s talk.”

Martina, our housekeeper, waits until mom and dad leave the room to approach me. “Señor Dutch,” she says in her

heavy accent, “would you like me to bring a plate of real food for you?” She winks.

I smile and shake my head. “Maybe later.”

She gives me an ‘okay’ sign and gestures to the servers waiting on either side of the table. They rush to remove our plates, heaping stacks of wasted food on trays and wheeling them out of the dining room.

Finally, dinner’s over.

I need to check on Zane but, first, I call Cadence.

She answers on the fifth ring. “What?”

“Were you sleeping?”

“None of your business.” Her voice sounds scratchy. I can picture her in bed, hair tussled and eyes at half-mast. Damn. Just the memory isn’t enough. If I didn’t have this crapshow of a dinner, I would have rushed over there and finessed my way into her bed.

We wouldn’t even have to mess around. I’d be okay just holding her.

And that right there tells me I’m in deep.

“Did you eat?” I ask.

“Why do you care?”

I smile at her heated tone. “I have something important to ask you.”

“What?” She grunts.

I lower my voice. “What are you wearing?”

Cadence makes a sound of pure frustration and it takes everything in me not to laugh.

“Call me to ask stupid questions like that again and I will poke the air out of all your tires. Try me.”

I laugh outright this time. After filling my car with trash and stealing my clothes from the pool, I know that’s not an idle threat. She’s good for it.

“Goodnight, Cadey.”

“Eat dirt, Dutch.”

I smile when I hear the dial tone.

She’s sexy as hell. I’m not going to lie. Pissing her off is fun. Plus I’m glad to hear her snapping at me. It means whatever she’s going through with her family isn’t keeping her down.

A part of me wants to text Jinx and get info about it, but there’s another side of me that wants Cadence to share.

For now, I’ll wait for her to tell me what’s wrong.

If she takes too long, I’ll take matters into my own hands.

After pocketing the phone, I head down the hallway to grab the car keys for the Lambo. We barely take it out, preferring rugged trucks to something as delicate as the convertible. But Zane needs some air and it’ll help to take a drive.

On my way, I pass the room where mom and dad are talking.

*“I’ve been turning a blind eye because what you do with your life means nothing to me, but keep irritating me, Jarod and I’ll tell the boys everything.”*

I freeze, my ears perking up.

*“Go ahead and tell him. You think I’m scared?”*

*“I think you’re being a child. Why are you in constant competition with the boys? So what if they want to play for Bex Dane and not you? It’s their life. Let them live it!”*

*“You coddle them, Jacqueline. That’s why they’re unruly and uncontrollable.”*

*“Controlling adults isn’t in my skill set, Jarod. If it was, you wouldn’t have been such a massive disappointment in our marriage.”*

*“I’m through talking with you. The next time you decide to grace us with your presence, leave me out of it.”*



*“Remember my words, Jarod. Don’t you dare smother these boys and threaten them with moving in or I have no idea what I’ll do.”*

I hear agitated footsteps.

Dad is storming out of the room.

Quickly, I duck behind a post and watch him, face screwed up and ears red, stomping to the front door. It slams shut a moment later.

Mom’s dainty footsteps patter toward me.

I step out of the shadows. “What do you mean? What does dad not want to tell us?”

Mom yelps. “Dutch, what are you doing here?”

“Is there something I should know?”

She studies my face. After a few moments, she beckons me. “Step inside, Dutch. Let’s talk in private.”

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

DUTCH

Mom sits primly on the edge of the ottoman. One leg crossed over the other, she folds her hands on her knees.

I lean forward eagerly, already imagining the dirt she has on our father.

Could it be a notebook documenting all his affairs?

Dirty business deals?

Another hit and run buried under the rug?

Mom opens her mouth and says with her usual stoic expression, “The contents of your grandmother’s will was recently revealed. All her assets, money, and properties will go to one of her grandsons.”

“One of us?”

“The one who bears the first great-grandchild.”

A tight laugh chokes me. “What?”

“You might not have known, since I intentionally kept you boys from her, but your grandmother was a very harsh woman. Very unpleasant to live with.” Mom purses her lips as if she has a story she won’t tell anyone. “But in her old age, she began to have regrets. It led to her changing her will just before she died.”

“Gran died two years ago.”

“And the will was revealed only recently. I was sent a letter from her estate lawyer that outlined her last wishes.”

I lean forward, intrigued. “What did it say?”

“That your grandmother wanted to start fresh. Her dream was to gift her wealth to the generation furthest removed from her own.”

“The grandson who bears the first grandchild,” I murmur. “It’s unnecessarily competitive.”

“She was always fussy. I’m not surprised.”

Mom motions to me. “There’s more. If none of you have children, the inheritance will default to your father.”

“That’s B.S. *You’re* her daughter.”

Mom waves a hand as if she couldn’t be bothered. “I don’t need my mother’s assets to survive. Besides, I always knew that the money wouldn’t fall to me. Mother and I did not have a good relationship and it worsened when I married Jarod.”

She laughs softly. “I was honestly surprised when I heard she wanted to leave it all to someone in my family. I believed she would dispose it to charity, not out of goodwill but out of spite.”

“Dad doesn’t deserve it.” I glance at mom. “Is the only qualifier to have a baby? Because one of us can get that done in nine months flat.”

Mom smacks me in the back of the head. “This is exactly why I didn’t want to tell the three of you. You or Zane would be foolish enough to impregnate a poor girl just to piss off your father. Finn’s the only one who would stay out of trouble.”

“That’s not true,” I mumble, rubbing the back of my head. “Finn would find a loophole and adopt a kid so he could qualify in two months instead of one year.”

Mom slants me a death glare. “Even if you wanted to do such a preposterous thing, it’s not that simple. Your grandmother had a qualifier. Whoever inherits the property must be married first.”

*Married.*

A sudden revelation zings through my body.

“Did that condition apply to dad too?” I ask.

“It did.”

My eyes lock on hers. Gravity is pulling my body until it feels heavy enough to break through the floor.

“Mom, when did dad find out about the will?”

“The lawyer called him after he called me.”

“I want exact dates,” I press.

She tilts her head to the side, her mouth curving up in a knowing smile. Almost as if she’s proud of me. “I believe it was around the time when he got married to Marion.”

“What a coincidence.”

“A coincidence indeed.”

“And I guess it’s a coincidence that he decided to teach at Redwood Prep right around the time grandmother’s will takes effect.”

“Mm.” Mom slides a lazy finger over her pearl necklace. “Quite the coincidence.”

I grip the arm of my chair, glaring a hole into the ground. I should have known there was something bigger than the chairman seat motivating dad. His decision to teach at Redwood Prep and challenge Miller’s power was too random. Too sudden. Dad let Miller run the place for years while he sat back and silently controlled everything. Why threaten the throne now?

It all clicks into place.

The power moves.

The sudden interest in our lives.

The inheritance.

Dad wants us in his sight to make sure we won’t qualify.

Mom turns to me. “Zane is in love with that teacher, isn’t he?”

“You noticed?”

“He can’t take his eyes off her.”

“I thought he was getting better at hiding it.”

“Please.” Mom rolls her eyes. “There was a moment during dinner where that woman burned her tongue while eating. I thought Zane would climb on top of the table to help her. He was so entranced.” Mom pauses. “Your father must have noticed this too.”

I take a deep breath and shake my hands out. “You’re saying... even dad’s choice of a wife was because of the inheritance?”

“I’m saying, Dutch, that your father wants this money very much. Why? I don’t know. I only know that he’s making moves to prevent you boys from even thinking of getting your hands on it. And while I initially believed in keeping you in the dark so you can marry and bear children when you’re older and more settled, I’m troubled by the lengths he would go. It makes me wonder if there’s something he’s hiding. Something he wants to make sure we don’t know about.”

Dad’s secrets don’t mean anything to me. All that matters is thwarting his plan and making sure he *never* gets this money.

“How much time do we have?” I demand.

“You’re not thinking of doing anything foolish are you?”

“How much, mom?”

“To have a child, you need...”

“I know. Nine months.”

“The deadline is in twelve.”

Twelve months.

One year to get married and have a kid.

She sets her hands on my shoulders. “I don’t want you boys getting into the ring with Jarod. I don’t want any of you to get hurt.”

“We’re already hurt, mom. Look at what he did! He took Zane off the table by turning the woman he likes into his step-sister.”

She flinches. “Yes, perhaps that was uncalled for.”

“Finn isn’t the type to jump into marriage. That’s the only reason dad isn’t messing with him. So that leaves me.”

“What’s that look in your eyes?” She gasps. “You have someone you’re interested in?”

“I do.” I think of Cadey and my heart hammers in my ribs.

“Dutch.”

“Baby-making isn’t a problem.” Cadey wasn’t even thinking of condoms when she was grinding her hips on my lap today. “But I’d have to drag her down the aisle. She’d fight me tooth and nail every step too.”

“If it’s a fight, it means she’s not ready.”

“I’ll make her ready.”

Mom shakes her head. “Dutch, truly liking someone means you don’t force them.”

“So the answer is to let dad win?”

She pins her lips together. Quietly, she says, “It could be someone else. Someone more willing—”

“Whether I get married or not depends on her.” I spear my mother with a determined look. “It’s her or it’s nobody.”

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

CADENCE

Mom didn't come home all night.

She must have taken enough cash to wild out for a few days. Or maybe she's trying to avoid me.

The house is eerily silent when I shower and get ready for school. I'm nervous about leaving Vi here alone. It's been a while since I've experienced mom on drugs.

On a good day, mom is... unpredictable.

On a bad one...

Hiding mom's money bag will definitely piss her off. If mom comes back to find the cash gone, there's no telling what she'll do to herself.

To the house.

To my sister.

She's never hurt Vi before, but now that my sister is thirteen going on thirty, things might be different. Mom is extra sensitive when she's using. If Vi gets mouthy while mom's in a bad state...

I shudder.

Hoping to ease my mind, I shuffle to my sister's bedroom door and peek inside. Viola is sprawled on the bed, one foot hanging over the edge and an arm flung over the headboard.

I should wake her, but it's been a hard few days. Besides, it's Friday. No one wants to be up this early right before the weekend.

Tiptoeing out, I grab my purse and catch the bus to the north side.

Redwood Prep stands before me in all its ruthless glory. Exposed brick. Trailing ivy. Valiant posts. The building is as elite as the children who walk through the doors.

But unlike the vapid students so easily shaken by scandal and treachery, Redwood Prep stands firm. Just a few days ago, a fire boiled in its belly, but you wouldn't know by looking at it.

This place isn't easily conquered. How do I find the secrets buried inside? Where do I even start looking?

My heart is hammering.

My palms feel sweaty.

With trembling fingers, I dig out my headphones and pop them into my ears. Brahms' *Wiegenlied* tickles my eardrums and settles my nerves.

*I can do this. I can be a double agent. No one will find out.*

I close my eyes, taking in deep breaths.

Ten hours.

Just ten hours to go.

Once the last bell rings this evening, I'll have the entire weekend away from Redwood Prep. To clear my head. To form a plan. To remind myself that joining hands with Jarod Cross is what I should—no, what I *have* to do. That's the only way to fulfil Jinx's command.

It doesn't matter that I have two people holding me by the throat.

It doesn't matter that mom is still out there, doing who knows what.

I'll figure this all out.



As long as I don't think too hard about the tangled mess that is my life, I can keep moving forward.

Right?

After a few moments, I force myself to step inside the dark building. My shoes thunder in the silence. Shadows flicker in and out. Lockers glint like sharp teeth.

I hear a noise and whirl around, my heart in my throat.

No one's there.

Serena did her work service with me early in the morning. I got used to having her around. Ever since she left, I've been a little freaked out.

*Deep in the caverns of Redwood Prep, secrets are buried.*

What secrets was Jinx referring to? Why the hell does she have to be so vague?

In the distance, a door creaks open and shut.

I tear out one of my headphones, every nerve on high alert. My eyes jump around the dark hallway. *What is going on here?*

Suddenly, a soft yellow light blasts on.

I swerve around and find Dutch leaning against one of the lockers. My heartbeat increases. If I were playing a piano piece, I would have to play *presto*. Faster and faster.

He's standing in the glare like he's about to go on stage and perform in front of screaming fans. Golden light falls against his square jaw. Sharp enough to kill. The villain turned hero. The boy girls know, deep down, they should stay away from but find themselves helplessly drawn to.

His white-button down and tan trousers are staple elements of the Redwood Prep uniform, but they look elevated on him. Like he just tore them off a model in Paris and is leisurely wearing it now.

Dutch moves toward me. Each step making me quiver deep in my bones. A panther on the move. The picture of destruction with his blonde hair, amber eyes and inked body.

“What are you doing here?” I mutter.

“I’m here to oversee your work service.” He bends down so his face is right on top of mine. “I’m in charge of you, remember?”

His amused tone makes me bristle. Of course he’s here to torture me. Why did I feel a glimmer of excitement at the sight of him? Why did I think this was anything other than a ploy to make me miserable?

*Stupid piece of crap. I hope you fall off the stage and actually break your leg!*

“Start down there, Brahm’s.” Dutch juts his chin toward a classroom at the end of the hallway.

“I’ll start where I want to,” I snap.

Fuming, I stomp away. But when I advance on the door to my right, Dutch grabs my hand and drags me to him. In a second, he’s drawing my waist to his body and lowering his face to mine.

Our noses brush.

His voice whispers over me like a caress. “Why does everything have to be a fight with you, Cadey?”

“I thought you liked my fight?” I snarl.

“I do,” he purrs, looking at me with eyes that say he would pin me against a locker and show me how much. “I really do.”

Dutch’s mouth drops closer, a burning flame that sears through me, making me tremble with desperate, pulsing need.

It’s agony, how much I want him.

Agony how much I wish I didn’t.

It makes me wonder whether I deserve all the bad things that have happened to me. If I’m drawn to someone as ruthless, evil and dark as Dutch, doesn’t that mean I’m a monster too?

He tortured me for weeks and yet I can’t keep my hands off him.

I *crave* him.

I'm deranged.

A masochist. Someone who enjoys their own pain. Who consumes their own poison.

Dutch stops an inch away from my mouth. Our heavy breaths mingle, twining between our still open lips. I part my mouth further. Inhale. Inhale. Inhale. It's like he's breathing more of his darkness into me. And I'm taking it all in. Leaving no crumbs.

"Be a good girl, Cadey. There are cameras." His eyes inch over my blouse. "Unless you don't mind the security guards watching..."

My senses return just in time.

I shove him away and he releases me.

Face ablaze, I storm to the classroom he indicated and shove it open, only to stop short when I see what's inside.

My jaw drops.

There are flowers scattered everywhere. A table set with a white cloth. Candles lit. Breakfast laid out.

A feast.

A quiet breath gets caught in my throat.

I blink and blink, but the scene before me doesn't change.

"This way," Dutch says, putting his hands on my waist and nudging me forward.

A blazing fire tears through me when his fingers settle on my side. It feels amazing when he touches me. Scarily so. I swat his hand down to hide my reaction. He smirks as if he knows he makes me nervous. As if all this fire and tension doesn't scare him as much as it scares me.

Swallowing hard, I remain standing after Dutch pulls out a chair for me.

"What is this?"

“Breakfast,” he says. As if it’s obvious. As if I’m the weird one for wondering why a classroom suddenly looks like a date.

Caught off-guard, I wrestle to keep my anger in the forefront. It’s difficult though. My heart is melting and my knees are getting weak.

*Don’t fall for it, Cadence. It’s just another ploy.*

“I don’t have time to play games with you, Dutch. I have work to do.” I turn away and he snatches my hand.

Bringing me back to the table, Dutch says simply, “Martina.”

The door creaks. A stocky woman, flanked by two other middle-aged ladies, step into my line of sight.

“I’ll sort out Cadey’s work service with Principle Harris later,” he says calmly. “For today, can you...”

“Of course.” Martina smiles and winks at me. “Enjoy your breakfast.”

I grip the back of my chair, feeling awful. “No, I can’t let you—it’s *my* job. I’ll clean.”

“You’re fine, señorita.”

“Let me at least help.”

“If you help us, we don’t get paid,” she explains with a frown.

“But—”

“Sit, Cadey,” Dutch growls.

My nostrils flare. I whirl on him. “What is *wrong* with you?”

The door clicks shut as Martina and her friends disappear.

“Have you eaten breakfast?” Dutch asks calmly, pouring me a glass of orange juice.

My chest feels stuffy. It’s like a ball of sharp needles has been set loose inside me. Every time it bounces against my ribs, against my heart, it punctures something important.

“I asked my friend, Chef Kraus, to cater. He doesn’t usually make breakfast, but my mother worked with him before he got his television show and—”

“I don’t want your stupid pancakes.” I swat the flat, round pastry to the floor.

Dutch’s eyes follow the descent, stopping at where the pancake sticks to the ground.

My chest is heaving.

Tears are stinging my eyes.

Slowly, his gaze returns to me. It’s sharp. Heated.

“Screw you!” I scream. “Screw you, Dutch!”

His eyes narrow.

“Do you have any idea what I’m going through right now!” I shriek. “Do you have any—” Anger makes me sputter and claw at my throat just to spit the words out. “I already have enough on my plate without you dragging your housekeeper here and wasting her time *and* mine! Why should she suffer because of me? It’s my job to clean the classrooms. I will clean. Who cares if I starve in the morning? I will handle myself. I don’t need you to feed me. I don’t need you to throw your wealth in my face. I don’t care about your pancakes or your stupid private chef!”

Dutch rises. The chair scrapes back, making a loud sound.

He stares at me with dark eyes. Viper eyes. Dark and unblinking.

But I’m too frazzled to care.

“You already won!” I yell, flinging my arms. “You ran me out of Redwood. I *barely* came back. You demanded my virginity as a price. I gave you that too even though I said I wouldn’t! I’m the fool. I’m the loser! What more do you want from me! What more are you going to take from...”

He moves fast. His arms close around my shoulders and he pulls me in for a hug.

“Let me go!” I struggle.

He pulls me deeper into his embrace. His chest is warm. His heart is beating, strong and sure, against my ears.

I lose my battle against the tears when his big hand cups the back of my head and smooths over my hair. When was the last time someone gave me comfort? Why am I so broken that even this beast of a prince can soothe me?

Dutch says nothing, and I'm glad because I'm already embarrassed beyond belief. The tears aren't stopping. Why won't they stop?

I'm strong.

I practically raised my little sister and myself.

I kept food on the table. I paid the light bills. After Rick made it clear that we were a burden to him, I didn't beg him for a cent more.

I defeated Christa and banished her from Redwood.

I kept it together when my mom came back from the dead.

People like me don't breakdown. We don't have the privilege of worrying about tears and feelings and emotions.

So why am I crying? Why does my chest hurt? Why does it feel like my heart's being shattered when I'm fine? I'm perfectly, totally fine.

I feel myself being lifted and pry my swelling eyes apart to see Dutch raising me up. He cradles me to his chest the way he did that night when we were searching for my sister.

I quickly wrap my arms around his neck so I don't fall.

Without a word, Dutch carries me to the practice room.

The light beeps when he fishes out his card with one hand and slaps it against the scanner.

“What are you doing?” My voice is scratchy. It sounds like I have a cold, but it's just that my nose is plugged. “Dutch...”

His fingers tighten on me, but he doesn't answer my question.

Dutch kicks the door shut with his foot and marches over to the sofa where we made out yesterday. I stiffen, wondering if he's going to try and kiss me.

But he doesn't.

He sits down with me in his lap.

When I struggle to ease out of his grip, he frowns. "Five minutes."

"What?"

"Close your eyes. Don't think about anything. You're safe here. Nothing will touch you. No one will hurt you. You don't have any responsibilities to anyone. Not for the next five minutes."

The tears crop in my eyes again. What kind of crazy utopia is that? No responsibilities? No pressure? No fear?

Dutch moves his hand over my face. With his thumb and pointer finger, he gently closes my eyelids.

"Five minutes, Cadey." His soft voice flutters my hair. I feel him place a kiss to my temple. His lips nuzzle my ear next. "Starting now."

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

CADENCE

*“Is our practice room a hotel now?”*

*“Shut up, Zane.”*

*“I’m just saying. Who’s the one who said we don’t bring girls in here?”*

*“She’s not just a girl to him. Obviously.”*

*“Finn has a point.”*

*“Keep your voices down. If you wake her, I’ll rearrange your teeth.”*

Groggily, I open my eyes. At first, there’s a blast of sunlight. And then three faces too beautiful for this earth crowd over me.

For a second, I wonder if I’m looking at angels.

But that’s not right.

Angels wouldn’t have tattoos. Or muscles. Or flickers of darkness shadowing their eyes.

I blink and Redwood Prep jackets come into focus.

Blink again.

Spy the guitars, drums and sound-dampening wall panels.

I stiffen.



I'm in The Kings' practice room.

I'm *with* The Kings.

I was sleeping, limp and defenseless, while four giant boys—three of whom did their part in torturing me for weeks—had full access to me. Self-preservation kicks in and I whip to a sitting position, my eyes dropping to my clothes.

I'm still wearing my blue shirt with the bow at the neck. My skirt is still on. So are my panties.

Despite knowing I'm fully dressed, my heart races.

It's not like any of these boys are saints.

Not even Dutch.

Especially Dutch.

Zane offers me a bottle of water and I frown at it. He arches a brow. "Would you like a beer instead?"

I take the bottle he offers, my fingers trembling.

Dutch's twin gestures to the sofa. "You snore."

"I do not," I snap, my face flushing.

"He's kidding," Sol says, folding his arms over his chest. "You didn't snore, but you looked really tired. And worried. Even in your sleep."

Finn nods. "That's true."

Dutch is the only one who says nothing. He leans against the wall, watching me intently. He's not explaining my presence at all. Probably because he wants to see how I'll handle myself. A king throwing a gladiator into the ring and waiting to be entertained.

I scowl at him and scoot to the edge of the sofa.

They all watch me as if I'm a curious animal who wandered in during a rainstorm. I can't help but shudder under their heavy gazes.

Predators.

That's what they remind me of. A pack of lions, all strong, glorious and capable of killing for a meal.

The thing is, I'm no one's freaking dinner.

"Did you guys like how I redecorated the place?" I gesture to the trophy case and the empty space where the coffee table should have been.

Finn smirks.

Zane shakes his head. "You really are fearless, aren't you?"

Dutch watches me with those honey eyes of his. From this distance, it's hard to see the golden flecks that swim in their depths. But I know they're there.

I glance away and twist the cap of my water. I'm thirsty.

"*She's* the one who trashed the place?" Sol asks, his voice climbing in surprise.

"They didn't tell you?" I set the bottle down and tilt my chin up. "I cut the strings on Dutch's guitar."

Sol doesn't respond, but his eyes dart immediately to Dutch.

Zane laughs. "Damn it, Cadence. You really want to fight."

"At this point, you don't scare me." I glance at him and then at Finn. "What more can you boys possibly do to me that you haven't already?"

"A lot," Dutch says finally, straightening away from the wall. "There's a lot we haven't done to you, Cadey."

A shiver goes down my spine when he flashes a sharp look in my direction. I wonder if I imagined the Dutch who held me tenderly and whispered that I could rest with him. Did I dream it? Were those pancakes drugged?

Wait, but I didn't eat anything.

So what happened? Why does Dutch look so intense now?

He drags a chair away from the table, drops it in front of the couch and takes a seat like a king on his throne. He leans

forward, full of confidence.

I scowl at his lofty expression. Even more annoying is the fact that his arrogance is earned. He's a guy who can summon a private cleaning team at will and bend the arm of the principal to get me out of work service. Power. Near unlimited power. He can have whatever he wants—so why does he insist on torturing me?

My nails dig into my skirt.

“Start talking.” Dutch drops his feet to the floor and leans his elbows on his knees. All he needs is a cigar dangling from his lips and he would pass for a gangster. Easily.

I glare at him. Open my mouth. “Who the hell do you think—”

“You said I don't know what you're dealing with. So give me a list.” He gestures to his brothers. “We'll tackle them one at a time.”

Zane nods at me.

Finn just folds his arms over his chest.

My brows tighten in confusion. What's the trick? Does he really expect me to believe that they'll help me?

Dutch frowns impatiently.

I glare at him. “First on the list... is getting you to leave me the hell alone.”

“Not happening. Next.” He flicks his fingers.

I scowl.

He waits, his face a cryptic mask.

I realize he's not going to let me leave until I name something. What should I say? I can't tell Dutch that I'm planning on working with his dad to get Jinx's information. If I jeopardize my agreement with her, Serena will never survive.

“We're waiting, Brahms,” Dutch says, tilting his head to one side. Sunlight falls over his golden hair. His tongue slides across his bottom lip. “Don't make us wait long.”

I'm pretty sure he's used that tone on me before. Right before he sent my favorite teacher, Mr. Mulliez, packing.

My heart thunders.

"Serena," I blurt, hating that I'm trapped. Hating that a part of me is willing to put hope in these dangerous, reckless boys. If I could, I'd set them on fire. All of them. Except Sol.

Or maybe I'd throw him in the flames too.

For the sin of being Dutch Cross's friend.

"I want her name cleared. I want her back in Redwood."

"Okay—"

"And I want the real culprit caught. I want him to bleed. I want him burned at the freaking stake."

Sol goes pale.

Finn scowls at me.

Zane glances away.

Dutch's eyes flash to mine, less amber, more black. Two endless pits of shadows.

When he speaks, his words are gritty. "We'll find a way."

Sol whips a sharp look over at Dutch.

I nod and rise to my feet.

Dutch stops me with a raised hand. "Is that it?"

"Get that done first." I sling my purse over my shoulder. "Then I'll tell you the rest."

His mouth twists into a hard line.

I don't care. I'm not depending on him to fix anything for me, but if he wants to use his evil for good this time, I'm not going to stop him.

Musical chimes ring faintly.

How long was I asleep? It's already time for class.

My eyes slide over Dutch and land on Sol. "You coming?"

“Where?”

“Algebra.” I nod at The Kings. “I don’t expect *them* to actually care about their education.”

Zane chuckles and falls into the couch, right in the place where I was sleeping. “You really didn’t tame her well enough, Dutch.”

My fingers coil into fists. I’d punch him if not for the bell chiming again.

“Am I free to go or do you want me to lie back down so you can creepily watch me while I sleep?” I arch an eyebrow in challenge.

Finn looks amused. He withdraws from us and settles into the nook with a tablet balanced on his knee.

“You can go,” Dutch says.

I flounce past in a whirl of sleep-tussled hair and plaid, only to be snatched around the arm by Dutch. He shoves me into the wall near the trophy case and puts a hand next to my face, leaning in.

“Sit with us at lunch.”

“Get your hands off me,” I growl.

He doesn’t flinch. “If you make me look all over this school for you, Cadey, you won’t like what happens when I find you.” He covers me with his form, his hard chest brushing against the buttons on my shirt. “I’ll see you at lunch.”

My body arches into him, seeking him out like he’s my own personal drug.

I’m repulsed by the instant and desperate ache that forms between my legs.

Dutch grips my chin. “Got it?”

I yank my face out of his grasp.

He must take that as confirmation because he steps back and gestures for Sol to open the door.

I huff and stalk out, hearing Zane's twisted laughter flowing behind me.

"How are you friends with them?" I grind out, my steps quick—not because I'm in a hurry to get to class but because I'm so pissed off. "They're animals."

Sol joins me. His tone is contemplative. "You seem different."

"What do you mean?" I'm still upset so the words are hurled like an accusation.

He watches me with eyes that are sadder and darker than they were before.

Annoyed, I turn the corner.

Maybe I am different.

A lot has happened since Sol returned to Redwood. Life hammered me from all sides and broke me. Made the rough edges sharper. Made the softness inside dissolve. I'm colder now. Stronger. The last shred of my innocence was torn away by my worst enemy and now there's nothing tying me to the childish, hopeful version of me.

Besides, the stakes are way higher now than they were before.

Four high school boys with power and cruelty don't scare me as much as what mom could do to me and Vi.

Sol slips a hand into his pocket and stops in the middle of the hallway.

I stop too and look back at him. He's staring at me, storm clouds gathering behind his dark irises.

My fingers tighten on my purse strap, but I don't cower.

Sol was born on the south side.

He knows that life, even if he hangs with pricks like The Kings now.

He's more like me than he is like them.

I draw near to him, no longer worried about class. The hallways are completely empty and the thud of my sneakers against the ground is loud.

“Is everything okay with you, Sol?” I frown at him. “You said you had something to tell me.”

“I did.”

I search his eyes.

He remains quiet.

“You can say it. Whatever it is, I won’t judge you,” I whisper gently. “We’re friends, right? People like us... we stick together.”

His lips arch up, but it’s not a smile. It’s too empty. Too broken. “We stick together.”

“Come on.” I grab his arm and tug. “Let’s get to class before our ‘tardy’ turns into an ‘absent’.”

“Actually, I don’t think I’ll go to class today.”

My eyes widen. “Why not?”

“I’ll catch you later, Cadence.”

As Sol walks away, a foreboding feeling scratches at my chest. What was he going to tell me? And why does it feel like his secrets are as black as all the others here at Redwood?

\* \* \*

*Jinx: Is Prince Charming Willing To Share?*

*Candles, flowers, and a gourmet breakfast were found dumped in the trash after Prince Charming failed to woo his very angry Cinderella. I guess private dinners aren’t enough to convince Cinderella to take our Prince’s hand.*

*But dry your tears, Prince Charming. You’ll need to keep your eyes wide open. You’re not the only one interested in popping Cinderella’s pumpkin. There are plenty of contenders*

*in the kingdom. And just like mice can turn into footmen,  
friends can turn into enemies.*

*Until the next post, keep your enemies close and your  
secrets even closer.*

*- Jinx*



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### DUTCH

The moment the door clicks shut, Finn sets down his tablet and slams me with his dark gaze.

I slip a hand into my pocket and pointedly avoid the question in his eyes.

Between Zane and Finn, the one who makes me wary is my adopted brother.

Zane is pure emotion. It's why he's so good at the drums. He explodes in a mess of energy, feelings, and uncontrollable urges. The good, the bad, the ugly, it eventually comes roaring out of him until there's nothing left.

I know where my twin stands with just a look.

But Finn is controlled. Contained.

The only way to know what he's thinking is if he tells you directly.

"What did you mean when you promised you'd find the culprit for her?" Finn asks.

I stalk to the fridge, open it wide and grab a beer. "I meant we'd find *a* culprit for her." I snap the tab and guzzle the drink. "I didn't mean Sol."

"You shouldn't have agreed to that in the first place. It's too risky," Zane scolds me. His eyes are clear. A surprise

given the amount of beers he drank before he hopped on his motorbike and took off last night.

Finn and I worried he wouldn't make it back in one piece but, around two a.m. he sauntered in, smelling like sex, perfume and anger. We didn't ask how he worked out his frustrations, but the truth came out pretty early.

His cheerleader of choice giddily posted a picture of him from behind.

Butt-naked.

Damn airhead had my brother's cheeks plastered all over Jinx's app by morning.

Zane doesn't care.

But I do plan to have that airhead kicked off the cheerleading squad. If she doesn't understand that discretion is a must when she spends the night with one of us, then I'll make it my mission to teach her that lesson.

"You might have forgiven Cadence for taking a bat to everything in this room," Finn says calmly. "But that doesn't mean *we* have."

"You have a problem?" I growl.

He lifts a shoulder in a careless shrug.

"Finn's right. You got your pound of flesh from her. We agreed she paid her debt after giving up the goods." Zane licks his lips. "We're square. But she doesn't belong in here after she disrespected our space."

"Enough." I lift a hand.

Finn draws one knee up and rests his long arm on top of it.

"Why the hell are you so sensitive about her?" Zane accuses. "Does she have something on you?"

My eyes slide over my twin's.

"Or is there some kind of magic between her legs because if so—"

"Cadence is my fiancée," I say sharply.

Both of my brothers fall silent.

Zane's jaw is on the floor.

Finn's eyes narrow to sharp slits.

I smile. Even though my brain is running on overdrive and there's a giant freaking wall between me and Cadence in a wedding dress, it's still a mind-blowing occasion.

My fiancée.

Damn.

It's right. It's perfect.

"Did you fall and hit your head?" Zane stammers. "How many fingers am I holding up?"

"It's not a brain injury. It's the honest freaking truth."

"Did you propose that night?" Finn's eyes glint in the sunlight. "The night you went over to her place?"

I nod.

"Huh." He seems amused.

"How are you so calm about this?" Zane shrieks. "This idiot is talking about *marriage*. Marriage! We're barely eighteen."

"It's legal."

"And she's not." Zane's eyes narrow at me. "Have you thought of that? She's seventeen."

"In December—"

"It's not December yet," Zane huffs.

I don't mind him cutting me off. His reaction is expected.

Finn studies me. "There's more, isn't there?"

"More? What more?" Zane squeezes his fingers over his temple and flops facedown in the couch. "I can't take more."

"Sit up. I need you paying attention for this." I nudge him.

He snaps up, eyes narrowed. "Why didn't you check with me? I could have hooked you up."

“Hooked me up with what?”

“You wanted a challenge? You wanted inexperienced and wide-eyed? Easy. I could have had a line of virgins banging your door down. No marriage proposal needed.”

“If the virgins are banging his door down, then it isn’t necessarily a challenge,” Finn points out.

“Are you cracking jokes? Right now? Seriously?”

“Not a joke. Merely an observation.”

“When one of us does something stupid, we call each other out. That’s what you did for me. Why the hell does he get a pass?”

“He said there’s more,” Finn says simply.

Zane sucks in a deep breath, closes his eyes, and sits back down. “This better be good, Dutch.”

I sit rigidly and run the words through my mind, wondering how I’ll deliver them. There’s no way to pretty this up.

Might as well tear off the band-aid.

“Gran left her fortune to one of us,” I admit.

“Did I hear that right? Did you say ‘one’?” Zane arches a brow.

“Just one.”

“Biological?” Finn asks quietly.

I glance over. There’s a hint of uncertainty in his eyes. The first crack in his armor I’ve seen.

“Don’t think so. The requirements are that the grandson is married and has a kid before a year is up. That’s it.”

“A kid?” Zane’s eyebrows arch. “Like a human child?”

Finn looks disturbed. “A year?”

“There’s more.”

Both of them look like they’re bracing themselves.

“If one of us can’t fulfil the requirement... dad gets everything.”

“Abso-freaking-lutely *not*.” Zane explodes from his seat.

Finn stares into the distance, running my words over in his brilliant mind. Finally, he glances up at me. “The marriage to Miss Jamieson’s mom. Dad chose her for a reason, didn’t he?”

“To fulfil the will’s requirement and to keep Zane away from... *recreating* with her daughter.”

Zane stops cold.

I give him a sympathetic look. “Two birds. One stone.”

“Miss Jamieson wouldn’t have married me even if I paid her.”

“Would you have *wanted* to marry her though?”

He stares at the ground, saying nothing.

“That’s why dad’s at Redwood. He’s keeping an eye on us so we don’t even dream of touching the inheritance.”

There’s a moment of silence as my brothers absorb what that means.

Our father is a damn psychopath.

Finn’s dark gaze meets mine. “Tell me there’s not more.”

“That’s it.” I raise both hands to show that I’m empty.

“What about you two?” Zane points a trembling finger. “Why go after me?”

“What do you mean?”

“You both have the tools to make a baby in a year. You could make freaking *three* just to be safe.”

“That’s because...”

“Dad thinks I don’t qualify as a son.” Finn’s words are subdued. He looks like he just got run over by a truck.

“We don’t know that,” I mutter.

Finn shakes his head, clearly unwilling to talk about it. “What about Cadence? Pictures of you and her are all over Jinx’s app. Even if dad’s not subscribed, just talking to a couple people will have them pointing to you two as a couple.”

I stiffen, already suspicious of Cadence being on dad’s radar. The fact that Finn thinks the same way is confirmation.

My brother studies me. “Jinx mentioned that Cadence and dad are having secret talks after class. You think it was about this?”

“How the hell is dad going to bring this up?” Zane mutters. “Hi, seventeen-year-old student. I’ll pay you a million dollars if you *don’t* marry my son?”

“It’s not below him,” Finn says.

“Nothing’s below him because he’s lower than dirt. But dad is smart. He wouldn’t out himself like that.” Zane presses his lips together. “Besides, dad wouldn’t need to pay a dime. She’d *not* marry you for free.”

“She *will* marry me,” I say sharply.

“Are you going to kidnap her sister and threaten her?”

“Of course not.” If I touched her sister, Cadence would probably slit my neck in my sleep.

“Are you going to forge her signature on the court records?”

“No.”

“Then it’s not happening.”

“It is happening,” I say evenly. “She’s family now.” I glance between them. “And I need you both to help me convince her of that.”

“You’ll need a miracle to convince that girl,” Zane mumbles.

Finn looks thoughtful. “Cadence is stubborn. We did everything we could to get her out of Redwood, but she stuck through it all. And when we managed to kick her out, she

came back. Getting her to marry you will be ten times harder than anything we've done in the past."

"We don't have a choice," I growl. "I'm not marrying anyone else. Unless you both want to sign up for a wife?"

My brothers shut their mouths.

"Since there are no other takers, my wedding to Cadence is a sure thing."

"Why don't you get her pregnant first and worry about marriage later?" Finn suggests.

My ears perk up.

Even Zane looks intrigued.

"Mom didn't specify in what order it had to happen, did she?"

"No."

"If someone like dad can qualify for the inheritance," Zane mumbles, "then I don't see why Dutch can't get started on the baby part before he signs the papers. It could work."

"Having a baby could be what convinces Cadence to marry you too," Finn says.

"It's an option." I rub my chin. The thought of pumping Cadence full of my children gets my blood hot. I can already picture her, legs sprawled, mouth open, eyes seeing stars as I impregnate her with our child.

"But she's going to hate you," Finn says quietly.

His words shatter my vision. I glance at my brother.

He's staring at me with those eyes that see more than they say. "Lying to her about Sol is one thing. But if you lie to her about this..."

"It doesn't matter. She can't escape me."

"What if she does?"

"I'll drag her back," I growl, staring him down.

"Is that love?" Finn wonders.

It sounds like he's thinking out loud rather than accusing me, but I still get defensive.

"Who gives a damn about love? We're talking about *marriage*. Aren't you terrified?" Zane's eyes bug. "This isn't a dare. This isn't hooking up. This is marriage. This is being a father. Are you ready for all that?"

"I don't know."

"What do you know then?" Finn inquires, his eyes flitting over me.

"I know that I want dad to lose something after what he's done to us."

Zane turns away, a vein bulging in his neck.

"I know that the moment I get married to Cadence, that's it for me. I'm married for life."

Zane looks surprised by that.

Finn doesn't.

"I know that she's important enough to me that I'd die for her. And I know that when I'm with her I feel..." I inhale deeply. "I feel like that first time I stepped on stage with my guitar. Lightheaded. Eager. Alive."

Finn turns to me. His eyes burn. "I'm in."

My eyebrows shoot up.

"Let's make Cadence your wife."

Zane reluctantly walks over. "And let's hope we're more successful this time than when we tried to kick her out of Redwood."



## CHAPTER NINETEEN

### CADENCE

Sitting with The Kings at lunch feels like taking a walk down main street naked. Everyone is staring at us. I'm pretty sure they've been staring all day too. Other things I've noticed this morning: the entire back row during algebra was free. Teachers avoided my eyes in the hallway. Someone accidentally slapped me in the shoulder with their backpack as I was coming to the cafeteria and they ran away in tears before I could tell them I was fine.

I'd forgotten that the Kings are more than just the rock gods of Redwood Prep.

They're ruthless rulers.

I got too close to them, so close that I was out of touch with reality. I failed to see what most of the students at Redwood see when they look at them.

Threats wrapped in tattoos and vengeance.

It's why I followed orders and dragged myself to the cafeteria. I'm fighting too many battles these days, and I don't care to add another one.

Not today at least.

Dutch Cross can win this round while I recover my strength.

“You want something else?” Dutch asks. His voice is a low hush in my ear. A shiver runs down my spine when he adds in a coarse whisper, “Or do you need me to feed you again?”

I glare at him. “Try it and I’ll bite your hand off.”

Finn unleashes one of his sexy ghost smiles.

Sol just shakes his head, looking annoyed.

Zane snorts. “Damn, Dutch. Give my sister-in-law some room. How is she supposed to eat with you breathing down her neck like that?”

Dutch looks pleased as he straightens away from me.

But my eyes widen in horror. “What did you just call me?”

Dutch cuts his brother off before he can answer. “I got another call from Bex Dane this morning. Since the Halloween Bash was a success, his people want us to play for the Christmas tour.”

My eyes widen at the name drop. Bex Dane is one of the hottest solo punk-rock artists out right now. If Jarod Cross is a legend, Bex Dane is the dark horse gunning for his spot at number one.

“He called *again*?” Sol smirks.

“Bex is needier than all of my exes combined,” Zane mumbles.

Finn scowls. “And Christmas isn’t my thing.”

“Ugh.” Zane flops back in his chair, his long, tattooed arms dangling almost to the floor. “You’re not going to accept, are you? You always turn into a drill sergeant before a gig.”

Dutch shakes his head. “I said no.”

Zane sighs in relief.

“Bex won’t stop asking,” Finn says in a deep voice. There was a rumor around school that Finn once got a girl to walk a mile in the freezing cold just by talking on the phone with her. I don’t think that rumor was exaggerated. There’s a chocolate

quality to his tone that's perfect for late night radio... or casting spells.

Sol props an arm on the back of Zane's chair. "Why aren't you taking the gig? It would piss off your dad."

"We've got other plans," Dutch says, glancing at me.

I squirm and glance away. The cafeteria food looks tasty, but I can't bring myself to eat.

"Here." Sol slides his tray over to me. There's a sandwich on it. "Have this."

"Thanks." I give him a grateful smile. Eating a sandwich during lunch instead of this five-star hotel fare is way more comfortable for me.

Dutch glares at our exchange, but I don't care. He doesn't like me being friendly with Sol? So what? Sol and I are close and I'm my own freaking person.

"Look, there's Paris," Finn says, nodding across the cafeteria.

The boys all stop and watch, so I do too.

Paris is shuffling into the lunch room, her head lowered.

Zane laughs. "What did you say to her?"

Dutch doesn't answer, but the look he gives the cheerleading captain is pure hellfire. Paris stops right in front of The Kings' table and uses the tray to cover her stomach like armor. Her eyes still haven't left the floor.

"Did you take care of it?" Dutch growls.

"The girl who took Zane's picture is off the squad. If anyone on the team talks to her, they're off too."

Zane pops a grape from the stem and eats it like he doesn't have a care in the world.

Finn is reading a book—how he's focusing on the words in this situation? I have no idea.

Sol looks bored with the whole scene already.

"I-is that all?" Paris trembles.

“One more thing.”

To my surprise, Dutch grabs my wrist and yanks my arm up. My sandwich flops to the bench, lettuce and mayo spattering.

I whip around to slam him with an angry glare, but he’s not looking at me. He’s staring at Paris with that scary face of his.

The cheerleader flinches in response.

“A feral cat made the mistake of putting her claws on my girl.”

“Your girl?” I hiss.

Dutch holds my hands tight, his eyes burning. “If that cat *ever* puts its hands on Cadence again, I’m going to hunt it down and cut each of its claws. You hear me?”

Paris blinks rapidly. “Y-yes.”

Dutch removes his eyes from her and she scurries away so fast she leaves skid marks on the floor.

Zane arches a brow. “When did Paris come for Cadence?”

Dutch doesn’t respond.

Zane arches a brow at me. “Brahms? Care to share?”

“I do not.” My nostrils flare. I turn to Dutch. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

He picks his chopsticks up and calmly eats his sushi.

My chest hot and my temper rising, I shoot to my feet.

“Where are you going?” Dutch growls, chewing without looking my way.

“The bathroom. Or do I need your permission to pee?”

Zane leans over to Finn and whispers, “Mommy and daddy are fighting again.”

I pin him with a seething look.

Sol’s brow goes up. “Did Paris hurt you, Cadence? Where? Are you okay now?”

“None of your business,” Dutch snaps at him.

Sol’s eyes go dark.

Unable to stand another moment in Dutch’s overwhelming presence, I climb out of the bench. The more he tries to control me, the more hatred I feel for him.

Paris is *my* problem.

Sol is *my* friend.

And I damn well can eat lunch with or without him if I so please.

I won’t let him take over me.

Never.

Not as long as I’m breathing.

I storm out of the cafeteria. Rather than head into the bathrooms where the girls will probably all run out in fear, I turn right and slam into one of the private stairwells.

Plopping down on the step, I fist a hand, stuff it into my mouth and let out muffled screams of frustration. I try to be quiet, but the sound bounces against the walls, ricocheting in the empty space.

As the last of the echoes fade, the door one floor below opens and Dutch stalks toward me, moving through the darkness like he owns every shadow.

“This isn’t the bathroom.”

“I got lost on the way,” I spit out.

“Get up, Cadey.”

“Leave me the hell alone.”

Dutch’s eyes narrow. He sits on the stair beside me.

“You want me to punish her more?”

“What? No!” I shuffle over as far as I can go. “I didn’t tell you about Paris because I didn’t need your help.”

“Who said I was helping?”

“I could have handled her.”

“I know. But I need to set an example. Everyone should understand the consequences if they touch what’s mine.”

At this point, I’m absolutely *done*.

“Go to hell,” I snarl.

Suddenly, Dutch rolls over me and jams his massive body between my legs. My back crashes into the stair when his weight presses on top of me. He smirks and grazes my lips with his, sweeping across my face until he’s at my ear. “I already told you, Cadey. If I’m going to hell, I’m dragging you there with me.”

He rocks his hips forward, making me groan. It feels so damn good, even though I hate him with every fibre of my being. My heart pounds fast enough to burst.

Musical chimes blast through the hallways.

Saved by the bell.

“I need to get to class,” I stammer, although everything in my body wants to lock my legs around his waist and pull him deep into me.

Dutch tips my chin up so I’m falling into his dark hazel eyes. “No class.”

“No class?” I repeat after him like a buffoon.

“You have two choices, Cadey. One—” He sticks up a rough, calloused finger. “I make you scream my name loud enough for the classrooms on both ends of the hallway to hear. Or—”

“Two. I’ll go with two,” I blurt.

He smirks. “You go back to the cafeteria and eat something.”

My eyes widen.

“You didn’t have any breakfast this morning.” He scowls at me. “If you miss lunch too, it’s really going to piss me off.”

His words are ice cold.

I stare at his face, full of hard lines and dark shadows.

A shudder racks my spine. If I ever make the mistake of falling for Dutch Cross, I'll be falling in love with a madman.

\* \* \*

*Jinx: When A King Speaks, It's Not A Request. It's An Order.*

*Earlier this morning, the Snare King graced his citizens with a view of his tight, toned... quarters. No one was complaining. Well, no one except Prince Charming.*

*Our royal band of brothers made their anger known and wasted no time carving the hearts out of their enemies. Why else would Snare King's one-night concubine be ousted from her position in the court and snubbed by everyone she held dear? I hope that romp in the Snare King's bed and the five seconds of fame were worth it.*

*Sadly, she wasn't the only one to suffer. Miss PomPoms nearly lost her head at the foot of Prince Charming's royal throne. Her offense? A wrong committed earlier in the week that Prince Charming hadn't forgotten.*

*It's a war out there, folks. Be careful how you tread. When it comes to their pampered princess, this royal gang offers no mercy.*

*Until the next post, keep your enemies close and your secrets even closer.*

*- Jinx*

## CHAPTER TWENTY

CADENCE

Jarod Cross's bodyguard is waiting for me in the parking lot after school. I feel myself bristling when I look into his shadowy eyes. I've been around the slimy side of darkness my whole life and I can smell something on this guy. Something that makes me uneasy.

My phone rings.

It's an unknown number.

I wonder if it's mom.

"Hello?"

"Cadence," Jarod Cross's smoky, million-dollar voice, fills my ears. "Lucien is waiting for you in the parking lot. Do you see him?"

"Yes."

"I'm afraid I'm preparing for a concert, so I'll need you to come to me. Is that okay?"

There's something in his tone that tells me there's only one right answer to that question.

I tuck my bottom lip into my mouth. "Yes."

"I'll see you in a few," Jarod Cross says. "I'm excited for our partnership."

"I haven't told you my answer yet."



“You’re a smart girl. I know you won’t disappoint me.”

My skin crawls with warning. I hang up the phone and walk over to the man dressed in a full black suit despite the wickedly hot temperatures.

I’m not doing this for me. I’m not doing this for money.

I’m doing this for Serena.

She deserves to be returned to her rightful place and the person who lied about her and ruined her life needs to be punished. I won’t stop until I accomplish both. Whatever I have to do to get my hands on Jinx’s evidence, I’m willing to do it.

Lucien watches me with hard eyes. He opens the back door.

I climb in and he slams it shut.

My heart lunges to my throat. I dig my fingernails into the seatbelt as he takes off.

*Should I tell Dutch where I am?*

The thought shakes me to my core. Why am I thinking of him? Rather than being a damsel in distress, I should find my own way out.

*Still. It’s better than driving off with some stranger who gives you the creeps.*

But if I call Dutch, what do I say to him?

*“I think your dad is dangerous, so I want to back out of this deal I made with him. Can you come and save me?”*

There is no reality where that will go over well.

I’m on my own.

Thinking quickly, I put my cell phone on record and set it under my thigh.

“Your name is Lucien?” I strike up a casual conversation.

Beady black eyes flash in the rearview mirror.

I force a smile. “How long have you been working for Mr. Cross?”

There’s a long period of silence.

I think he’s not going to answer, but he eventually says, “About five years.”

“Really? The way you two interact, I thought you’d been working with him since the beginning of his career.”

Lucien’s mouth falls into a thin line.

I clear my throat. “Where are you taking me?”

Still nothing.

“What does Mr. Cross want me to do?”

Still nothing.

My heart slams against my ribs. I dig my fingernails into the phone, wondering what I should do next.

Something doesn’t feel right.

This man. This ride. The rockstar’s request.

“You don’t need to record this,” Lucien says, his voice crisp and dry. “Mr. Cross wouldn’t hurt you.” His eyes flash on me again. “Not as long as you cooperate.”

My nostrils flare. Does he realize how he sounds? Maybe in Lucien’s head, that was meant to comfort me, but all I heard was ‘*Mr. Cross will hurt you if you DON’T cooperate*’.

I lick my lips and turn off the recording. He’s made his point. There is no way to escape these circumstances. All I can do is trust that I’m not making the biggest mistake of my life.

Lucien returns his cold eyes to the street.

The rest of the drive happens in stifling silence.

Finally, he pulls the car into a giant arena. There are paparazzi out front, but none of them are back here.

The car engine dies.

Lucien opens my door for me like I’m someone important.

I glance up at his face.

He stares at me, a cruel glint in his eyes. It reminds me of that kid in kindergarten who used to put ants into puddles just to watch them drown.

“That way.” He points, flashing a cuff link with a tiger symbol on it. “He’s waiting up there.”

I stumble past him, glad to be away from his strangely unsettling presence.

The stairs leading to the stage are big and wooden. My sneakers thump on them loudly, but the sound is swallowed up by the massive cacophony above. Giant cranes are swooping across the stage. Men in T-shirts with the label ‘CREW’ on the back, hustle in desperation.

In the circle of the chaos, calm and sinisterly beautiful, is Jarod Cross. He’s got a guitar strung over his long, lean body. Tattoos grace his chest and most of his arms, which are on display thanks to his black wife beater. The lights all point to him, bathing his face in white and mystery.

He turns his head to the side and I can see Dutch. The way they hold their guitars with careless grace, the way they both stand in the middle of the spotlight without fear, it’s alluring in a strange and sinful way.

Jarod Cross’s blue eyes snap open and he cuts his gaze across the stage as if sensing my presence. He sees me and a slow, confident smile stretches across his face. Like a cat who has the mouse right where he wants him.

“Cadence.” He swings the guitar over his head in one smooth motion. Someone approaches and accepts the guitar from him.

I’m sure I look as dazzled as I feel, but I can’t find the strength to hide my expression. It’s my first time standing on a professional stage. Although Redwood Prep takes music seriously, this is not a school presentation. This is on another level altogether.

“You’re here.” Jarod snaps his fingers.

Magically, a bottle of water appears in front of him.

He twists the cap, takes a swig and holds out his arms.

The bottle is promptly removed.

He drops an arm around my shoulder. “Come. Walk with me.”

I stumble beside him, wondering when the hell I went to sleep and started dreaming about rockstars giving me stage tours.

“Everyone,” Jarod Cross gestures to his band, “this is Mulliez’s best student—Cadence Cooper.”

The musicians jut their chins up in a cool sign of greeting.

My stomach clenches nervously. “Hi.”

“Mulliez chose her?” The bass guitarist slides his eyes over me.

“How do you know Mr. Mulliez?” I ask.

“He played with our band. Briefly,” Jarod says. “He might not be with us now, but you never forget your bandmate.”

“What do you play?” the drummer inquires. He’s a tall, thin guy covered in tattoos. His hair is so shaggy that it hides most of his face.

“Piano,” I murmur.

“Keys?” He bobs his head. “Not bad.”

“We’re guitarheads over here, but we respect the piano. No hate.” The bass guitarist pumps a fist into his chest.

“You should play something.”

“Yeah, definitely. Let me hear what Mulliez staked his life on.”

Jarod chuckles. “Cadence?”

“I can’t.” The words escape on a squeak. Quiet and fearful.

Put me up against a raging monster like Dutch Cross and I’ll fight tooth and nail.

Ask me to play in front of a crowd, and I lose all my fire.

“Why not?” Jarod arches a brow.

“I have stage fright,” I admit, clasping my hands together.

The entire band goes silent.

Jarod studies me with a long look, his gaze sliding from my butt-length hair to my dusty sneakers. “What kind of relationship did you have with Mulliez?”

At once, everyone in the band stiffens.

I do too. What the hell is he insinuating?

“Were the rumors true?” Strangely, Jarod Cross seems more amused than scandalized.

I’m immediately on edge.

Mess with me? Fine. But don’t come after the people I care about.

“Mr. Mulliez chose me because of my talent.” I pierce the band with my gaze. “Not for any other reason.”

“How did you qualify for Redwood if you have stage fright?”

I inhale deeply. “Do you guys have a wig around here?”

They’re rockstars. They *must* keep some kind of costume in the building.

“No.”

My heart pounds faster.

I can’t do it without a wig. I can’t do it.

Jarod’s hand falls on my shoulder. “Cadence, it’s okay to admit the truth. If Mulliez—”

“He didn’t,” I growl.

Jarod’s amused smile gets bigger.

I squeeze my eyes shut. *Come on, Cadence. You can do this. You even played for the cafeteria ladies, remember?*

Dutch pushed me out of my comfort zone more times than I can count. It's time to see if it worked.

“Do you have a drum cover?”

Jarod snaps his fingers. “Get this girl something to cover herself.”

I accept the thick blanket and approach the piano to the left of the stage.

By now, most of the crew members are watching us curiously, trying to see what's got Jarod Cross so engaged. I ignore everyone and throw the blanket over my head, covering my hair like a veil.

I'm sure I look ridiculous, but at this point, I'm too invested to care.

There are no lights under the piano. It's dark and difficult to see the keys. Not that I need to. Every note is etched into my bones and buried deep under my ribs.

I close my eyes and play. *Blind Love* ekes out and spreads through the arena. It's an angsty, rebellious rendition of Jarod Cross's first hit song.

My fingers tease the black keys, climbing octaves to layer the already insidious beat with an extra dose of chaos. Louder. Louder. Until the only thing I can hear is my heart bursting in my ears.

And then soft. Like the wind. Flowing. Lightweight. No gravity.

I click my foot on the sustain pedal and let the last note ring, dragging their hearts over the coals for as long as possible before I release them from my trance.

When I'm done, I lift my hands.

I'm too embarrassed.

I just bled all over the piano keys. What if they see the mess and laugh at my cowardice? What if they don't understand?

My stage fright's improved a little, but not that much. I don't trust what happens if I throw this blanket off my head and face the crowd.

Slowly, the sound of applause breaks out behind me.

It's followed by another.

The applause thunders through the room, building until it matches the crescendo of the song.

"I need the room!" Jarod Cross barks.

Footsteps patter.

Whispers rush.

*"She was incredible."*

*"I haven't heard anyone play like that in my life."*

*"Dude, why the hell am I crying?"*

Finally, it all fades to silence.

I feel the drum cover shifting and, slowly, it drapes off my head to my shoulder and into my lap. I meet Jarod Cross's blue eyes and find him leaning over the piano, his lips quirked up.

"Burying that talent would be a crime," he says in a low hush. "Have you ever thought about touring?"

"Me? Tour? No." I shake my head and brush my hair down. The blanket caused frizz to rise all over.

"You obviously know how to play. And you had to have played in public for Mulliez to discover you."

"I usually wear a wig and makeup."

"A wig and makeup?" He chuckles, low and deep.

I squirm. Exhale. Change the subject. "Mr. Cross, do you really want me to spy on Dutch? Why?"

"I suspect that my son is dealing drugs," he says bluntly.

My eyes widen. All the air gets sucked out of the room and I can't breathe.

“I’ve had my suspicions for a long time, but when I saw all the money in Dutch’s account well... I started investigating.”

“He wouldn’t... Dutch doesn’t do drugs. I haven’t even seen him smoke.”

“Dutch is rebellious by nature.” Jarod Cross folds his arms over his chest. “He would do anything to get back at me for the wrongs he perceives I’ve done.”

My mouth opens and closes.

“I did my research, and you—Miss Cooper—are the only one who seems unafraid of my son. It’s why I chose you. It’s why I know you won’t let me down.”

My skin starts to crawl. The one thing I hate, more than anything in this world, is the substance that turned my mother into an addict and the people who benefit from the trade.

If Dutch is dealing...

“No. He isn’t the type who’d hide if he were doing that,” I insist. Why does it hurt to think that Dutch could be dealing? Why do I want that to be a lie so desperately?

“Some people disguise themselves better than others.” Jarod Cross picks up the drum cover. “You should know something about hiding your true self.”

My chest burns. I see through his smile to the truth beneath. He’s taunting me. Challenging me.

The danger of the moment rolls through my chest like a storm, deep and foreboding. I don’t know what’s going on, but I know that I’ve stepped into rushing, dangerous currents. At any minute, I can sink like a stone.

“If you’re telling me this to try and keep me away from Dutch, you don’t have to bother. I’m not interested in your son.”

He laughs. It’s a twisted sound. “I don’t care about your high school romance, Miss Cooper. All I ask is that you keep an eye on him and report to me if you see him doing anything suspicious.”



“So you can report him?”

“No.” He blinks innocently. “So I can save him from himself.” Sadness settles over his face. “It’s hard to be the son of a celebrity. Even worse when all your mistakes are paraded before the world. I’m his father. My biggest desire is to protect him.”

I nod, wishing my mom was that considerate of us.

Jarod Cross walks around the piano. His hand drapes over the top. “How would you feel about opening for fan meetings in London?”

My knees weaken. “O-open? For you? No, I couldn’t possibly.”

“Think about it.” He checks his watch. “That’s enough for today. You can leave.”

“Wait.” I shoot to my feet.

He turns, blue eyes dark and assessing. “Is there something else you want?”

“Yes.” I swallow hard. “You mentioned getting me a scholarship or money.”

“Yes...”

“I don’t want either of those.”

“What do you want?”

“My friend was falsely accused and expelled from school. Can you bring her back?”

“Your friend? By chance, is it the one who started the fire?” He rubs his jaw.

I hold my breath. My deal with Jinx is Plan A, but I don’t intend to let Jarod Cross have his way unless I get my three wishes from him.

He considers it and nods. “I can bring her back.”

My heart balloons with hope.

“But she won’t be able to graduate this year.”

My shoulders sink. “No.”

“And she’ll always be remembered as the one who set the fire.” He arches a brow. “Is that really what you want?”

“No. I want her to come back to school and—”

“I meant do you want to waste your payment on someone else?”

“Yes.” There’s not a second of hesitation.

“How sweet.” His voice is deep with amusement and something else. Something I can’t decipher. All I know is it really isn’t a compliment. “Give me what I want, Miss Cooper, and I’ll do everything I can to help your friend.”

I swallow hard. Despite hearing those words, I still feel like I’m getting into bed with the devil.

Jarod Cross waves a hand. “Now go. Lucien will give you the things you need.”

“The things I need?”

“To spy on my son.” He turns back and gives me a hard stare. “I’m expecting great things from you, Miss Cooper. Don’t disappoint me.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

DUTCH

I know how to make a woman see stars. I know how to touch her, play her, tease her until she's begging for more. I know how to whisper my orders in her ear, how to command her body, how to own her in every way possible.

But I don't know how the hell to plan a date.

At least, not one where the girl actually sits down to eat and enjoys herself.

I shudder at the memory of Cadence screaming at me and then bursting into tears at the candlelit dinner I prepared for her. I hated seeing her cry and I never want to be the reason she cries again.

"She's not into flowers," I mumble, scowling as Zane shoves the bouquet at me. We're sitting in my bedroom, brainstorming the biggest challenge of my life—getting Cadence to go out on a date with me.

"She doesn't like fancy meals either," I add. The only time Cadence isn't biting my ear off is when I'm bruising her lips with my kisses or marking her body with my tongue.

"Shut your mouth and give her the damn flowers, Dutch. It's a guaranteed win."

"No," I scowl. "I tried that. The day of the fire. And again that day in the classroom. She freaked out."

“Probably because you keep trying to seduce her at school,” Finn says robotically. His eyes are on a book. He turns the page and it makes a crisp sound as it flips to the next chapter.

I flinch. “It’s not like she’ll see me outside if I ask her out.”

“Why not just go to her house then?” Zane suggests. “Do something nice for her there.”

“She won’t let me in.”

“Barge in.”

“Sure. Breaking and entering is real romantic,” Finn murmurs.

“He broke in that night and she still put out.”

I stiffen and slant Zane a dark look.

Finn arches a brow. “Is the point to get her to sleep with you or to get her to like you? Because, when it comes to you and Cadence, those are two distinctly different things.”

“The point is to get her to marry me.”

“Then she has to at least like you.”

Zane snorts. “If that’s a requirement, why do fifty percent of marriages end in divorce?”

“Cadence and I aren’t getting divorced.” Just the thought of losing her makes me want to smash something.

“I’m not saying you’ll get divorced. I’m genuinely asking.” He glances between me and Finn. “Do wives and husbands actually like each other anymore?”

“They always do at the start,” Finn says.

Zane rolls his eyes. “I think Dutch should go big. Plan a trip to France. Take her right up to one of those romantic Ferris Wheel rides and propose to her up there. Girls love that crap.”

“On top of a Ferris wheel, where she can’t run away?” I rub my chin. “I like it.”

“First, you have to get her on a plane to Paris,” Finn points out.

Zane and I exchange looks.

We both open our mouths at the same time but, before we can blurt out what we’re thinking, Finn says, “If you say you’ll ‘kidnap her’, *I’m* going to cut your guitar strings.”

“Try it,” I growl.

“Cadence is the only one who can murder his guitar and live,” Zane taunts with a laugh.

“She’ll hate you forever if you keep pushing her into corners,” Finn warns.

“Like Zane said, I don’t need her to like me to get her to marry me.”

“So you’ve decided to threaten her?”

“I’ve decided to get her to admit what we’re both feeling.” I scowl. “She’s the one making it complicated.”

“And you’re the one who wants the girl who sees you as a menace to marry you. Cadence isn’t stupid. And she isn’t desperate. You want to strong arm her into falling for you? You can’t go in blazing hot. You’ve tried that. And it hasn’t worked so far.”

“What do you suggest then?” I snarl, frustrated. I’m not asking for their help in creating a son. It’s simple enough to get her into bed. Every time I so much as touch her, Cadence is ready for me. No matter what she says, she can’t deny the chemistry between us.

But I’m totally lost on how to get her to admit she even has feelings for me.

“Be smart about it. You have a secret weapon.”

Zane bounces up from my bed. “What’s that?”

“Her sister.”

I freeze where I stand, thinking it over.

“Dude.” Zane frowns. “Her sister’s thirteen.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“I got what you meant,” I mumble.

Zane’s eyebrows hike. “Oh. *Oh*. That’s actually not bad.”

“You’re good, Finn.”

He shrugs as if it’s obvious. Cocky bastard.

I pick up the phone and DM Viola.

She responds immediately as if she’d been waiting.

“What did she say?” Zane peers over my shoulder.

“Give me a minute.” My brow wrinkles in concentration.

“I asked for her number.”

Clicking on the tab, I dial the number Viola gives me and listen to the phone ring.

Zane edges up against me, sticking his ear to the back of my cell.

Finn sits down with his book, but I can tell he’s tuned in because he hasn’t turned a single page.

There’s a long ring.

Finally, it clicks.

A timid voice says, “Is this... Dutch Cross?”

“Hey, Viola.”

“Eep!” She lets loose a girlish squeal. “I can’t believe Dutch Cross is calling me!”

“How have you been, Vi?”

“Good.” She sounds giddy.

Zane makes a circular gesture, indicating that I should hurry it up.

I clear my throat. “Vi, remember that favor you promised us?”

“Mm-hm,” she says eagerly.

After we helped her out with her makeup tutorial, Viola swore up and down that she wouldn't forget our kindness.

I glance at Finn and then at Zane. Heart pounding, I tell Cadence's sister. "I'm going to need to cash in on that favor."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

CADENCE

“Wake up. Cadey, wake up.”

Someone is bouncing on my bed and if they don't stop in the next five seconds, I'm going to karate kick them into the next bedroom.

“Cadey!”

“Urg, go away,” I mutter unintelligibly.

The weekend is the only time I've got to sleep in, and I'm exhausted. It didn't help that I couldn't fall asleep until two a.m. this the morning.

Jarod Cross's accusations kept running circles through my head.

Dutch? A drug dealer?

It's so far out of left field I could laugh, but the more I think about it, the less ridiculous it sounds.

He's frightening enough to pull it off. None of the teachers would tell him anything, even if they caught him red-handed. He's cold and careless. He doesn't give a damn about the people he's hurting in the process.

But, for all his brutality, I thought he had lines he wouldn't cross.



Was I wrong? Did I let my guard down, let my *sister* around the type of man I hate the most?

“Cadey!”

I moan and fling an arm over my face to keep the sunlight from scraping past my eyelids. The golden light is barging in anyway, making my head hurt.

Viola shakes my shoulders. “If you don’t get up now, I’ll start singing.”

“Don’t!” I shoot to a sitting position.

Viola laughs, pretty brown eyes glinting. It’s my first time seeing her smile that wide since mom came back. Immediately, the exhaustion clears from my body.

I smile back. “Why are you in such a good mood?”

“Because it’s *finally* Saturday. The weekend took *forever* to get here.” She sits on the edge of my bed and the mattress bounces with her weight.

“Saturday is cleaning day.” I rub my eyes.

“Come on, Cadey.” She pushes out her bottom lip and takes my hand. Swinging it back and forth, she coaxes, “Can’t we go out and do something fun today?”

A yawn cracks my jaw and makes my words mush together. “With what money?”

“I have some money.”

My eyebrows jump.

“Natasha Bombarch threw a party, so I got a few more makeup gigs than usual.” Viola raises both hands in a placating motion. “I saved one-third of the money like you told me, but there’s enough left over to do something fun.”

“Why don’t you go and do something fun with your own friends?”

“Because I want to do something with you.” She goes still and pulls her knees up to her chest. “Ever since mom came back, it feels like I’m living in a different world.”

My heart tugs guiltily. “I know. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry.” She sighs. “I’m the one who’s sorry. You were right about everything. I don’t think I could have lived with those secrets mom forced you to keep.” Viola looks contemplative. “I think I forgot what she was like. Or maybe I wanted her to be different this time? But nothing’s changed. She came back to us for a day, probably to steal something, and we haven’t seen her again. It’s been almost three days and she hasn’t even called.”

My eyes fall to the mattress. I tug at one of the threads that came undone.

“I was wrong about mom, but I still don’t think you should do everything on your own. I really do want to help.” Viola shuffles toward me. “Not just today. With everything.”

“Why don’t you help by letting me sleep, missy?” I tap her nose.

“I’m serious, Cadey. I can do more to pitch in. That video I posted with The Kings is going viral. I qualify for monetization now. That means I’ll get paid for views in the future.”

“That’s great, Vi.” I feel awful for not noticing that her channel was improving. My life has been such a tornado of setbacks that, in the chaos, my sister got left behind.

I lift my chin. “You know what? You’re right. Just because mom disappeared and our lives are in this weird limbo, it doesn’t mean we should stop living.”

Viola brightens. “You’re coming with me?”

“Sure. Just let me get dressed.”

Viola pumps a fist, looking way too excited for, what will probably be, a one hour trip to the bowling alley and maybe some fried onion rings. But if she’s happy, so am I.

After my shower, I feel a little brighter.

“I’m ready,” I say, sliding my purse over my head and stepping into the living room.

My sister pulls a disgusted face. “Cadey, what are you wearing?”

“My bowling outfit,” I say, pointing to my oversized T-shirt, jeans and scuffed sneakers. “It’s comfortable.”

Viola’s eyes look panicked. “I don’t want comfortable! I said ‘cozy chic’!”

“This is cozy.” I tug on the large grey sleeve. At her horrified response, I get a little sheepish. “Isn’t it?”

“Come with me.” Viola grabs my hand and marches into her room.

After tossing almost twenty dresses on the bed, she finally decides on a short, flowy dress with flower patterns. “Here. Pair it with this jacket.” She slaps a cream-colored jean jacket at me. “It’ll be super cute.”

“Isn’t this a little much for—”

“Wear. It!”

“Okay. Okay. Calm down.” I scrunch my nose at her. Her intensity is starting to remind me of Dutch. Maybe I shouldn’t let her hang around The Kings anymore. She’s getting pushy.

“This way.” Viola motions to me.

I frown at her. “What are you doing?”

“Your makeup?”

“Vi, don’t bother. I’m not like you. Putting on makeup isn’t fun for me.”

“You put on makeup to play piano.”

“It’s just a way to deal with my stage fright. We’re going to hang out today. There’s no need to dress up.”

“You should get dressed up now and again. Just for yourself,” she says with a resolute nod.

“I don’t—”

“Blah, blah, blah. You’re boring. I get it. Now, sit.”

I want to resist, but I tell myself that this is her day. If putting makeup on my face just to go bowling delights her, I'm not going to complain.

After Vi's through with me, I pick up a mirror and check my reflection. "Wow. It looks like me but... glossy."

"Of course. It's your face." She raises her chin. "I kept it light and natural today. I call this the 'dewy' classic. It makes you look like an angel."

"I really like it. Vi, I'm so impressed. You've really improved."

"Thank you." She curtsies.

There's a knock on the door.

Vi squeals and grins. "He's early."

"Who's early?" My stomach clenches. Even though I haven't seen him, I already have an idea of who's standing outside that door. "Viola." Her name escapes like a warning.

My sister winks at me, dances out of the room and throws the front door wide open.

Dutch appears, lined in light. Despite all the sunshine, shadows still surround him. I slide my eyes over his messy blond hair, the leather jacket hiding the tattoos just beneath, the designer jeans and sneakers.

"Let's go." Vi grabs my arm and tries to tug me.

My legs remain rooted to the floor. I tossed and turned all night, reliving our moments together over and over. Wondering if the scraps of humanity I saw beneath Dutch's monstrosity was all made up in my head. Wondering if I'd opened myself up to the type of person I despise with all my breath.

Money. Power. Now drugs? A tangled web I don't want to get caught up in.

"What are you doing here?" My voice is sharp. Cold.

Dutch's expression remains the same except for a near imperceptible flick of his eyebrows. He didn't expect this level

of animosity. What the hell *did* he expect? That I'd accept him with open arms if he manipulated my sister into doing his bidding?

"Cadey," Vi pulls at my arm, "I already promised Dutch we'd hang out with him today."

"Why would you promise him that?"

"I asked for a favor." Dutch glances over me, some of his blonde hair falling into his eyes. He pushes it back with strong fingers.

*He's a drug dealer.*

"Please?" Vi pouts.

*A drug dealer.*

My heart pounds. Would a father lie about his own son? Isn't there *some* truth to the accusation?

"Don't you have something better to do with your Saturday than hang out with us?" I ask, and Dutch gives me this look with those amber eyes of his.

I've never seen it before.

I honestly don't know how to interpret it.

"There is nothing in this world I'd rather do than spend today with you," he says. And then he straightens and seems to remember we're not alone. "And Vi."

Viola snorts. "Nice save."

I remain frozen, hesitating. Torn. If it were just me, I could take the chance. But it involves Vi. If my sister gets more embroiled with these guys...

"Come *on!*" Viola jumps behind me and shoves me forward, dragging me to the door. "You're going to have fun today even if it kills me, Cadey!"

I shudder at the declaration.

If Jarod Cross is to be believed, hanging around Dutch just might kill us both.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

### CADENCE

I stare at the empty amusement park. Sunshine blazes over the colorful rides, lights blinking in welcome at a crowd of exactly three.

Me. Vi. Dutch.

“Where is everyone?” Vi wonders, pale fingers curling around the strap of her purse. “Is it closed?”

“To the public, yeah.”

My sister and I whip our heads around to stare at Dutch.

He sounds casual when he says, “I rented it.”

“You *rented* it?” I squeak.

“How much does that cost?” Viola coughs.

“Not as much as if we rented it for the afternoon,” Dutch says, looking annoyed. “But I couldn’t convince the owner. Not even after I threw in two VIP tickets to a Jarod Cross concert.”

He’s angry about the fact that he didn’t pay premium...

When I’m still trying to wrap my brain around the fact that he could rent this place at *any* time of the day.

“So there’s no one here? Not one person?”

“The operators are here,” Dutch says.

“But apart from that?” Vi is bouncing on the tips of her toes.

“Apart from that, it’s just us.”

“Just us?” Vi sounds like she took a deep drag of helium.

“No long waits. No crowds. You can do whatever you want.”

Vi pumps her fists. “This is the best day of my life!”

“Dutch, why would you—”

He places a finger to my lips.

My body buzzes at the touch.

“Today, your only job is to have fun. That’s it. Ask me questions. Scold me. Hate me. Whatever. You can do that when we’re done.”

“When will we be done?” I ask, hating my stern teacher tone but unwilling to give in to him.

Jarod Cross gave me a warning, and I don’t want to discard it just because Dutch makes my body hot.

Ever since Breeze accused me of being blind to red flags, I’ve been trying to do better. I don’t care if this feels good in the moment. I will never, ever tolerate a drug dealer in my life. Never.

Dutch leans down, the gold flecks shining brighter in his eyes. “When you’ve had enough fun.”

My brows drop low.

“Let’s try that rollercoaster!” Vi shrieks, hopping around like a frog on steroids.

Dutch throws me a cocky smile and jerks his head toward her.

I zip my misgivings away and follow them.

For Vi’s sake, I’m not going to stop this, but I won’t let Dutch Cross get any closer to me until I know for sure who he is.

For her sake.

And for mine.

\* \* \*

After we've ridden every single ride, Vi's too spent to do anything but drop into one of the plastic chairs in the food court.

Dutch chuckles and extends an ice cream cone to her. "Ready to roll out?"

"Give me a minute. I can't feel my legs." My sister exhales loudly.

I smile at her. Whatever his intentions today, I have to give it to Dutch. Vi is having a blast. It's been so long since I've heard her laugh this much. My heart is so full it could burst.

I hear a creak and feel Dutch's presence beside me. He shucked out of his jacket, getting hot from all the walking back and forth. I take note of his lean muscles covered in ink. His jeans hug impossibly long legs. While his personality sucks, his body... isn't so bad.

Memories of gripping his neck while he showed me just what that body can do fills my mind.

Another hot strike pulses between my legs.

I squeeze my thighs together.

"You're melting," Dutch says.

"What?" I croak, my voice hoarse.

Dutch smirks like he knows what he does to me. "Your ice cream."

"Oh." I blink and realize the ice cream is falling on my fingers. "Vi, can you get me a napkin?"

"Just a sec." She pushes herself up and shuffles away.

"Let me," Dutch grinds out. He leans forward, giving me a wicked look before he flicks his hot tongue over my finger.



My mouth parts on a hiss as he sucks greedily and then gently scrapes his teeth over my skin.

The heat in my lower belly becomes an inferno.

My heart beats so fast I feel dizzy.

“Got ‘em,” Vi says, hurrying back.

I lurch away, my face on fire.

Vi stops in her tracks. “Cadey, why are you so red?”

“It’s hot out here,” Dutch says. He rubs my back. His hands are pure heat as he skims over my jacket.

“Yeah,” I pant. “It’s really hot.”

Vi shrugs and gives me a napkin.

I reach for it and pin Dutch with an angry glare.

He looks like he’s in complete control of himself, but I’m the total opposite. I want him to touch me again. I want to touch him. I want to see him as undone, as breathless, as needy as I am.

*What happened to not ignoring the red flags? What happened to not getting closer to him until you know who he is.*

I have to do better.

I *will* do better.

But as the day wears on, I find myself getting dragged further and further into the fantasy.

*What if everyday could be this good? What if I could hear Vi laugh like this all the time?*

I catch myself feeling hopeful and shake it off.

This isn’t our reality. This isn’t the life we lead, maybe not even the life we deserve.

There’s a slight, niggling worry in the back of my head. Is this okay? To be happy? To have fun in such a lavish way?

What if this sets Vi up for heartbreak in the future? What if it was better to not have seen, tasted, and experienced rather

than to have it once and realize it doesn't belong to you? That it may *never* belong to you.

All I want is for my sister to never worry about money or groceries or her mother sneaking into her room and stealing her stuff.

And here is Dutch, giving us a glimpse of a better life.

... But if I let myself fall for it, it'll only lead to disappointment.

Dreams, desires—they're too fragile. Shattered in a single touch.

As the sun begins its descent, I pull Vi to me and stand in front of Dutch. "Thanks for today, but I think we should head home now."

"I can't go home," Vi says.

"What? Why?"

"I have a group project."

My eyes bug. "What do you mean? You didn't say you had homework this morning."

"Because I knew you wouldn't let me go with you guys today."

"Viola," I snap.

She smiles innocently and pokes her head around me to look at Dutch. "Can you take me to my friend's house?"

Dutch swings his car keys around his finger. "Hop in."

We drive Viola to Shanae's mom, one of the few mothers I actually trust to watch my sister when neither Breeze or I am available. Once we park, I climb out and grab my sister by both shoulders.

"Vi," I speak in a low voice, "you're not making this up because he asked you to, right?"

"Are you kidding? Dutch said he was taking us camping tonight." She frowns. "I really want to go, but this project is

due Monday. Shanae and I will have to work all night because we waited until last minute.”

It’s totally believable that Vi would push off her homework to the last minute. And it’s believable that she wouldn’t tell me about it too.

Still, I grasp at straws. “Maybe you can work on it tomorrow.”

“Shanae has church tomorrow.”

“But...”

“Are you that scared of being alone with Dutch?” Viola wiggles her eyebrows. “Because if you don’t want him...”

“You’re thirteen. Don’t you dare finish that joke.”

My sister laughs. “You haven’t really enjoyed yourself today.”

“I did,” I argue.

“No, you were always asking me what I want to do. What I want to ride. What I want to eat. For once, why don’t you just have fun for you?” Vi nods at where Dutch has climbed out of the car and is leaning against it, waiting for me. “I bet he can help.”

My heart hammers.

“I’ll text you, Cadey.” My sister gives me a knowing smile. “I have a feeling both of us will be spending the night outside.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

DUTCH

“*This* is camping?” Cadey says, not ripping her eyes away from the view in front of her. String lights pierce through the foliage, sending sprays of golden light on the forest floor. Wooden slats balance on top of heavy branches. Warm tones. A lazy hammock. It’s pretty freaking brilliant architecture.

“*This?*” Cadence points up for emphasis.

I try to keep the pleased smile off my lips. Cadey will think I orchestrated everything just to get her alone if she catches me grinning like a maniac.

I took my brother’s advice and made this day about her and Vi.

Mostly Vi.

Which, hopefully, touched her too.

‘*Show her you can take care of them. Be a gentleman,*’ was Finn’s advice.

It’s no wonder girls leave our beds hating us and themselves, but they leave Finn’s willing to die for him.

I decided to take his advice. There were zero expectations on getting naked with Cadey tonight. Dreams? Fantasies? Hell yeah. But I figured the anticipation would simmer until I could get her alone and taste her the way I desperately want to.

I didn't expect the reward for my patience to arrive so soon.

"How much did you spend on us today?" Cadey mumbles, drawing near to me. Her face is upturned. Plump lips full of poison. Eyes that have me by the throat. Hair getting tangled in the breeze.

She's freaking stunning. A work of art I want to etch on my skin.

"Dutch."

"You ask a lot of questions about money," I say, folding my arms over my chest.

"I'm trying to calculate how much I need to pay you back."

I give her a long look. "I can think of a few ways you can pay me back."

She gets red. I'm starting to notice that she's blushing a lot more. She did before, but not this much. Even when I had her backed up against tables, dark corners, quiet spaces, she didn't blush.

But it seems like losing her virginity made her shyer rather than bolder.

I like it.

Girls who constantly throw themselves at me are boring.

And it's nice seeing the brash, fearless Cadence Cooper go soft.

She averts her gaze, settling into that hard, mistrustful expression she's been wearing all day. I get the sense that my presence makes her deeply uncomfortable.

Between hate and discomfort, I'm not sure which is worse.

I just know that I've got an opportunity here, and I'm not going to blow it.

"I only agreed to this because Vi asked me to take pictures," Cadey says, talking as if she needs to convince

herself. “Let’s go inside. I’ll take a few more shots and go home.”

There’s no way I’m letting this girl go tonight.

Not until I’m through with her.

“This way.” I gesture with my arm.

Cadence pockets her purse and approaches the thick tree trunk. There’s a ladder hammered into the wood.

“You got it?” I ask, sensing her hesitation.

“Of course.” She scoffs, but her eyes drop to the wedge sandals she’s wearing. They look sexy as hell, but they’re not exactly climbing gear.

Before I can offer to help, Cadence gives a determined nod and reaches for the first slat. I follow, keeping my eyes locked on her as she makes the climb. The fabric of her skirt sways and I can see up her tights.

My pants strain.

It’s not even a view of her panties, but it’s enough to make me lose my mind.

I’ve never been rational when it comes to her.

“Ah!” Cadence yelps. One of her shoes slips off the slat.

I move instantly and palm her backside, keeping her steady so she doesn’t fall.

“You good?”

“Y-yeah,” she mumbles.

Unable to help myself, I pat her there. “You’re okay. Just keep going.”

Cadence glares at me. “Hands off, Dutch.”

I lift both hands in surrender, but this time the smile can’t be swiped away.

She narrows her eyes in response and successfully climbs the rest of the way. I join her soon after, easily mounting the ladder.

When I get up there, I expect Cadence to be waiting for me with fierce words, but she's too busy gasping at the view.

"This is incredible," she whispers. Moonlight spills over the treetops, strokes of silver topping majestic green. Stars close enough to touch, to kiss. Bright enough to blind the eyes.

I lift my phone and take a shot of her, expression spellbound and awestruck.

Cadence notices and snaps out of her trance. "Did you just take a picture of me?"

I pocket the phone. "No."

Her eyes narrow. She doesn't believe me.

I draw closer. My face is carefully neutral but, inside, I feel alive in a way that I haven't in a while.

Would she scream if she knew how obsessed I am with her? Would she shake in fear if she heard that every time I stroke my guitar, I'd rather be stroking her? That I hold my breath when she sighs in exhaustion? That I broke when she cried that time?

She acts like the world is on her shoulders. I want to take that burden from her. Even if it's just for one night.

"I've got snacks in the ice box. That giant, fluffy rug is new. I bought it since it seemed more comfortable than sleeping bags. The projector's hooked up to a computer filled with all the dumb, girly movies I could find."

"Girly movies?" Her lips twitch.

"I bought them all. I thought Vi would be here, and I didn't know what movies she liked to watch."

Her gaze is fixed on me. "Did you really do all this for Vi?"

I slide my fingers over her face. "You too."

Confusion knots her brow.

"Vi is important to you. That means she's important to me."

Her tongue darts out to wet her bottom lip. “What does that have to do with you?”

“You’re mine. Everything that involves you involves me.”

Her shoulders stiffen, but I don’t let her go.

“I’ll protect who you protect. I’ll love who you love. I’ll hate who you hate.” The words are raw. Honest. I don’t know if she hears me. If she gets it. I just let them come pouring out. “You and Vi are a package deal. That doesn’t scare me.”

“Nothing scares you,” she mumbles.

I shrug. Nod. “No.”

She studies me again, that shrewd, mistrustful look that seems darker and more frustrating tonight.

“Since you planned this camping trip for Vi, you didn’t bring booze, did you?”

My eyes widen.

She chews on her bottom lip deep in thought. Then her gaze lifts to mine. Pure brown and alluring. She takes a step forward. Feet gliding. Dress swaying around her thighs.

My heart squeezes when she stops right in front of me.

And the absolute last thing I’d expect her to say comes out of her sensual mouth...

“Truth or strip.” Her words whisper across my face. “Let’s play a game, Dutch.”



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

### CADENCE

I've got my back to him, but I can feel Dutch watching me as I step into the middle of the gorgeous treehouse. This place looks like a five star resort hoisted into the air. It took everything in me not to gawk, and I think I failed that mission.

But how could I not marvel?

My whole life, I've lived in my crappy neighborhood, seeing crappy sights. My head was bent toward the ground, nose to the plough as I tried to eke out a living. I had no time to look up, much less point my gaze to such extravagant heights.

If not for Redwood Prep, I wouldn't have the chance to sniff the air up here.

Every lavish experience I've had these past three months—playing piano at expensive parties, doing a private concert for Jarod Cross, and today, my sister getting first-class treatment—it all happened because I got the opportunity to study there.

But Redwood didn't give me those things without taking its pound of flesh.

I had to suffer.

I had to clamor for survival.

And he was in the center of the torture.

Dutch Cross.

The dangerous, prowling, ruthless boy who became the center of my universe. He took that spot without asking and demanded it without apology. The last thing I want to be is trapped in him. Especially when I don't really know who he is.

But I plan to find out tonight.

"The rules are simple," I say, sliding my purse over my head and tossing it into the hammock. There's a basket of M&Ms and snickers between the pillow forts. A candy wonderland.

Vi would have loved it.

"I ask you a question. You answer it. Honestly. If you don't, you strip."

"How will you know if I'm being honest?" I feel him behind me. The warmth of his chest. The coolness of his breath. The air changes. An all-consuming darkness that I both despise and desperately crave at the same time.

It gets hard to swallow, but I pretend that I'm unaffected. "I won't."

He's silent.

I turn and find him staring down at me with that dark, animalistic gaze of his.

"But if I feel like you're lying, you'll get a penalty," I add.

"What about you?" His voice is low and seductive.

"Same game. Same rules."

"I decide the penalty?"

I peel my eyes away. "Yes."

Why do I keep finding myself here, playing dangerous games with Dutch Cross? Why does it excite me rather than terrify me?

*There's no other option.*

I would have preferred truth or drink. That way, none of my clothes would need to come off, but I'm willing to dance

close to the fire to get answers.

“Deal.” Dutch sticks out his hand.

I stare at it. Slowly, I reach out. He clasps on, his fingers swallowing mine whole. My breath catches as he tugs me forward. I can smell him, the expensive mint scent. All male. All Dutch.

His eyes narrow slightly. His stare is edged in violence but, when he speaks, his voice is gentle. “You started this, Cadey. Don’t even think of backing out later.”

I know this is his extension of mercy. His last act of kindness. The tension between us is thick and we’re both still fully clothed.

He’s telling me to step back now if I don’t think I can handle it.

But that only stirs my competitive spirit more.

“Worry about yourself,” I hiss. “If I catch you lying to me, my penalty won’t be a joke.”

His eyes slide down my dress until they return to my face. “Looking forward to it, Brahms.”

Heat spreads from the top of my head to the bottom of my toes, which are curling in Vi’s borrowed wedge sandals.

I whirl around and step into the middle of the room, right in front of the projector screen hanging from a wooden beam.

Dutch shrugs out of his jacket.

I frown. “What are you doing? I haven’t asked a question yet.”

“I’m hot.”

“And?”

“I plan on telling you whatever you want to know.” He lifts one corner of his mouth in a smirk. “It’ll take too long before I get to strip.”

My nostrils flare. Cocky piece of—

“You want to go first or should I?”

“I’ll start.” I face him, arms limp at my sides, eyes tracing every muscle of his face. “Have you ever done drugs?”

His eyebrow jump is telling. He’s surprised by the question. “No.”

My tongue darts out to wet my lips. “Have you ever sold drugs?”

He tilts his head, trying to figure me out. “That was two questions.”

I realize I was overeager. I nod and gesture for him to go.

“But the answer is no.”

I exhale sharply.

Dutch stares right into my eyes. “I don’t do or sell drugs. Who told you that?”

“No one.” That’s a lie, but he doesn’t call me out on it.

My mind is whirring fast. Dutch seemed genuinely puzzled by my question. He could have lied about the drugs, but I don’t think he could fake that perplexed expression.

The knots in my stomach loosen a bit.

But that brings up other issues.

Like why would Jarod Cross tell me that Dutch sold drugs? Was he genuinely mistaken or is there something bigger I’m missing?

Annoyed by the mystery, I motion to him. “I took two turns. You have another question.”

“What was it like that night? Being touched that way for the first time?”

I freeze.

Dutch stares at me, a challenge in his eyes. Waiting.

I think of his fingers sliding down my back. His lips on my neck. His bruising caresses.

This heavy, penetrating heat sweeps over me. It’s sticky on my skin. Like rain. The kind that presses your clothes into

your body and makes you want to open your mouth and drink.

Dutch's gaze tempts me to do bad things. Very bad things.

I shrug out of my jacket, glad to rid myself of the layer.

I'm getting hot too.

He studies my every move, looking for something in particular.

I won't give it to him. Whatever he wants. Whatever he's searching for. He'll never have it from me.

"Your housekeeper, Martina, was at Redwood the day of the fire. Did she really not see anything?"

Dutch's lips press into a thin line. He slips his shirt over his head and tosses it aside.

I'm surprised. Does he know something about the fire?

The thought gets blurry when I slide my eyes over his inked skin and abs. *Damn, he's ripped.* Dutch notices me drooling and cocks this annoying grin that makes me want to punch him.

I quickly drag my eyes away.

"Why did Vi run away that night? The real reason. Not the B.S. one you gave me."

My heart pounds. I'm not telling him about mom. He doesn't need to see that side of my brokenness. I won't let him touch those shards.

Reaching down, I try to remove my shoes.

"You'll take those off last," he commands.

My eyes burn as I glare at him.

He stares back at me, daring me to defy him.

I'm shaking, but it's not from anger.

It's need.

Pure, white-hot desire.

I want to undress.

I want to see his eyes, the way they glint, the way they darken.

Letting him look but not touch.

Letting him want but not have.

It's enough to turn me into smoke.

Slowly, I grab the zipper at the back of my dress and slide it down. The metallic teeth unlatching inch by delicious inch makes a noise that swells through the room.

Dutch's face is taut. He holds himself tensely, fingers fisted at his sides, need hot and evident on his flushed skin. Sweat drips down the back of my neck and I see perspiration dotting his forehead too.

The dress pools around my ankles. I step out of it. Flick it away with my shoes.

Bra. Tights. Panties. Shoes.

That's it.

All that stands between me and his greedy, brutal eyes.

"Is there something you're not telling me about the fire?" I demand quietly.

A muscle in his jaw flexes. The sound of his zipper coming down turns my insides to mush and I bite hard on my bottom lip. He undoes his pants and shucks it off, eyes never leaving mine.

I refuse to dip my gaze past his V-line. Refuse to let temptation get the best of me. Refuse to admit that the heat in my core has anything to do with the fact that he's one piece away from being naked.

"Careful, Cadey. Once it's off, the game is over," Dutch taunts.

"Game is over when I say it's over," I snap.

He laughs, this dark, twisted sort of chuckle that promises pain and pleasure in equal measures. It's a sound that scares me. Sends a full-body shiver up my skin.

“My turn.” His entire face is darkening, eyes burning me to crisps. “Did you find the person who pawned the ring and left cash under your bed?”

Another question about mom.

I reach behind me to unsnap my bra, my body clenching in anticipation.

Dutch takes a giant step forward, trapping my wrist beneath his huge, calloused hand. The smell of him tightens around me like a rope. Amber eyes peer into my own, sending traitorous currents lashing through my veins.

He’s turned my own body against me. Where did seventeen years of self-control go?

“I’m going to take this off you,” he breathes. Quiet. Calm. Yet he’s staking his claim. Demanding ownership.

When I speak, my voice is rough and broken. “That’s not the rule—”

“You get one more question, Cadey. One more question before my self-control runs out and I mark every inch of this body until sitting down, standing up, taking a damn shower makes you think of me.”

I shiver, feeling my pulse pick up and my lungs constrict.

His eyes are two pools of dark promises, his mouth a harsh slash of threats and heat.

“Why are you doing this to me?” I croak. “Why me and not some girl from your world?”

The smile he gives me is arrogant and absolute—Dutch knows that I’m his for the taking and he doesn’t have to answer that honestly for me to anticipate what he’s about to do next.

But he still takes a second to think about his reply.

“You have something to protect and I have something to destroy. You escape into music and I’m trapped there. You hid from me and I still found you. Where you end, I begin.” He wraps long fingers around the back of my neck. “We may not

be from the same world, Cadence, but we're made of the same freaking soul."

"Dutch." It's all I can say before he slips his mouth over mine and sips from my lips. Slow and luxurious. Like he's tasting expensive wine. Something to be savored, not rushed.

My hands twine in his hair and all the blood in my body rushes between my legs, making my head spin.

Dutch's kiss is pure torture, a promise ripped from the pages of a fairytale. Right there in the villain's chapter where he swears he'll burn the world down.

Wrong prince.

Wrong story.

It should hurt. It should frighten me, but it feels so right.

It feels so freaking good.

And if this were a different story, a different night, a different life, I'd step into the eternity trapped in this moment and call it something I've never truly believed in.

Love.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

### CADENCE

My bra makes a silky sound as it flutters to the edge of the rug. I don't hear it. My groans are too loud, pouring out of me like a crash of notes as Dutch sends his thumb skittering over my freshly exposed skin.

A D# G

Fingers crashing into notes, creating music. Creating chaos.

The friction is too much.

Too.

Much.

I rake my nails through his hair as he drapes me on top of the rug. "Shouldn't we..." I gasp as his lips connect with the pulse in my neck. "Protection. We need..."

"I don't have protection," he murmurs in my ear.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I hear a warning bell.

And yet, Dutch keeps kissing me, bruising my lips, sucking his way down my neck to my chest. Showing me that he has everything I want. Hot, burning pleasure. A storm of satisfaction. A cruel torture.

"Do you want me to stop?" he whispers, sliding a rough finger down my stomach. A bundle of fireworks hisses

through my veins. He slicks the length of his finger over my tights, holding my pleasure just out of reach, so I have no choice but to surrender to him.

All my protests disintegrate when he kisses me again, teasing me over my clothes.

His teeth graze my naked shoulder and then he bites.

Tension snaps through me as every sensitive nerve in my body blazes to attention.

I moan louder. Taut. Hyper-aware of his ragged breaths in my ear, his need pressing into my leg.

“Sweet Cadey.” His tongue slides over my shoulder, caressing the bite mark, leaving me aching, reaching, wanting more. “There are so many things I want to do to you.” He presses a kiss to my throbbing skin. My pain. My medicine. “I apologize in advance for not being gentle.”

His threat whips a new invisible chord into the air.

Dark, decadent notes.

B C# Eb

I’m already on the edge of blinding pleasure. Already breathless with need.

I can’t stop.

Not now, when everything I need to quench this immeasurable thirst is within reach.

He has me in the palm of his hand.

This beast.

This monster.

He’s mine tonight.

I crave more.

“I’m not afraid of you,” I taunt him. Goad him.

His lips quirk as if he knows what I’m doing. He sees through me. Through all of it.

Despite the slight smile, his eyes turn to two pits of black. An abyss of dark promises.

“No, not afraid. You were never afraid of me, Cadey. Not even when it would have been better for you if you were.” As he speaks, his hands move. In a blink, the rest of my clothes are gone and so are his.

The notes shift. *Pianissimo*. Quiet. The quietest a music piece can go. Low and haunting. The sound of silence right before the crescendo. Right before the explosion of sound hits the air.

As Dutch draws nearer, my mind tilts. I thought my body would be liquid heat. I’ve done this before. He’s the only boy who’s been this close to me, closer than my next breath. I’ve traced my nails over his back. I let him consume me. Burn me to a crisp. And I came back to life.

But dragging my eyes lower on Dutch reminds me of the pain I felt.

The adjustment. The feeling that it would break me before it hit the end of me.

My body locks up, anticipating, tense.

Dutch lifts my head up with one hand, so I’m staring into his endless amber eyes. Rough fingers snap around my thighs. He guides my legs wide.

“Scared, Cadey?”

“Shut up,” I hiss, fingers curving into the rug as he pulls his hips back in preparation.

“Look at me.”

I raise my chin, my defiance burning as bright as my lust. I’m aching with desire, each nerve in my body fired up and quivering.

Even so, I refuse to let him see how powerless I am before him.

He holds my jaw in a tense grip, lust and fury tight on his skin. Sweat glistens on his taut muscles. A drop slips from his

tattooed arm and plops on top of my chest, chasing a trail down the line of my stomach toward my thighs that are spread open for him.

“You hated me, didn’t you? You’ve hated me for so long that you still think hate is what this is.”

The music in my head becomes louder.

Gradually.

Slowly.

Building.

“Screw you,” I snarl, hissing under my breath as Dutch’s body lines up with mine.

I feel my heart pounding so hard it’s about to burst.

“You hate the way I make you feel, the way I make you tremble, the way I own you,” he breathes. “The way you lose control.”

I’m shaking. Everywhere is throbbing with slick, decadent heat.

In my head—a full chord.

G B D

“My sweet Cadey.” His voice is like a drug, smoke curling around the air, taking over me. Sumptuous, addictive, resonant perfection. “No matter how hard you fight, you’re mine. You’re never escaping me.”

I grit my teeth, mouth open to speak, but it’s too late.

He descends without warning and all I can do is gasp.

The crescendo is quick and rough, snapping through my mind like a crack of thunder and expanding beyond that. A cry escapes my lips that I can’t contain, no matter how hard I try. A million notes being played at once, fingers stretching, stretching, stretching until they’re bound to snap.

Dutch moans and the music lashes.

He moves and the earth shatters, taking my body with it, tearing me into a million little pieces.

His lips crush mine, ripping what he wants from me, possessing my mouth the way he possesses every part of me—body and soul. The kiss is cruel, almost savage, a brutal reminder of who I belong to and why that will never change.

I should fight back, find some way to claw for equal ground, but I'm being wholly and totally devoured to a frantic rhythm matched only by the wild, forceful pounding of my heart.

I can't hear the music anymore. We're making our own. Sounds I can't stop. Sounds I didn't even know I could make. Gasps, groans, and heady whimpers that unfurl from inside me and lash out like a whip.

My body rocks forward. Our tongues clash like swords.

It's unstoppable—the pleasure. It courses through me, a torrent of flames that makes me scream. He mumbles something, probably another line about me belonging to him. And maybe I do. Maybe he's right. I can't control myself. I can't hide how good he makes me feel.

He's claimed me in every way and even if I say I hate it, I don't think I do.

I... I might even love it.

Dutch flips me around, and the rug barely manages to stay tethered to the ground as he grabs my hair and unleashes a wild, forceful storm. The music we create changes again. The raw, animalistic slap of our bodies is a forbidden song.

His breath gets choppy. I hear it and something inside me instinctually responds to it. The ruthless king of Redwood stripped to his base form. Brought to his knees by me. Beneath the anger, beneath the obsession, beneath even the hate—a surrender.

I arch my hips and he groans, a dark, thrilling note that's thick with need. His fingers tighten on me. Savage. Crazed. Forceful. So hard and fast I wonder if he's trying to snap me in two.

And then he cries out my name.

I can't see his face, but I feel him. The tension. The pleasure.

He rolls off me and I tilt my head to look at him. Amber eyes. Menacing lips. A creation of darkness and shadows, and yet he made me see the light.

Dutch rakes his fingers through his hair, his gaze hot enough to steal my breath away. Moonlight pours through the sun roof above the treehouse. Its silver fingers stroke the lines of his face and I know without him having to tell me—the night is far from over.

“This truce is just for tonight,” I pant, because it will probably take me all week to catch my breath again. Besides, I can see in his dark gaze that he thinks this means I've accepted him. The ring. The future he wants for us. Everything.

“Truce or not, tonight is the beginning of forever.”

“Forever?” I scoot back. Close my legs. My shoes are gone. I don't even remember him taking them off. Trembling slightly, I inhale and get hit with the scent of him mixed with the musky scent of us. “We're still young, Dutch. And life is unpredictable. You really think you want forever with me?”

I try to inch back again, but he doesn't let me get far.

His hands slam on the rug like brackets on either side of my thighs. Muscles and ink. A perfect combination. At least on his long, lean body. He presses forward, his face a breath away from mine.

My eyes flash on the slight scratches on his shoulder from where I raked my nails over his back.

“Cadence,” Dutch says, drawing my eyes back to his lips. My mouth throbs, recalling all the ways he bruised it. My lips aren't the only part of me that's aching. I can already tell my scalp will be sore in the morning.

“What?”

“Marry me.”

I hold his stare, my heart thundering like a war drum in my chest. “You're really trying to piss me off, aren't you?”

Dutch's mouth curves into a sharp grin, teeth flashing white against a face thrown in shadows.

"You'll look good in white," he says and then he pushes me back, grabbing my knees and prodding my legs apart.

A surge of adrenaline pounds through my veins. I thought once was enough. I thought the night couldn't get any hotter, but the blaze that roars through me as he turns his attention to my pleasure cannot be doused.

I feel that chaotic need again.

Energy unfurls through me as his eyes gleam with dirty promises.

"I won't stop until the whole damn world acknowledges that you're mine, Cadey."

My head falls back into the rug as Dutch seals his promise with his tongue and then his fingers. Filthy. Bloodthirsty. Obscene. He doesn't care how messy it gets, lapping at me with an abandon that takes over my brain. In a second, I snap over the edge.

My whole life is flashing before my eyes. Bright lights. Stars.

No one has ever made me feel like this.

I dig my fingers into his blond hair, barely catching my breath before he climbs over me again.

"Dutch," I cry, but he grabs my jaw and kisses me. I taste myself. I taste disaster and destruction. And yet I fall deeper. Even though it's foolish. Even though it will definitely wreck me. Even though he was the beast who made every day at Redwood hell.

I'm pulling at him before my better senses can take over. I wrap my legs and then my body around him, his heart beating against mine while we both erupt into flames. All movement, heat and friction. All groans, lips to neck, teeth on shoulders.

And when I think I'm done, when my body pulses and I'm about to roll away and find what pieces of me he hasn't

shattered, he pulls me on top of him. Fingers working. Hips thrusting despite his instruction to take over.

I don't think I'm going to survive the night.

Dutch Cross is trying his best to kill me.

But I don't die.

After the last snap of a crescendo, after the last cry of pleasure screams through the room and echoes into silence, I find myself back on earth. My body is limp. I lie on top of him, rising and falling as his chest balloons with each pant.

My face sinks into the crook of his neck, tasting the sweat, tasting the essence of me. Dutch shifts his head to the side and kisses me like the world is ending. Like it'll never be enough.

And maybe it won't.

Just like there seems to be an everlasting fountain of hate between us, there will always be a persistent and unmistakable desire drenching us both. Drawing us back to each other when nothing about us together makes sense.

Dutch rolls me on my back, dropping whisper-soft kisses against my face and down my sweaty, naked body. His fingers slide between my thighs with unmistakable intent.

My body zings and I arch my back off the rug.

"Dutch," I moan, already hyper-sensitive. "I can't marry you if I'm dead."

He laughs and keeps going. "Is that a yes?"

I realize what I've said, how it sounded, and I blink rapidly. "N-no."

I'm punished for my defiance in a way that sets all the shadows on fire.

"You want to fight, Cadey?" Dutch taunts, looking down at me drenched in sweat and the evidence of my satisfaction.

My eyes glint at him.

He smiles. Cruel king. Depraved ruler. Despicable beast.



Putting his lips to my ear, he warns me, “You’re my girl. My fiancée. My wife. Did you think I would let you walk out of here before convincing you?”

I look up at his menacing face and the music starts in my head again.

Pounding drums. Insistent crescendoes.

The song of a madman.

And I’ve joined in his delirium.

Because it doesn’t hit me until the next morning that, all through the night, we never once used protection.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

DUTCH

I wake up with my arms locked tight around Cadey's waist. Her body's curled into mine. *How is she so freaking beautiful?* Light radiates from her skin. No makeup. Tussled hair. Lips swollen from my rough kisses.

I graze my thumb over her mouth.

Her face is hot to the touch.

She stirs and I remove my hand, glancing out to the treetops beyond the front door. Sunshine is pouring through the skylight, falling on us as we lie tangled in each other's arms.

This is the second time I've fallen asleep cuddling Cadey.

I'm like a domesticated wolf, only willing to snuggle if it's her.

"Mm." Cadey makes a sound in her sleep and nuzzles against my chest. I cradle her closer, resting my forehead against hers and just... breathing.

With her in my arms like this, it feels like all the pieces are snapping into place. The fury inside, the anger, the uncertainty, it's being stripped away with every sweet breath that leaves her lips.

I can handle my father.

Miller.

The future.

A son.

Excitement explodes in my chest.

I pumped her full so many times that there's a real possibility one of them took.

At this moment, our kid could be stirring to life.

A phone buzzes. I glance around, my eyes skipping past our discarded clothes until I locate her purse strewn over one of the hammocks.

It's probably Vi wondering where she is.

Sometime during the night, I allowed Cadence to check on her sister, but it's morning now. I have to let her go, even if I don't want to.

"Cadey, you need to wake up."

"Mm-mm." She protests. Her mouth stretches into a pout. Her brows knot.

She's cute as hell.

I graze my lips over her temple. "Come on. Get dressed. We need to pick up Viola."

"Mff." Her eyelids crack apart.

I press a kiss to her neck. "Cadey."

"I'm up. I'm up," she grumbles.

I know I worked her out last night, but she seems extra tired. How does she manage to wake up so early for work service everyday if she's such a lousy morning person?

Cadey slides to a sitting position. Her hair drapes over her back like a shroud. She grabs my jacket from the edge of the rug and shrugs into it.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

"I need to pee," she mumbles. At first, I think she's angry. But then I see the red flush at the tip of her ears and realize she's just embarrassed.

I grin in satisfaction while she hurries off.

“There are T-shirts and towels in the bathroom, if you want to take a shower,” I yell at her back. We made a mess of the rug. She must be uncomfortable too.

“Yeah,” she grunts.

“If you need me to show you where they are—”

“I can find it myself!” A moment later, I hear the slam of a door and the click of a lock. Cadence rattles the knob, probably to make sure I can’t get in.

I smirk and rise to my feet, stretching my arms over my head. It’s a good thing she ran. I’m hungry for her again and I don’t think I could have resisted if she was still lying beside me.

Another phone buzzes.

It’s mine this time.

Perplexed, I slip into my shirt, boxers and jeans and walk over to the phone. Who’s calling so incessantly? It can’t be my brothers. They expected me to be out all night.

I doubt it’s mom or dad.

I lift my phone and spot the unknown number tracking across the screen.

Miller?

Curious, I put the phone to my ear. “Hello?”

“Is this Dutch Cross?”

The voice is female, husky and unfamiliar.

“Who is this?” I growl. “And how did you get my number?”

I don’t give that information out. In fact, apart from my family, Martina and a handful of industry folks, the only people who have my phone number are Sol, Cadence and Vi.

“My name is Tina Cooper.” She pauses. “I’m Cadence’s mom.”

I freeze, unable to believe my ears.

“Dutch... are you still there?”

“Are you freaking kidding me?” I growl. “Who the hell are you? Who put you up to this?”

“This is not a joke.”

“Cadence’s mom is dead.” Death by suicide according to her files. It happened a few months before Cadence transferred to Redwood.

“I’m very much alive.”

Something clicks in my head. The night Vi ran away, Cadence said their fight ‘had something to do with mom’. Cadence and I found Vi hiding out at their mom’s memorial tree later.

“Why should I believe you?” I growl.

“You gave Cadence a vintage platinum ring, didn’t you? A brilliant diamond solitaire.”

My back snaps to attention. “You’re the one who stole it?”

There’s silence on the other end of the line.

I let out a stunned breath. Last night, during our game of truth or strip, Cadence refused to tell me who pawned the ring. She also kept quiet about her fight with Vi. If this woman is to be believed, the two incidents were caused by the same person.

“Can we meet? I have something important to tell you,” she says. “It’s about Cadence.”

“What about her?” I ask urgently.

“We can’t talk over the phone. I’ll text you a location. Meet me there in thirty minutes.”

The bathroom door clicks open.

I whip around and lock eyes with Cadence just as her mother warns, “And come alone.”

“Wait—”

The line beeps.

She's gone.

Cadence must see something in my face because she stops in her tracks.

"Is something wrong?" she asks carefully, running her fingers around the collar of her T-shirt. I bought three cheesy 'I SPENT THE NIGHT IN A TREEHOUSE' T-shirts for her, Vi and me. The fabric swallows her whole.

"No." I shake my head after a moment of contemplation. "You ready to go?"

She nods.

I climb down the ladder first and she follows. This time, I wrap an arm around her waist and help her down, not even giving her a chance to slip and fall.

As I hold her, I notice the red hickeys and bite marks on her neck and shoulders. I've thoroughly marked Cadence Cooper, and though I haven't taken a look in the mirror, I'm sure there are signs of her all over me too.

Rather than feeling pleased, I feel frustrated.

I thought I'd stripped away everything that stood between us last night, but she was keeping such a big secret from me.

Her mom is alive.

No wonder she broke down that morning when I brought her breakfast. No wonder she screamed that I didn't understand.

"What are you doing? Put me down." Cadence smacks my chest.

I realize I'm just standing here, holding her and I quickly set her on the ground.

We walk to the car and I mull over every encounter we've had since last week.

*Her mom is alive.*

It's insane to think, but the pieces line up so perfectly that it's almost comical. Why didn't she trust me with the truth? Why did she keep such a big secret to herself when I was right there, ready to make it all go away?

And more importantly, what does her mother want to tell me that Cadence can't hear?

\* \* \*

*Jinx: Riding On The Royal Coattails.*

*They say it's not what you know. It's who you know. And gaining the favor of royalty is the fastest way to freedom.*

*Royal networking 101: the powerful can open doors, not just for you, but for all the important people in your life.*

*A lesson New Girl discovered today.*

*Someone working the morning shift at the biggest amusement park in the city sent photos of an unusually smiley Prince Charming and the ladies he was trying to impress.*

*Will this finally be enough to win Cinderella's hand? Or will Prince Charming have to give up more of his heart and up to half of his kingdom?*

*Until the next post, keep your enemies close and your secrets even closer.*

*- Jinx*

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

CADENCE

Dutch is tense and quiet on the drive back to my neighborhood. He doesn't bring up what happened last night at all. I feel the distance, but I don't breach it. A part of me is grateful that he seems to be pulling back. I don't know how I would have handled it if he'd been all over me.

Last night already broke something.

Some boundary.

Some wall.

Some defense between my life and his.

I need to assess the damage and build back what was there before so I don't fall even deeper than I already am. Because what happens when I really give up the fight?

Marriage. Graduation.

And then what?

What does my future look like with Dutch Cross in it?

The thought frightens me.

I can't give up control. I just can't.

Vi gets into the car. She's brimming with questions and smiles until she sees both our faces. Her mouth snaps shut and she melts into the backseat, not saying a word.



“Vi, let’s go,” I mumble when Dutch slows his car in front of my apartment building.

Vi wiggles through the space between the front seats instead. “I told Shanae about the amusement park. She didn’t believe me when I told her you rented the entire place.”

Her innocent words seem to spark him from his daze.

Dutch glances over his shoulder. “We’ll do it again soon. You can bring your friends next time.”

“No way!” Vi’s eyes light up.

I stiffen. “You shouldn’t make promises you can’t keep.”

“Who says I can’t keep it?” Dutch’s eyes take me in, wrecking me, tearing me to shreds without any effort. *I’m already falling for you. I can’t let my sister take the same path.*

The air turns tense.

Vi scrambles out of the car, not sticking around for the aftermath.

I grip the car handle too. The last place I want to be right now is here in this car with him, trapped in the memories of what he did to my body. What I did to his.

Space. It’s the only way I can recover from Dutch Cross.

“Cadey,” he says in that way of his.

I stop.

“I’m not going to let you run this time.”

“I’m not running. I’m going home.”

His amber eyes meet mine and he cracks a smile that doesn’t quite land. “Home. Right.”

I don’t understand that look. I don’t understand the worry creeping into his expression.

“Is something wrong?”

He sidesteps the question. “I’ll send someone with breakfast.” He smirks. “Don’t worry. It won’t be pancakes.”

“I don’t need you to do that.”

“You burned a lot of calories last night.”

“Jerk.”

“I want to.” His voice is smooth and low. “I want nothing more than to take care of you and Vi.”

My heart slams against my ribs.

I turn away from him, crack the door open and hop out.

The car drives off and I stare at it as it rounds the corner. I can't decide if I just won that argument or if I lost tragically.

My phone buzzes.

*Jarod Cross: I'm waiting for an update, Miss Cooper.*

I squeeze my eyes shut and blow out a shaky breath. I'm starting to think that getting involved with these Cross men was my biggest damn mistake.

\* \* \*

## DUTCH

The coffee shop where Tina asks me to meet is in an even worse side of town than Cadey's apartment.

I can see the bullet holes and shattered windows covered with garbage bags and duct tape long before I park in front of the poorly maintained building. Graffiti lines the outside walls and it's hard to believe this is a functioning store.

I stalk forward, pushing the door aside and bending slightly to fit through. I'm surprised when I step into a fully functioning dive bar. There are skull decorations. Mismatched sconce lights, probably won from a garage sale or fished out of a dump. People with shifty eyes, tattoos and motorcycle leather.

I'm clearly younger than them, but no one bats an eye when I stalk past the tables. Guess my tattoos and jacket help me blend right in.

I search the room, my eyes settling on the one and only woman who reminds me of Cadence. She's sitting all the way at the back with dark hair past her shoulders, a tank top and jeans.

The family resemblance is unmistakable.

She smiles when I sit across from her. Up close, the makeup starts to crack and the lines etched into her skin are clearer. She's probably around mom's age, but something about the way she carries herself makes her look much older. Or maybe it's that she seems more weary. Traumatized.

She reaches out to me and covers my hand. Her smile gets wider. "Dutch."

"Mrs. Cooper."

"Call me Tina. Please." She laughs. It's a hoarse, cackling sound.

I glance down and spot the needle marks on her skin. I've seen those marks before. You don't lift the curtain behind fame as many times as I do without spotting people like her. The people who use coke, liquor, whatever drug they can find to numb the pain.

*No wonder you find it so hard to trust, Cadey.*

I keep my expression blank. "You said this was about Cadence."

"It is." Tina folds her arms over her chest and studies me.

I frown.

Finally, she speaks. "I don't get it. What would make a boy like you put a ring on her finger?"

My shoulders stiffen.

"She's not that pretty." Tina shrugs and reaches for a cigarette on the table. "She's unbelievably uptight. And I'm sure it took a long time before she put out, if I know my daughter."

"Get to your point." My voice is a harsh clip. She's insulting Cadence to my face and the only reason I'm not

acting on my fury is because she's Cadence's mother.

One corner of her lips curl up. "You should be careful about that, boy. When you love someone that much, when you're obvious about it, people can use it to hurt you."

I slide my eyes over her, unimpressed. "I thought people who came from the dead would have better advice."

She laughs again, but this time her eyes are sharp.

I plant both hands on the table, ready to get up and leave. This woman stole Cadey's ring. She made Cadey cry.

I don't need to entertain someone who has a clear disdain for the woman who belongs to me.

"Might want to sit down."

"Why should I?"

"I've got evidence on your daddy," she says.

I freeze, already halfway out of my seat. My head turns back to take her in.

"Jarod Cross has been dabbling in the good ole drug trade."

Eyes aflame, I stare at Tina. "What are you talking about?"

"You want to know what would make a woman die when she's alive and healthy? Seeing things she has no business seeing."

"Dad is dealing?" I lean forward.

Smoke billows from her thin lips. "I saw Jarod Cross playing one night, before he blew up. Damn near made my knees weak the moment he opened his mouth. I swore I'd have his babies." She laughs again and looks at me with a hint of regret. "Turns out some other woman had his babies instead."

She's talking in circles, but I don't have the time or the patience.

"What did you see?" I growl.

Unfortunately, my threats don't scare her. She's confident. Unperturbed. She knows I wouldn't hurt her because I won't

hurt anyone associated with Cadey.

It makes her cocky.

Tina chugs on her cigarette again. “Maybe that’s why I’m angry.” Her eyes climb to the ceiling. “I couldn’t get Jarod Cross, but my daughter is screwing his son. That’s irony if I’ve ever heard it. My daughter...” Her eyes burn into mine, “becoming a *whore* for the Cross boys.”

I slam my hand on the table, my placid expression twisted into a threatening one.

“I don’t care if you’re her mother. Don’t you *ever* talk about her like that. You hear me? I will freaking end you and it won’t be difficult.” I grip the edges of the table and lean over. “Because all it takes is one call, one picture of you going about your business, and plenty of people will have questions.” My eyes narrow. “And I’m not talking about the cops.”

She flicks her gaze over me, her eyebrows tightening. From the tremble of her lips, I can tell the threat landed where it was supposed to.

“She got it from you,” Tina whispers as if she just stumbled on a secret.

I glare at her.

“You’re Cadey’s backbone.” She smirks again and crushes the butt of her cigarette into the ash tray near her left hand. “Forty-Sixth and third, Hamshire Street. Eleven o’clock.”

I stand straight, not batting an eye.

“The evidence against your father. You’ll find it there.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

### CADENCE

There's a knock on the door and breakfast arrives in the hands of a familiar face.

“Martina!” I blink in shock.

“Señorita.” Martina hustles inside, carrying heavy bags.

“Let me help you.” I grab one of the canvas bags from her and set it on the table.

Vi pokes her head out of her bedroom, sees our guest and hustles out. “Who's this?”

“This is... uh... Dutch's—”

“Maid.” Martina grins broadly and takes out containers of food on our tiny, linoleum-lined counter. “Although Finn always scolds me for saying that. Apparently, such a word is ‘problematic’. It is hard to keep up with what is problematic these days. Just call me Martina.”

Viola blinks.

So do I.

“Dutch said you need your vitamins, foods strong in protein and calcium.” Martina gestures to the spread. Confidently, she opens our cupboards, finds the spoon and fork drawer, and takes out cutlery. “So I made you eggs with cheese, salmon...”

Vi's eyes meet mine. Her eyebrows touch her hairline as she mouths, "*Salmon?*"

"... and peanut butter French toast. Turkey bacon. It's much healthier for you." She points to another bowl filled with freshly sliced strawberries, kiwi, berries, papaya and mango. "Eat the fruits first. It is better for digestion." She wipes her palms against her skirt. "Oh, what am I forgetting?"

"There's more?" Vi chokes.

"Juice! Yes." She uncaps a tall, stainless steel mug. The brand on the side makes my eyes water. This is a designer tumbler. Same as any other tumbler... except it goes for two hundred and fifty bucks.

I blink rapidly. "Martina, I'm so sorry."

"Sorry for what?"

"Bothering you. I'll ask Dutch not to do things like this again."

"No, bother. No bother, señorita. I'm okay."

"But—"

"Dutch, he is good boy. He never like a girl this much. I'm happy he's smiling and worrying about you. It makes this heart very full." She clutches her chest.

I cough. "I think you're mistaken. Dutch and I aren't together."

"Of course." Her smile freezes on her face. She stares at me like I'm talking another language. "Of course. The kids, they don't date anymore, *noh?* It's not cool to admit you love someone. Yes, yes. I understand."

No, I don't think she does. "We're really not together."

Martina grabs her purse and hurries toward the door. "You do not have to worry about washing the plates. Pack them back in the bag and set it outside your door. Someone will come to pick it up."

"Wait." I don't know why I'm so desperate to convince her, but I find myself stalking her to the living room. "Did

Dutch say we were together?”

“No, no, no.” She gives me a nervous smile.

I force myself to change gears. “Martina, before you go, there’s something I wanted to ask you.”

“What is it, señorita?”

“I heard you were at Redwood Prep the morning of the fire.”

At once, her face turns pale. She bats away a lock of her wavy hair. “I... need to go.”

“Go? All of a sudden?” I follow her to the door.

Martina quickens her steps like I’m a scary psychopath with a hacksaw. “Enjoy!”

It’s the last thing she says before she slips out of the apartment and slams the door shut. I stand in the silence, my mind churning.

According to Miss Jamieson, Martina was the one leaving The Kings’ practice room. Why did she look so guilty when I asked just now?

Was it because she played a part in setting the fire...

Or was she covering for the person who did?

“Oh my go—*Cadence!*”

I whirl around, alarmed, only to find my sister flopping back in the chair, her mouth full of food and her eyes bright.

“Can we have salmon every morning?”

“We can barely afford cereal and you’re talking about salmon.” I stomp to the kitchen-slash-dining room area.

My stomach growls. I haven’t eaten anything since dinner yesterday.

After grabbing a fork, I join my sister around the table and find myself—in the space of twelve hours—moaning because of Dutch Cross.

Again.



“Why is this so good?” I whimper as the fish melts in my mouth.

“I thought the cafeteria food at Redwood was amazing,” Vi admits.

I meet her eyes and nod. Ever since Dutch upgraded my meal card, I’ve been eating half of my meals, secretly shoving the rest into doggy bags and bringing food home for my sister to enjoy.

“But *this*,” Vi wipes away a tear, “this is heaven.”

“Don’t get used to it.”

She sticks out her tongue.

I keep eating, but the food turns to ash when I think about Jarod’s text.

He demanded evidence. What evidence? How can I bring evidence of something Dutch *isn’t* doing.

A sigh tears past my lips. I don’t think Dutch is the person Jarod believes he is, but I seriously doubt he’ll accept the excuse of ‘*after playing a game of truth or strip, I verified your son is not a drug dealer*’.

Does it matter what I bring him? I’m not that interested in being Jarod’s spy anyway. I’m only doing all this to sniff out his secrets for Jinx.

Viola starts laughing across the table.

I glance up at her. “What’s so funny?”

“It’s so weird. Martina said she made food ‘high in vitamins, protein and calcium.’”

“Yeah, so?” I spear a strawberry with my fork.

“We’re learning about reproduction in biology right now,” she says, her mouth full. Using her fork, she points to the food. “Fish, turkey, eggs, beans, oatmeal...”

“What about it?”

“They’re all foods that help with a baby’s brain and heart development.”

“A baby?” Shock traces like lightning strikes against my skin.

“This breakfast would be perfect if you were pregnant.”

My fork drops out of my hand and clatters to the plate.

Vi frowns. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I murmur.

But a sick, twisted fear rises to life in my stomach. I made a mistake by not using protection last night but, as my eyes sweep over the feast Martina brought, I wonder if all I did in that treehouse was play right into the monster’s hands.

\* \* \*

*Jinx: Don’t bother calling this number, New Girl. No voices. Text only.*

*Cadence: I’m going to end this. Tomorrow. You better be more specific about the dirt you want on Jarod Cross because after tomorrow, I won’t have anything to do with either of you.*

*Jinx: I’ll send you something to leave in his office.*

*Cadence: How will you send it to me?*

*Jinx: It’s a secret.*

## CHAPTER THIRTY

### CADENCE

The bike Jarod Cross gave me purrs between my legs. With my helmet and leather jacket, I blend into the night, sweeping past street lamps like a shadow.

I didn't think I'd have use for this machine. Though I assured Lucien that I learned how to ride for my brief stint as an errand girl at a tech company, it's been a long time since I rode a motorcycle. I was nervous to get on a machine this powerful.

But tonight, I have a reason to conquer my fears and tear through the streets, my sights on Dutch Cross's truck.

I've decided to follow him until I get answers.

Not because of Jinx.

Not because of Jarod Cross.

Because I want to know what kind of a maniac I'm dealing with.

*'This food is for pregnant women'.*

When Viola pointed that out, my mind shattered. Maybe in the past, I would have brushed everything off to coincidence, but I'm not the same, naive girl who skipped into Redwood Prep assuming people would leave me alone if I minded my own business.

Dutch and his brothers did their part to rip the scales from my eyes.

This world is a ruthless, twisted place brimming with injustice. Lies abound, and if I fell for yet another one of Dutch's lies...

*'I don't have protection.'*

"Idiot," I growl behind my helmet. The motorcycle engine makes a guttural sound, responding to my anger.

Was that just an excuse?

I'm not pushing off responsibility to him. I own most of the blame, since I'll have to bear most of the consequences.

Teenage pregnancies are as common as the flu in my neighborhood. I know exactly what happens when girls don't protect themselves, but I was stupid. I got caught up in the heat of the moment and couldn't even *imagine* pressing pause.

But why the hell did Dutch send me breakfast the next morning as if I'm pregnant? As if he *wants* me to be pregnant.

It reeks of an ulterior motive.

One that sets my teeth on edge.

There's a difference between us both being so ravenous for each other that we weren't thinking straight and him intentionally setting me up just to control me...

Motivations matter.

The *truth* matters.

My heart hammers.

I need to know.

Who the hell is the real Dutch Cross?

His indicator flicks left, moving into an area I know scary well. My breath catches in my throat. I keep following and I see where he's going before he pulls to a stop.

I turn my bike lights off and take cover behind a large dumpster. Shoving up my face shield so I can see clearer, I

squint my eyes at the three boys who climb out of Dutch's truck.

What are The Kings doing at Sinner's Den?

My breath thickens as I fight back memories. The darkness. The writhing bodies. The thin, needle-marked hands reaching for me as I played piano, like ghosts trying to drag me to hell.

My throat closes up and I feel the first stages of a panic attack rolling through me.

Dutch suddenly glances behind him as if he smells my fear. I force my head down, ducking out of sight. I made sure to keep a proper distance from his car to throw off suspicion, but I'm still nervous.

*He can't see you, Cadence.*

I peer up and let out a breath of relief when I see his attention is on his brothers.

Scrambling for my purse, I lift my cell phone and start recording. At first, the boys are steeped in darkness and it's hard to make out what they're doing, even if I zoom in.

Eventually, they step under a lamppost. Zane and Finn keep glancing over their shoulders, looking guilty and suspicious. I do a close-up of Dutch's face. Sharp jawline. Straight nose. Lips that are harsh slashes across his face. I remember when those lips went soft. Lax. Parted as he moaned for me.

Was it just twenty-four hours ago? It feels like a lifetime.

The door opens and a man wearing a hoodie walks out. I don't recognize him, but Dutch seems to have been expecting him because he nods at the guy.

My hand is shaking hard. The camera tilts out of focus. I adjust the angle and take steadying breaths as my gaze shifts between what's showing on the screen and what's happening in real life.

Dutch moves close to the guy. It's hard to see what they're exchanging, but something is definitely moving hands. The

guy pockets a stack of money and Dutch stuffs a clear plastic bag into his jacket pocket.

Everyone disperses quickly. Like roaches.

The Kings hurry away, climbing into their vehicle and tearing out of the lot. The guy in the hoodie slips back into the den.

I end the video and rise slowly, my heart in my throat.

There it is.

The evidence I didn't want.

Dutch is even more of a monster than I thought he was.

But what does it make me if I opened myself up to carrying the monster's baby?

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

CADENCE

I'm vigilant when I walk into school the next morning. I don't know what I'll do, what I'll say, if I see Dutch again.

All I know is that I'm brimming with violence.

I need to curb that.

Be smart.

Though I've spent all night clawing at his face and beating him to a pulp in my dreams, the reality is... he's much bigger than me. I doubt I'll be able to get one punch in.

Revenge will be mine.

I'll hurt him in other ways. Deeper ways.

It's just about biding my time.

The sunshine is bright, but I feel like I'm dragging a dark cloud behind me. Conversations stop when I set foot in the hallway. Whispers crash to a lull and then silence.

Everyone is staring at me.

I touch my face self-consciously. Panic sets in, digging its claws into my shoulder. Did Jinx feature us again? Was it a post about that night in the treehouse?

Do they know all the depraved things Dutch did to me on that fluffy, harmless rug? Do they know where his tongue was, where his fingers were, what he said to me when he did those

things? Do they know how I shuddered and whimpered and begged him for mercy and then for more?

My heart hammers behind my ribs.

Exposed, I duck my head and hurry to my locker.

Once I open it, my phone buzzes.

*Jinx: Check your green pencil case.*

My eyes widen.

I lift my head and whip around. Is Jinx here in the hallway now. Is she watching me?

Uneasy, I reach into my locker, unzip the pencil case and find a small, black pin nestled between my pens, pencils and erasers.

My fingers dig into the metal door. How did Jinx get into my locker?

“Hey, Cadence.”

“Ah!” I yelp and slam the locker shut.

Sol gives me a weird look. “You okay?”

“Yeah. Great.” I release a slow breath. “What are you doing here?”

“I wanted to see you.”

“Okay.” I chuckle at his intensely concentrated face. “You’re seeing me.”

He just keeps looking at me with this tortured expression.

I hear more whispers as the hallway becomes crowded. Class will start soon.

“Do you know why everyone is staring more than usual?” I ask Sol.

He lifts his shoulder in a shrug, his lips tight. “Jinx wrote a post about you and Dutch.”

I jerk forward. “What did it say?”



“I don’t know. Something about him shutting down an amusement park for you.” He runs a hand through his hair, looking agitated. “I try not to read those things.”

The reminder of the amusement park makes me cringe. Dutch knew I would be soft on him after he made Vi’s day. He intentionally used my sister to get me to open up to him.

Sol presses forward. “Cadence.”

“What?” My voice is irritated.

“There’s something I’ve been meaning to say.”

I blink, waiting.

“I don’t feel right keeping the truth from you and—”

My phone buzzes again.

It’s not Jinx this time.

It’s Jarod Cross.

I stiffen. “Just a minute, Sol.”

He bites down on his bottom lip, a shadow crossing through his brown eyes.

I step away from him and lower my voice. “Hello?”

“You found something?” The rockstar’s smooth voice fills my ears.

“You were right. About that *thing*. I have evidence.”

His chuckle sounds pleased. “I knew you wouldn’t let me down, Cadence. I’ll send Lucien to pick it up.”

“No,” I blurt. Slipping my left hand into my pocket, I finger the device Jinx gave me. “I’d rather come to you.”

“Don’t you have school?”

“I can miss first period.” The teachers aren’t going to penalize me for skipping class anymore. Everyone knows that touching me means touching Dutch and no one in Redwood Prep is foolish enough to try that.

I resented Dutch for his cruel presence overshadowing me everywhere I go, but it does come in handy now.

“Meet me at my private studio in an hour.”

I hang up and whirl around to face Sol. “I have to go.”

“I’ll come with you.”

“It’s kind of private.” I ease back. “But I promise, I’ll set time aside for you when I get back, okay?”

Sol’s fractured expression is the last thing I see before I skate outside.

I didn’t bring the motorcycle—a short, Redwood skirt isn’t exactly conducive to riding that machine—so I have to catch the bus.

I’m edging on being late for my meeting with Jarod Cross, but I crash through the doors just in time.

The recording studio is brightly lit and filled with sound dampening panels. The mixer board outside looks like it costs several million. I’m nervous to even breathe in the direction of the sensitive buttons and levers.

“Miss Cooper.” Jarod Cross leaves his guitar on the stand, opens the door of the recording booth and joins me outside.

“Can we talk?” I glance at the sound engineer and the band members behind the glass. “In private?”

“Sure. Come this way.” Jarod Cross leads me down a dimly-lit hallway. Posters of him cram the length of both walls. Him at various music awards. Him meeting presidents and royalty. Him on the covers of famous magazines.

I live life so far in the dirt and the darkness that it’s difficult to see so much gold. This hallway is a brilliant reminder that Jarod Cross is no mere human. He’s as close to supernatural as a mere mortal can get.

“In here,” Jarod says, holding the door open.

“Is this your office?” I glance around the richly decorated room. There are so many trophies in here, it looks like I’m staring directly at the sunshine.

“Yes, I conduct important business in here.” He gives me a pointed look as if I should be honored to have the privilege of

standing on the hardwood flooring. “Whenever I’m in the city, I spend more time in this room than at home.”

I drop my fingers into my skirt pocket and roll the small device around. Right now, I’m a pawn on three different chess boards—Jarod Cross, Dutch and Jinx.

But I’m nobody’s puppet.

I can choose which strings I want to keep and which I want to cut off. I use them, just as they use me.

Jarod Cross extends a hand. “Let me see it.”

“See what?” My heart jumps to my throat and I grip Jinx’s device protectively.

“The evidence.” He arches both eyebrows.

“Oh.” I unzip my purse, dig inside and pull out the flash drive. I saved the video on the memory stick last night.

Jarod Cross accepts the device from me and sets it on the table. “Good work.”

“Aren’t you going to check it?”

His eyes dart to the side. An imperceptible move, but one I notice.

“Yes,” he says. I guess I should check it.”

Something about his word choice nags at me. Why doesn’t he seem that concerned about his son dealing? Didn’t he hire me because he was concerned? Shouldn’t he be more frantic? More upset? Just... more?

Right now, he seems calm.

Too calm.

As if everything I’m doing, all the ways I’m acting were anticipated.

*Don’t overthink it, Cadence. Just find a spot for the device and move on.*

“You have a lot of books,” I murmur, sliding across the room as Jarod settles behind his desk.

“Purely for decoration.” He waves a hand, staring distractedly at the computer. “I’ve never cracked one open a day in my life.”

*Bingo.*

I slide my nail against the spines, finally stopping on a shelf closest to Jarod’s desk, but out of his line of sight. Turning my head slightly, I note that he’s focused on the computer.

Sweat dots my upper lip and my hands shake when I take out Jinx’s device.

*I’m too anxious to be a spy.*

My heart in my throat, I slip the device on the shelf and hide it beneath a book.

Suddenly, the door bursts open.

I straighten and spin around with a guilty look.

Lucien slides his shadowy eyes over me.

My heart bangs against my chest, but I force myself to remain calm. Tilting my chin up, I let my eyes slide past him to Jarod.

“I told you to always knock,” Jarod snarls.

A dark look passes through Lucien’s gaze. He frowns. “Your meeting with the TV interviewer is in fifteen minutes. We need to move.”

“Oh, right. I forgot.”

Lucien remains in the doorway.

Jarod shoos him with a gesture. “I need a moment with Miss Cooper.”

Lucien’s eyes slice through me. He scowls and closes the door.

“Ignore him. He’s more friendly than he looks.”

*Yeah, I doubt that.*

What's important is that Jarod Cross didn't notice me planting a bug in his room. I can only hope like crazy that there aren't any security cameras in here and, if there are, that no one is watching. Especially not Lucien.

That guy gives me the creeps and I don't know what he'll do to me if he finds out I betrayed his boss.

"Thank you for helping me prove Dutch's true colors," Jarod Cross says, his voice thick with almost... parental concern. "Now that you've seen who he really is, what do you think of him?"

I find the question strange. Why does a rockstar care what I think about his son?

The answer is easy.

I want Dutch Cross to burn in hell.

But I'm not sharing that sentiment with his father.

Instead, I lift my chin. "I have never and will never care about Dutch. Isn't that why you trusted me with this?"

Laughter pours from Jarod Cross's mouth. He sounds smug. Satisfied.

"Just keep your end of the bargain. Get my friend back to school and we can call this deal done."

"Yes, I think we can," he says, his eyes scouring my face.

I jut my chin down and turn to leave.

"Now that your eyes are open, I hope they stay that way," Jarod Cross says to my back.

I whirl around.

"Dutch can be convincing, but never forget who you're dealing with. He's not to be trusted."

I stare at the rockstar, taking note of his intense eyes. There's a nagging feeling in my gut. A muted suspicion that's screaming at me.

*What am I missing here?* I feel like I'm swimming in a current that's smooth on the surface but full of whirlpools

beneath.

“Be careful or you’ll get hurt, Miss Cooper,” Jarod Cross murmurs.

And I can’t help thinking he’s warning me about himself as well as his son.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

DUTCH

“She’s not here,” Finn says, meeting my eyes. He’s lounging against Cadence’s locker, eyes frozen on his book.

“She doesn’t skip class,” I growl. My heart is beating fast and I feel like I’m getting torn up inside. “Do you think dad —”

“Would hurt her? No.” Zane shakes his head.

“He knows that would start a war,” Finn assures me.

“She’s not answering her phone.” I curl my hands into fists and smash the locker beside hers. “Why the hell isn’t she answering? What if she got kidnapped?”

“Vi got through to her. Her phone’s working. She’s fine,” Zane says.

“But her mom—”

Finn cuts me off. “Is a drug addict who can’t keep her story straight.”

“We don’t even know if her mom was right about dad. That cell phone with the ‘evidence’ on it was a total bust.” Zane scowls.

I punch the locker again, still angry about that.

Tina sent me on a wild goose chase. I’m glad I brought my brothers as backup, but I felt like an idiot traipsing into that

side of town for a dud cell phone.

The musical bells chime.

First period is over.

The hallway fills with students and I spot Sol walking purposefully toward Cadey's locker. He stops short when he sees the three of us prowling the same area. His twitch of disappointment sets me on edge.

Sol has been acting strange ever since the fire. When he broke down in the practice room after, I told myself that he was dealing with a lot. I stopped plowing through his business and gave him some space.

But now, he's been distancing himself from us.

And I have a feeling he hasn't been going to his therapy sessions.

Finn slaps Zane on the chest and juts his chin at Sol.

My twin straightens. A smile spreads over his face. "Stranger."

"Are you guys waiting for Cadence too?"

*Too?* I bristle. "What business do you have with Cadence?"

Finn eyes me hard. "Calm down, Dutch."

I seethe, but I keep my mouth shut.

Zane speaks up. "We're looking for her. She skipped first period."

"I saw her this morning. She said she had something to do, but she'll be back."

"You spoke to her?" I step forward threateningly.

Sol tips his chin up, fingers already curled into fists and preparing to throw a punch.

Maybe I *will* duke it out with him in the hallway.

I'm a jealous, possessive bastard, and I keep picking up vibes between Sol and my future wife. I hope I'm wrong. But



if I'm not, a lifetime of brotherhood with Sol is about to get trampled.

I don't share.

I'd bury my opponents where nobody can find their bodies before I think of sharing her with anyone.

The tension snaps between me and Sol until it's thick enough to draw the eyes of the kids passing by.

Zane chuckles nervously. "Take it outside if you want to fight. Don't be free entertainment."

"No one's fighting." Finn snaps his book shut and slides it under his armpit. His eyes narrowing to slits, he places a hand on my shoulder and whispers in my ear. "Dutch, get yourself together. No one here is your enemy."

I stare at Sol, and he stares right back, an edge to his scowl that makes me wonder if I'm looking at the same guy who spent almost every summer with us. There's something different, something twisted about his gaze that plays at amusement. Like he couldn't give a damn about it all. Like the Joker who wants to spread havoc for the hell of it.

"Dude, she's here." Zane jerks me around and points.

Cadence strolls through the front door, looking like hell and vengeance. Her hair dangles over her shoulders. Her skirt flits around her upper thighs. Brown eyes slam into me before she drags her gaze away and it lands on Sol.

Her expression clears and she smiles for him.

Freaking shows teeth for him.

"Hey, Sol," Cadence says, passing me without a word and snubbing me *hard*. "Sorry I had to run out earlier."

"No problem," Sol says. He's soft with her. Too soft. The fists he was holding at his sides relax.

A tan-colored hand slams on my shoulder.

A pale hand descends on my other shoulder.

My brothers are holding me back.

Cadey continues to pretend that I'm not there. "Do you want to talk now? We can head somewhere private since my locker's being blocked by a garbage can." Her eyes flick over me, sharp and burning with anger.

My stomach churns and I grit my teeth. What the hell is wrong with her? She wasn't angry when I took her home yesterday. Embarrassed, maybe. A little shocked at all the ways I made her see stars, sure.

But she wasn't pissed off.

I step forward only to be jerked back by both of my brothers.

"Yeah," Sol says, his eyes sliding over me. I can see him hiding his smirk. *The bastard*. "Yeah, let's talk."

"Cadence," I growl.

"We didn't get a pop quiz during algebra, did we?" Cadence says, walking beside Sol.

"No."

"Good. I was worried I might have missed something important."

"I'll share my notes with you," Sol offers.

I feel my anger hitting the roof and there's no holding me back. I wrench my shoulders, shaking my brothers off me.

My footsteps are heavy and dangerous.

My nostrils flare like a bull.

I head toward the exasperating, whip-lash inducing, pain in the butt who happens to be the queen I would die for.

Cadence senses my violent stride because she stops and turns instinctively. Her eyes widen, but that's the only reaction she can make before I scoop her up and over my shoulder.

"Dutch!" Cadence shrieks.

Everyone turns to look.

Cadence kicks and punches my back. She even tries that maneuver she did outside of Paris's party that time. But I'm

ready for her. My arms are steel bands over her hip and I don't let her go.

My eyes spear Sol.

He's mashing his lips together, face creased in frustration.

I don't say anything.

I don't have to.

My eyes whisper one thing: *she's mine*.

If he wants to lose everything, he can challenge me on that.

"Stop being a freaking caveman and put me down!"  
Cadence yells at my lower back.

Once I'm certain Sol's gotten my message, I stalk down the hallway. The corridors are crowded. People slide out of the way when we pass, but it's not enough. There are too many eyes. Too many people watching us for me to feel comfortable hashing this out in a stairwell or the practice room.

I need more privacy.

So I take her out to the parking lot.

"Dutch!" Cadey shrieks. "This is kidnapping, you know!"

I don't answer.

"I have class!"

I dip one hand into my pocket, press the alarm on my car and shove her into the backseat. She lands with a thud. I pause long enough to make sure she didn't hurt her head and then I climb into the front seat and back out of the lot like a patient escaping an asylum.

Everything that happened this weekend—meeting Tina, getting her questionable intel on dad, losing a huge chunk of cash for a dud cell phone—it's all a mystery that's begging to be solved. I hate when people toy with me and Tina's sudden reappearance rings too many bells.

I'm going to get my answers.

But the most important answer is currently scowling at me in the backseat of my truck.

I'm not going anywhere until I find out why the hell Cadence freaking Cooper has it out for me. Again.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

CADENCE

Dutch slows the car in a grassy lot overlooking the city and the violent surge that takes over my entire being makes it hard to breathe. How does a human kill a monster? Poison? Silver-tipped arrow? Holy water?

“Come to the front, Cadey.” There’s an edge of danger in his voice that says I might not like what happens if I don’t comply.

“If I call the cops, it’s over for you.”

Dutch keeps his attention straight forward, his mouth a cruel slash across his face.

“Call them. Go ahead.”

“Is that a threat?” I bristle.

“No, Cadey.” His jaw clenches. I can see the vein popping on his temple as if he’s trying to restrain himself and failing. “Out of everyone in this world, you’re the only one who can destroy me and I wouldn’t retaliate. Send me to jail if you want. But we’re talking first.”

My brows go up. “You’re such a good liar. Consider acting, Dutch. You’d win awards.”

His shoulders tense.

Silence reigns in the car.

I glare at the back of his head. Full blond hair. Muscles taut against his Redwood Prep sweater. White and gold. Preppy. Except the guy who's wearing it looks far too dangerous to pull 'preppy' off.

"Come. To. The. Front," he growls. "Or would you rather I go back there instead?"

At the threat, my brows go up.

"I get options?" My voice is thick with mockery. "Aren't you going to just grab me by the hair and drag me over like your own personal plush toy? Why stop there? Why not order me to take my clothes off so you can have another round of unprotected—"

"Is that what you want?" His jaw ticks, and he looks at me like I'm the most unhinged person he's ever come across. "Do you *want* me to drag you over my lap and screw you against the steering wheel instead of talking this out, Cadey?" He barks, his eyes two burning flames. "Because I can do that, but you're not going to enjoy it."

*How does he know I won't enjoy it?*

My face flushes. When I close my eyes, I can feel the rough press of his body on mine, the brief pain and then the intense pleasure of him filling me up.

I hate myself for the thought.

Or maybe I just plain hate myself.

I know how dangerous Dutch is. I know he's only using me. Just like Jinx. Just like Jarod Cross.

I'm their plaything.

I have been since I set foot in Redwood Prep.

But it doesn't matter.

I'll take from them. I'll take just as much as they took from me.

"Why are you so damn *stubborn*?" The last word snaps in my face like a taut rubber band. "You know what most couples

do when they have a misunderstanding, Cadey? They use words. They hash it out. And then they move on.”

“We are *not* a couple.”

“Then what the hell are we?”

“I don’t know, Dutch? You tell me! You’re obviously the one in charge here.” My hands are trembling so hard, I have to stuff them beneath my skirt and sit on them.

Dutch grits his teeth, more veins protruding in his neck. He wrenches his door open and pops out of the car.

At first, I think he’s going to stalk off and cool his head, but then I see him approaching the back door. I quickly slam the lock.

He pulls on the handles and arches a brow when he’s denied access.

I tilt my head to the side, smug.

Without any shift in his expression, Dutch digs his fingers into his pocket and uses the alarm to open the car.

I shriek when he yanks me out and pulls me around the car, and then he’s grabbing my waist and pushing me on the hood. My hands slide around his neck.

“What are you doing?” I scream, wrapping my legs around him to keep from getting burned. Most cars get extremely hot under the hood. Is he trying to melt my skin off?

But when Dutch drops me on top of his car, it’s not that hot.

“This is an electric,” Dutch says. Calm as a freaking bug. “You think I’d do anything that would hurt you, Cadey?”

“You can’t hurt me, Dutch. Not anymore. Not when I know the real you.”

His eyes narrow. He studies me with that hot, penetrating gaze. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m not discussing this with you.” I unwind my legs from his waist and move to hop off the car. Dutch slams his hands

on either side of my thighs, caging me in.

Leaning forward, he grinds out, “You’re not going anywhere until you tell me what the hell you’re thinking.”

I scowl at him.

He looks right at me with those amber eyes of his, wraps his fingers around my ankles and jerks. I careen back, my elbows digging into metal as he drags me to the edge of the hood. With a snap of his wrists, he locks one of my legs around him.

My breath comes in sharp, hot spurts.

“What are you doing?” I squirm. The movement only causes more friction. “I thought you just wanted to talk?”

“We can talk like this.” With both of my legs secured around him, Dutch leans forward again. He gives me a pointed look that says *you better give me what I want*.

Fine. He wants to play games?

“Where were you at eleven last night?” I snap.

His eyes widen imperceptibly. It’s only a brief shock before his expression returns to its default setting. He doesn’t answer immediately, but I can hear the wheels turning in his head.

As the silence builds, so does my anger.

I fall into the fury all over again.

“I let you around my sister,” I hiss, my breathing erratic with anger at the mere mention of Viola. “I trusted you against my better judgement. And you were selling drugs, you sick piece of—”

“Your mother called me yesterday.” He’s watching me. Every flicker of my eyes. Every change of my expression.

“M-my mother is dead.”

“We both know that’s not true, Cadey.” He tilts his head slightly, looking down at me with that cold, calculating expression.



I suddenly find it hard to breathe.

“She asked to meet me alone, so I went. She said she had dirt on my father and gave me the address to find it. We met some guy who gave us a package, but it turned out to be useless.”

“I don’t believe you.” My voice is weak. I’m grasping at straws.

Dutch fishes out his cell phone and plays back a recording.

I pale when I hear my mother’s voice. “*Forty-Sixth and third, Hamshire Street. Eleven o’clock.*”

“If that’s not enough, I’m willing to take a drug test to prove that I’m clean. I meant it when I said I never touch the stuff. And I never will.”

My eyes widen.

He stares down at me, contemplative. “I thought I saw a motorcycle tailing us that night. Where did you get the bike? How did you know where we were going to be?”

I open my mouth and then close it.

Dutch leans in, his lips hovering close to mine. “Is this why you’ve been meeting my dad after class? Did he ask you to spy on us?”

“N-no.” I push at him, feeling too exposed.

I was so sure I was right.

So sure he was the villain he’s always presented himself to be.

But when there are villains everywhere you turn, no one can be trusted.

Dutch refuses to let me run. He bends all the way down, flattening my back against the car. His eyes are hot enough to brand my face. I clench my teeth, trying hard to fight the blazing connection between us.

“Don’t lie to me, Cadey.” Dutch nips at my jaw, his mouth grazing my cheek to my ear. “I’ll believe you.”

His weight on top of me snaps the bonds of my restraint and sends up flashes of desire in the caverns of my body. I feel like I'm suffering whiplash. Back and forth. Hate and misunderstandings.

But the only thing that's remained consistent... is this blazing pull between us.

A tug of cosmic proportions.

An antidote to the numbness.

My hand slides up Dutch's abs, feeling taut muscle under the fabric of his uniform. How fair is this to him? To answer his question about secrets and trust with lust and desire?

I don't know.

I don't know anything anymore.

Dutch's eyes drop to where my hands are caressing him. Storm clouds slip into his amber eyes.

I grind my hips against his jeans.

He groans.

Yes. Perfect.

I'm reeling from my mother's duplicity and unwilling to face what this means going forward. I need a distraction from the chaos. A way to sidestep all the painful, harmful truths that I can't handle yet.

I reach for his face, bringing it toward mine.

"No," he says sternly.

I jerk to a stop at the rejection.

"Are there any more secrets, Cadey? Anything else I should know about?" He grits his teeth. Hands on either side of me. Knuckles turning white. "Tell me now."

Secrets?

Like the fact that I'm working with Jinx?

Like the fact that his dad has 'evidence' of him dealing drugs because of me?

“What about you?” I deflect.

His eyebrow jumps.

I clutch the back of his neck tightly. My thoughts return to the night in the treehouse. The food delivery the next morning. The fact that he hasn't brought up any concerns about us skipping protection.

“Is there anything you're hiding from me?”

“Yes.”

My heart ricochets. I can't hide my surprise.

“But it's not my secret to share.”

I stare at him in confusion.

With a stern frown, Dutch cups my chin with his fingers and lifts my face. “Is that all you have to say?”

I narrow my eyes at him.

He waits a bit. And then he shakes his head. “One day, you're going to be honest with me, Cadence Cooper.”

“Why should I?”

He closes the distance between us and kisses me. His tongue practically burns as it slides between my lips, making room for all the lashing, uncontrollable emotions he sparks to life.

Fire races through my belly, making my sore insides demand more. Demand everything.

Dutch eases back just enough to whisper over my lips, “Because you and me, we're—”

“Damaged?”

His fingers trace my lips. “Inevitable.”

Heat cascades over me, obliterating the crumbs of self-control that lingered.

I arch my back on the slippery surface of the car hood and bring his head down for an explosive kiss that rocks the soul

out of us both, falling so deeply into him that I don't hear the phone ringing in the backseat...

\* \* \*

*Jinx: As promised, New Girl. A secret for a secret. Attached is a video of the real culprit setting the fire. Surprised? The cat's out of the bag and it's too late to turn back. Once a secret rises from the grave, it can never be buried again.*

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

### CADENCE

I fix my clothes and slide off the hood of Dutch's ruggedly expensive truck, landing to the grass on shaky legs. He sweeps those dangerous fingers over his blond hair, studying me with eyes the color of a dancing flame, honey and gold.

"I need to get back to school," I murmur, failing to hide the slight tremor in my voice.

"You need to cool off first." He gestures to my top. "And button up properly. Walk into Redwood looking that disheveled and everyone will know what we were doing." His brows go up. "Not that I have a problem with that."

My eyes flash. "I don't need you telling me what I can and can't do."

"Your face is red, Cadey. Maybe try not to blush so hard when you make a point."

I cup my cheek. "It's from sunburn."

He smirks.

Eager to get away, I march to the backseat and grab my phone.

Jinx's message pops out at me.

Heart racing, I click on the video and watch the murky feed. It's a shot taken from one of the cameras in the hallway

near the classroom that burned. How did she get this footage? The police couldn't pull anything from those cameras.

"What are you watching?" Dutch asks.

I jump in my skin, pause the video and hide it behind my back. "Nothing. Can we go now?"

He stares at me for a long, tense moment, and then he nods once.

"Let's go." Dutch opens the passenger side door for me.

"I'll take the back."

"From now on, you ride up front with me."

I want to argue because it's pure habit to be contrary at this point, but all I can think about is the video. The faster I get to Redwood, the faster I can view it privately.

Dutch starts driving.

"Your mother told me she had to fake her death because she saw something she shouldn't have," he says, and I shrug. Everything that comes out of mom's mouth is questionable. The only thing I don't doubt is the lengths she would go to find her next fix. "Do you know what she saw?"

"A murder apparently." The confession rolls off my tongue with careless ease.

Dutch's fingers tighten on the steering wheel and he whips around. In his eyes are a tight, smoldering frustration.

When I see his reaction, I realize how casual I made that sound.

"But she could be lying," I add as he pulls into the parking lot of Redwood Prep. "It's possible she just owed a debt she couldn't pay and saw dying as an easy way out."

He frowns at me.

"No one's bothered us yet, so I'm sure we'll be fine."

"Yet?" He turns the engine off, pockets the keys and pins me down with his dark glare.

“You know as well as I do that mom’s not a reliable source.”

“She could be telling the truth this time.”

I shake my head. “She’s an *addict*, Dutch.” I don’t normally share my thoughts so freely, but he’s already stepped into this mess. It’s not like I can pretend my life is something it isn’t. “She’ll do anything, say anything to convince you of her story.”

“People don’t fake their own deaths for the fun of it, Cadey.”

Jinx’s video keeps pressing at the back of my mind.

Dutch is choosing the worst time to talk about this.

“It’s not your problem,” I grind out.

“Of course it’s my problem. Everything that concerns you is my problem.”

I stiffen at his possessive tone. “Don’t think what happened on the hill means anything’s changed. You and I are still mortal enemies.”

“You screw all your mortal enemies?” he asks, cocking a brow at me.

He has a point.

Rather than answering the question, I twist around and face him confidently. “You and I... we mess around sometimes. We... use each other to let out steam. That’s it.”

His jaw works for a minute, like he’s thinking hard about my words, and then he gestures with his chin toward Redwood.

“Go inside before you say something even more ridiculous, Cadey.”

I scowl at him, the urge to fight snapping through me.

*You want to fight Dutch or watch Jinx’s video?*

It’s an easy choice.

I sprint into Redwood and duck into the nearest bathroom. After locking myself in a stall, I lift my cell phone again.

Thumb up. Breath shaking.

I slam the play button.

The video starts again, a steady picture of the hallway. Suddenly, there's a pop and the tinkle of glass breaking. A slight *whoosh* fills my ears.

On my screen, a shadow falls on the floor.

The outline of the true culprit.

My head is reeling.

I'm so close to the truth, I can taste it.

But why am I so nervous?

I wipe away the sweat forming above my upper lip.

On screen, orange and red glow against the lockers. Reflections of the mounting fire. The culprit walks closer and closer to the camera. Steady footsteps. Arms loose. No more perturbed by the destruction he caused than Vi would be if she broke a nail.

And then he's there.

In the frame.

Familiar brown eyes. Broad shoulders. Thick, wavy hair.

The fourth member of The Kings.

The only friend I have among the ruthless boys of Redwood Prep.

Sol.

I gasp and the phone slips from my hand. It clatters to the ground. I hear the crack of glass. If I were in my right mind, I'd be horrified. I try to be careful with my phone because I can't afford to fix it if it breaks.

But my mind is whirring too fast.

I cover my mouth with my palms, eyes wide and frantic.



Sol?

Sol... is the culprit.

At once, a wave of memories washes over me. Sol's, heavy, agonized glances in my direction. His constant attempts to tell me something.

*'Cadence, we need to talk.'*

*'I hate keeping the truth from you.'*

*'Can we talk?'*

I kept brushing him off. I was so sucked into Dutch, Jarod Cross, Serena, and the drama with mom that I didn't even stop to...

Dropping to my knees, I flip the phone over and stare at the broken screen.

The video is frozen on the scene where Sol is facing the camera.

It's really him.

But why? What would make Sol do something like that? He had the protection of Dutch, Finn and Zane Cross. Those boys ruined my life and Mr. Mulliez's to get Sol back to school. They were never going to let him leave Redwood Prep.

My fingers close around the cell phone and I hold it tight, ignoring the scrape of the broken glass against my palm. Shoving the device in my purse, I press my hand against the bathroom stall, struggling to catch my breath.

At that moment, a group of girls enter the bathroom in a cloud of giggles and perfume.

*"What's so funny?"*

*"She snuck into Lit again."*

*"Why?"*

*"It's the only class Zane Cross attends."*

I hear the spritz of perfume and a rustle of fabric.

*"He didn't seem like the smart type."*

*“Of course he’s smart. He never did his homework, but he used to have these epic book arguments with Miss Jamieson.”*

*“They haven’t done that in a while though.”*

*“Yeah, Miss J doesn’t call him out in class anymore. Zane doesn’t call her out either. He just kind of glares at her until the bell rings and then he leaves. It’s so weird.”*

I suck in a deep breath and push the door open.

The girls gasp in shock when they see me. At once, they dip their heads and greet me like I’m the queen or something.

I ignore them and shuffle to the sink, pooling my hands under the water in the faucet. The reflection in the mirror reveals my long brown hair, pinched lips and restless eyes. I look as stressed out as I feel.

“Um...” One of the girls approaches me like I’m a wild animal. “You’re New Girl, right? Dutch Cross’s girlfriend? I’ve seen him—uh... *carrying* you through the hall before.”

Great.

She tilts her head up, staring at me like my ‘love story’ with Dutch is something to freaking look up to. If she knew how sordid and twisted my life became after Dutch barreled into it, she wouldn’t be so damn starry-eyed.

I dig my nails into the sink.

“I just wanted you to know that we’re such huge fans.” The girl flashes a brilliant smile. “I’m a scholarship kid too. Everyone at Redwood treated me like trash until you came along. They see us as something more than their punching bag now.”

The other girls nod enthusiastically.

“You control Dutch Cross now. Which is, like, insane. He actually listens to you. Plus you hang out with The Kings. You’re, like, the coolest kid ever.”

My head swings down, my chin hitting my chest. I release a shaky breath that rattles through my lips and fogs up the mirror.

“If you ever need help, you can ask me. For anything.”  
The girl bats her eyelashes.

I want to growl at her to ‘go away’, but I can’t find it in me to rip that smile off her face. I can’t find it in me to burst that bubble of hope and shove her face in the crap that’s become my life.

When I still don’t say anything, she finally gets the hint. With a small jerk of her chin toward the door, she leads her friends to the exits.

“Wait,” I rasp.

The girls stop and spin in one fluid motion, like ballet dancers. They’re already leaning forward, already eager to do whatever I command.

I pull my fingers into fists, nails digging into the soft flesh of my palm.

“Do you know who Sol is?”

Her eyes bug. “Of course we know!”

“Find him for me and give him a message.” I sweep stone-cold eyes over the girls. “Tell him to meet me in the music room.”

She gasps. “But you can’t go in there. They banned that place after the fire—”

“Do it.” I cut her off. “Now.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

### CADENCE

The walls have deep, gaping puncture wounds. Gnarled black lines. The fire chewed at the windows and tore at the ceiling, leaving behind ugly gashes. I inhale and the stench is so strong that it makes my eyes water.

The fire happened a while ago, but it feels like the fingers of hell are still dancing, flashing my face with heat and brushing against my skin.

Behind me, the door slips open and then shut.

I hear footsteps. The rustle of the yellow ‘CAUTION’ tape that was meant to keep students out.

And then silence.

I turn slowly.

Sol’s eyes are so dark, it almost hurts to look at him.

“Every night, I had the same nightmare.” His voice drops to a dangerously low tone, something guttural and empty. “You looked at me with that exact expression. Like you hated me.”

I’m vaguely aware of the chimes, signaling the start of another class. Vaguely aware of the sunshine pushing past the windows and falling on the charred desks and ruined plastic piano keys.

A low note plays in my head.

Music mourning its own.

“Serena’s mom is in the hospital. Did you know that?” I take a step toward him, my hand shaking. “The school’s about to sue her family for breaking the scholarship contract. The only money they have is the one they saved up for chemo.”

Sol has the decency to flinch.

“Her mom’s *life* is in danger, but you stood by and watched.” Heat blazes through my voice. “What gives you the right? You think you’re the only one living in a nightmare? You think you’re the only one battling demons when you’re awake and when you’re asleep?”

His eyes shoot back to mine, inquisitive. Almost as if he didn’t care about anything I just said until I mentioned that last line.

“Is something going on with you?” he demands.

I stalk all the way in front of him. Forget the fire that burned this building. The one I’m going to rain on his head is twice as hot.

“What the hell were you thinking, Sol?”

“I wasn’t.” Muscles clench and contract in his jaw. He bows his head. I can’t see his tortured eyes anymore.

“That’s not good enough.”

“I’m telling you the truth. I was just feeling. Feeling all the injustice, the unfairness, the helplessness. I had to do something. It had to come out.” His eyes meet mine. Clear. No sense of desperation. No apology.

The monster Redwood created turned around and stabbed it in the chest.

“Fight fire with fire?” I step right into his face. I’m too short to stand nose-to-nose, but I’m nose-to-chest and it’s good enough. I tilt my head up. “The problem is, Sol, that when you take aim without thought, innocent people burn.”

Brown eyes watch me heavily from beneath his wavy brown hair. “I’ll fix it.”

I turn around, unable to look at him.

I feel too sorry to Serena. I feel too stupid.

Not once did I think Sol set the fire.

Not even when the evidence was staring me in the face.

It all pointed to him.

The mysterious person leaving The Kings' practice room.

The Cross brothers using Martina as a scapegoat.

Martina fleeing guiltily when I brought up the fire at breakfast.

And Dutch...

*"It's not my secret to share."* He knew something, but he'd rather die than tell me. He's always been protective of Sol.

The picture was right in front of me, but I believed so much in Sol that I couldn't even consider the possibility of him being behind this.

Doesn't that make me foolish?

Naive?

I was so happy to meet someone who came from my neighborhood, someone who got me, who saw me. The conversations Sol and I had made me think that we were more alike than we were different.

Both of us didn't belong here. Both of us seemed to be—whether willingly or not—caught up with a group of brothers who lived in a world way higher than our own.

I trusted him.

Because of that, Serena suffered.

"Cadence," Sol's footsteps patter behind me, "I'll take care of everything."

His hand closes around my arm.

I brush him off and whirl around, my chest heaving. "Why should I believe you when you've done nothing until this point?"

“That’s not true.” He reaches out to me again, but stops short when I glare at him. Hesitantly, he slips both his hands into his pockets. “After I found out Serena was arrested, I went straight to Principal Harris. He told me to screw off.” Sol’s eyes narrow to slits. “According to him, it didn’t matter which one of us got kicked out.”

I scoff.

Sol licks his lips and keeps staring at the ground.

“Did Dutch know since the beginning?”

His head whips up. Sol stares at me for a long moment, as if he’s trying to figure me out. “Does it matter?”

“What?”

“Does it matter to you if Dutch knew? I thought you hated him.”

“I do hate him.”

His eyes search my face. His jaw works for a minute, as if he’s trying his best to believe me.

I can’t take the tautness in the air between us and grind out, “But we’re not talking about Dutch. We’re talking about you, Sol. It was your decision to set the fire. It was your decision to hide it.”

“Don’t worry.” His voice is flat now. He glances past me. “I started this. I’m going to finish it.”

“No, *I’m* going to finish this.” I stalk past him.

“Cadence—” Sol grabs my arm to stop me.

“Let me go.”

He drops my hand immediately, but his shoulders are tense. “You think barging into Principal Harris’s office and demanding things is going to work? I’ve been there. I’ve done that. I already confronted them and they didn’t give a damn.”

Maybe he failed, but I won’t. Sol didn’t have the footage that I do. If Harris insists on letting Serena take the fall for the fire after seeing what I have, he’s insane.

“Don’t try and stop me, Sol. That’s my final warning.” I stalk to the door again.

“I really hate when Dutch is right,” Sol mumbles. A moment later, I hear white noise and then the hiss of a recording.

*“I’m telling you. I’m the one who set the fire in the music room!”*

*“Sol, let me be frank. It didn’t matter which one of you withdrew from Redwood. Just be glad you’re still here and get back to class.”*

I freeze, right in front of the yellow and black tape.

“You recorded him?” I whisper, turning around.

“Learned that lesson the hard way.” He juts his chin down. “When you face a snake, always keep your recorder on.”

My nostrils flare.

My mind trips through what I just heard.

*It doesn’t matter who got kicked out?* The callousness Principal Harris showed toward Serena is disgusting. I always knew I didn’t mean anything to these people. But at least Dutch, Paris and Christa were honest about their disdain for me. Even Miller flashed his true colors pretty quickly.

But people like Harris? I thought he was a harmless puppet for the real overlords of Redwood.

After hearing that recording, I doubt he’s the innocent, bumbling principal he portrays himself to be.

“Why didn’t you just play that for me from the start?” I hiss.

Sol draws near to me. “Dutch said you wouldn’t believe me unless I had evidence. He said you were stubborn. I told him you’d give me a chance.” He purses his lips, dark eyes slicing me with disappointment. “Looks like he was right.”

I don’t care about his pissing contest with Dutch right now.

Holding my hand out, I say, “Give me your phone.”



His eyes widen. “Why?”

“Just give it.”

Sol hesitates a second before tucking the cell into my palm.

I head straight for Principal Harris’s office.

“Cadence!” Sol scrambles after me.

My hand bangs against the door. It slams into the wall.

The secretary, a woman with long nails and a perpetual affinity for gum, gives me a wide-eyed stare.

I don’t bother granting her a look.

When she sees me stalking past her desk with violent intent, she shoots to her feet. “Wait just a minute! You can’t go in there!”

Her shrieks are like background noise. Right now, all I can think about is Serena’s mom. Her pale face as she tried her best to smile at me. Her eyes, red from exhaustion and stress. Her joy that Serena had a friend at Redwood.

What Sol did was insane, but there’s a part of me that understands where that wrath is coming from. A human being can only be told he’s worthless for so long before he either believes it or fights back.

And it’s time to fight back.

I’m tired of this school breaking us down and beating us into the ground. Redwood Prep has tried it’s best to take me, Sol and Serena out.

We’re not leaving.

Not until we’re good and freaking *ready*.

I slam my fist into Harris’s door and barge in while he’s on a call. His eyes widen and he half-rises out of his seat, craning his neck to look past me as if he’s waiting for someone to walk in and give him an explanation.

“Sorry, Principal Harris,” the secretary rushes in behind me. “I couldn’t stop her.”

“I need to speak to you. Alone,” I hiss.

Sol is right behind me. I can feel his eyes as if he’s peeling my skin off.

“Young lady, you are being *very* disrespectful right now. Leave before I suspend you both for misconduct—”

I slam my fist on the desk. My hair flies in front of my face. “You’re going to want her to leave and you’re going to want her to close the door because if you don’t, I’m walking out of here and I’m not going to stop until I get to the cops.”

His eyes bugging, Harris glances at me and then at Sol.

With a quick flick of his wrist, he chases the secretary out.

She gives me the stink eye before closing the door.

“What is the meaning of this?” Harris grumbles, looking down at me behind his big circle glasses.

I slam Sol’s cell phone on the desk. A pen rattles in the metal cup next to the picture frame of Harris with a golf club.

Maintaining eye contact, I press play.

Harris’s voice fills the room as he coaches Sol into shutting up.

I watch his face intently but, what I see there, sends shivers up my spine. Harris doesn’t look scared at all.

In fact, he laughs.

“That’s it? Do you think that’ll make a difference, Miss Cooper?” He rises and looks down his nose at me.

“You know exactly what you did?”

“Which is what? Encourage a vulnerable student to stay in school and get a good education?” He pushes his glasses up his nose. The light from the window catches on the lens and makes them glint. “This is why we shouldn’t open our doors to people like you.”

My back stiffens.

I grit my teeth.

“Don’t think I’ve been blind to all the trouble you’ve caused since you’ve arrived here at Redwood Prep. Mulliez and Jamieson fought for you. Jarod Cross covered for you. If so many people put their necks on the block, you should know enough to at least be grateful for the opportunities you’ve given.”

Sol launches forward, but I stick out a hand.

I don’t need anyone saving me.

“This recording alone probably won’t damage you enough. But this...” I turn my cracked phone around and press play.

The video of Sol leaving the music room fills the screen.

Sol’s eyes widen.

Harris points in shock. “H-how did you get this?”

“*Principal of Redwood Covers Up Arsonist*’. Sol came to you to admit his crime and you threw an innocent person under the bus, for what? The fun of it? Scholarship kids are all replaceable cogs in the Redwood machine. Unless our last name is Cross or Miller or something attached to dollar signs, you don’t give a damn.”

“Miss Cooper!”

“Don’t you dare bring that lawsuit against Serena. Bring her back to Redwood *now*.”

His eyes double in size. I guess I wasn’t supposed to know about the lawsuit.

I scoop up both cell phones. “I suggest you waive her work service and give her a heartfelt apology. That’s the least you can do. If she doesn’t sue you for libel and emotional damage.”

Harris inhales deeply. After a beat, he seems to regain his composure. When he lifts his eyes again, he’s smiling.

“Go ahead. Let it out.”

My jaw slackens.

He frowns at me. “You want to throw one of your little friends under the bus to protect the other? Have at it. All I did in that recording,” he points to Sol’s phone, “was do what the police told me. I had no idea Sol was the culprit. Neither did the cops. Everything I did was by the books. However,” Principal Harris adjusts his ill-fitting suit jacket, “now that you’ve pissed me off, any hope of you and your little culprit,” he nods at Sol, “remaining in Redwood are null and void.”

Rage simmers in my veins.

I launch forward. “You prick!”

“Cadence!” Sol pounces on me.

I fight him like a banshee.

All I can see is Serena’s teary-eyes.

Her mother’s pale face.

The promise I made that will never be fulfilled.

“Have some respect for your principal!” Harris shrieks, curling back.

Sol’s fingers dig into my arm, but I can barely feel the pinch.

“Since I’m no longer a student here, then you’re not my freaking *principal!*”

“Who said you weren’t a student here?” a new voice growls.

I freeze, my eyes swinging to the open door that is now occupied by two people—Dutch and...

“Miller.” Principal Harris’s face pales. “What are you doing here?”

“I came to talk about business. I didn’t know I’d be stepping into a bar brawl.”

“They were just leaving.” Harris reddens and pats his shirt down.

“No. I don’t think they are.” Dutch’s words are for Harris, but his eyes are on the place where Sol is holding onto me.

Sol doesn't drop his hand despite Dutch's warning stare.

I break out of his hold myself.

"Dutch. Miller. What is this about?"

Dutch fills the room with his darkly charismatic presence, claiming the cluttered office like it's his own personal war room. He turns the Redwood Prep sweater, heavy trousers, and combat boots into a cloak and scepter.

I've never seen a man so confident in himself. From the way he walks to the way he runs his fingers through his blonde hair and the way he flashes a cocky smile when he passes me by. He's arrogance personified.

The chairman of the board takes a seat in front of the desk. "After talking things over with the board, our lawyers and the police, we've decided that there just isn't enough evidence to charge Ms. Parker with the crime of setting the fire."

Harris gapes like a fish, but I can't judge him because my jaw hits the floor too.

I slant Dutch a stunned look.

He winks at me before facing Miller. "And since Christa is leaving Redwood to study overseas, there's one more spot open in the music program and Mr. Miller has generously offered to dedicate a scholarship in Christa's name to Redwood."

My knees buckle. I can't even believe what I'm hearing.

Christa leaving Redwood for good?

Her spot opening up a place for Serena?

All her expenses paid while she's at Redwood?

Dutch's eyes meet mine. "Serena was a part of our music program and, I represent the entire class, when I say that if anyone messes with her, they mess with us."

My heart flips strangely. I press a hand to my chest, trying to calm down.

“That’s generous of you,” Principal Harris smacks his lips, “but the rumors have spread. How would it look if we brought back the person who started the fire?”

“Serena didn’t start the fire,” Sol says harshly.

“The fire is old news. Mistakes happen.” Miller waves a hand as if he couldn’t be bothered.

Dutch pins his dark, threatening eyes on Harris. “Serena was falsely accused and we’re prepared to protest, speak to the media and do whatever we need to prove her innocence.”

“Redwood Prep doesn’t need that kind of negative attention,” Miller says.

Harris is sweating hard. “She’s just a scholarship student. Isn’t that what you said Miller?”

“She’s not *just* a scholarship student. She’s one of us, and we want her back. Reinstate her. Today.” Dutch’s words are harmless, but his tone is clear. He’s not really giving Harris a choice.

Harris’s mouth trembles. “Since when were you working so closely with students, Miller?”

“I don’t think that’s the question that needs answering.” Miller adjusts his expensive tie and folds his hands over his knee. “Get the girl back in school, Harris. She’s suffered long enough.”

\* \* \*

*Jinx: The Royal Request That Turned Into A Coup*

*Mere mortals know to step out of a queen’s way when she’s on a rampage and Cinderella made the ground shake on her way to the government office.*

*Who knew our quiet and reluctant princess could make such a ruckus?*

*But a Queen of Hearts is nothing without her King of War. To fulfil Cinderella’s greatest desire, Prince Charming forged*

*an alliance with an enemy.*

*Turns out love can bend a royal's heart, but is such a sacrifice enough to win Cinderella over?*

*Only time will tell.*

*Until the next post, keep your enemies close and your secrets even closer.*

*- Jinx*

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

### DUTCH

Miller squints his eyes as I walk him out of Redwood Prep and into the sun. He stops in the doorway and stares out at the sprawling lawn.

“Harris might look like a fool, but he’s got a nasty temper. You and your crew better watch out.”

“We’ll handle Harris.” I shove my hand toward him. “Pleasure doing business with you.”

“A deal’s a deal.” Miller grins and accepts the handshake.

I nod. Last week, I paid Miller a visit and told him I’d get Christa into the best international music school. Zane, Finn and I have been offered invitations countless times but always refused. We didn’t want our music confined to anyone’s standards but our own.

Being on their radar means we’ve got contacts all over that institution. It was easy to make a few calls.

“My daughter needed a fresh start and I wouldn’t have been able to get her in without your help.” His eyes skate over the thick entrance. “Redwood Prep is my territory, but not even I could save her at the end. Hopefully, the ghosts of her past stay buried.”

“Nothing Christa did here will leave these walls. I’ll make sure of it.”



Miller slaps me on the back. “If working with you to help my daughter is any indication, I look forward to seeing what you’ll do when it’s time for the chairman re-election.”

Rather than answer, I jut my chin at the parking lot.

Miller slaps me on the back again and saunters away.

I head straight for Cadey’s locker, but she’s not there. *Is she still with Sol?* He warned us he was going to break the news today, but I don’t see why they have to hang out alone.

Or why they have to touch.

I bristle at the memory of his hand on her arm. When I saw him touching her, I wanted to rip his jaw in two.

I’m losing my mind.

If I don’t get a handle on things, Sol and I really will come to blows.

Pulling out my phone, I send Cadey a text.

*Where are you?*

There’s no response.

“This girl never answers her damn phone,” I mumble.

At that moment, my screen lights up.

My heart jumps, thinking it’s Cadey.

But it’s Finn.

“What?” I growl, stalking past classrooms that are in session. Students peer out of the windows and stare at me.

No one says a word.

No teacher calls me out.

I don’t remember the last time I’ve attended a class I didn’t want to.

“Your fiancé’s waiting for you in the practice room.”

“What?” I stop short.

“She just walked in with Sol. Said she wasn’t looking for you, but she keeps glancing at the door like she’s expecting

you to barge in any minute. Come and put her out of her misery.”

“I’m on my way.”

I sprint through the hallway, skidding to a stop in front of the practice room. Slapping my card against the scanner, I barrel in.

My eyes snap over the couch, the instruments, the trophy case and finally land on the girl who made me go out on a damn limb for Christa of all people.

I see Cadence’s slight smile and my heart seizes in my chest.

*This girl can kill me.*

It’s a real and persistent threat.

I’d rip my heart out of my own chest and offer it to her on a silver platter just to see her freaking eyes light up when I walk in the room. Just like they are now.

“Well, if it isn’t the man of the hour!” Zane approaches me with two beers in hand. He hands one to me and I grab it distractedly.

“What’s with the celebration?”

“You marked the first task off her list.” Zane points a finger at Cadence. He’s talking about the promise I made last week to help Cadey with her problems. I shake my head, but that only makes Zane grin harder. “Didn’t think you had it in you.”

I scowl at him.

He laughs and takes a swig.

I drop the beer on the table and stalk over to Cadence. Eyes inquiring, she tilts her head up, but it’s not far enough. I wrap my fingers around the back of her neck, squeeze it tight and yank her head back so far she almost snaps her neck.

Descending sharply, I crush her mouth with mine in a punishing kiss that makes my fingers tremble. Her lush lips part, fitting perfectly against my harsh caress. I suck on her

bottom lip and then bite down, swiping my tongue over the places I nip.

“Get a room!” Zane boos.

I ease back, ignoring my brother’s hoots and Sol’s screwed-up gaze.

“Do you know how freaking sexy you looked going after Harris?” I growl. Her ripe mouth parts in surprise. “I almost took you against his desk.”

“Dutch.” Cadey gasps. The tips of her ears look like I held a flame to them.

Ripping my eyes away from Cadence, I snap at Sol. “You shouldn’t have held her back.”

Sol’s jaw works. “Harris is the type to call the cops and play the victim. Cadence didn’t need that kind of heat.”

I study him. See that he’s sincere.

He was protecting her.

Fine.

As long as he doesn’t cross the line, I don’t have a problem.

“What are you doing in here?” I ask Cadey as quietly as I can.

She opens her mouth.

Finn talks first. “Cadence was waiting on you before she called Serena and broke the good news.”

I glance over at my brother. Finn is plucking his bass guitar. The instrument is nestled in his lap like a lover. He has one arm draped over the body and another tight around the neck.

“I thought, since The Kings were involved one way or another, you should be around when I tell her.” Her voice is slightly breathless. Shaking. The red flush climbing up her neck is the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen.

“You were waiting for me, darling?”

“Call me darling again and I’ll key the word all over your car,” she growls, eyes narrowing.

I smile because she’s poison and she’s beautiful and I want to tear her out of that skirt so badly that my hands ache.

“Are we calling or would you two like to eye-bang for a while longer?” Zane gestures between the two of us.

Sol glances away.

“Ladies’ choice.” I drift my fingers in Cadence’s direction.

She clears her throat and tosses her hair over her shoulder. “I’m calling now.”

I take the seat beside her. While the line rings, I feel around for the bottle opener. Sol flips the tool into my lap.

My eyes swerve to him.

He nods.

For a moment, it feels like I have my friend back. But then he looks at Cadence and his gaze changes to this soft, yearning thing.

I stiffen again.

The line clicks.

“Hello?” Serena’s voice is feeble and tired.

“Serena, I have good news.” Cadey turns to me and the brightest grin I’ve ever seen crosses her face.

Damn. She didn’t smile when I gave her a ring worth thousands. Or when I brought her breakfast. When I canceled her work service. Or when I took her sister to the amusement park.

But right now, she’s glowing like the sunshine. Like something too pure, too innocent for a monster like me to touch.

Hell, I’m going to touch anyway.

But I still know I don’t deserve to.

“What news?” Serena asks.

Cadey is practically bouncing in her seat. “You’re coming back to Redwood. Tomorrow.”

“What?” Serena shrieks.

Cadey makes an equally girly sound from her mouth. “Yes!”

“No!”

“Yes!”

“*No!*”

“Yes,” Finn says in exasperation. He rolls his eyes. “Let’s try to use cohesive sentences from now on.”

“Screw you!” Serena shrieks from the phone. And then she pauses. “Who was that?”

“Finn.”

“Finn? As in Finn Cross?” Serena croaks.

I chuckle and take over. “This is Dutch.”

“Oh my gosh.”

“Our lawyers went after the police and got them to wipe everything off your record. We can’t stop gossip but, as far as the government knows, you have nothing to do with this fire and it’s not going to come up later.”

Sniffles sound on the line.

Finn meets my eyes. “Is she crying?”

“Serena, are you okay?” Cadence asks.

“I’m happy. I’m really happy.”

I glance at Cadence and see tears filling her eyes too. Why the hell is she crying? My heart is about to burst looking at her tears.

“What’s wrong?” I whisper, pushing her hair back.

“I’m just happy.” Cadey sniffs.

Aren’t tears supposed to mean ‘sad’?

I don’t get women.

Suddenly, there's a loud and persistent knock on the door.

I'm too busy worrying about Cadence to get up. Sol doesn't either.

Finn picks at his bass guitar. "I wonder who that is?"

"The only person crazy enough to knock on our door like that is Cadence." Zane points a drumstick in her direction. "And she's in here."

The thuds sound again.

"Dammit." With an annoyed scowl, Zane stalks to the door and throws it open. "Who the hell do you think you... Miss Jamieson?"

My brother stares at our Lit Teacher with shocked eyes.

The tiny woman pushes him out of the way and storms right into our practice room, eyes on fire and chest heaving.

I don't know what this is about, but whatever it is... our step-sister looks *pissed*.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

CADENCE

The voice that blasts from the doorway of The Kings' practice room surprises me. Since I've known the Cross brothers, no one has ever dared to call them out.

Not in the hallways.

Not in the classrooms.

And definitely not in their own domain.

But Miss Jamieson doesn't have an ounce of fear.

The moment Zane opens the door, she explodes past him and storms right into the room. Chest heaving, she careens to a stop in front of Sol.

Dutch stiffens beside me, his eyes narrowing as if he's bracing himself for action. Finn's watching it with a bored, almost detached look. Sol looks slightly amused by it all.

And Zane...

I stare at Dutch's twin, a little alarmed by his expression. Zane has this intense, almost frightening gaze when he looks at Miss Jamieson. I don't know how to describe it except that it's dark and... greedy.

*Why is he looking at a teacher like he owns her?*

Miss Jamieson's angry brown eyes skip over everyone and land on Sol.

She takes in a ragged breath. “You.”

Sol lifts his chin, unintimidated.

*What’s going on?*

The room feels too charged for this to be a simple matter of a teacher scolding us about skipping class.

And that scolding would be fully deserved.

I admit, since I embraced the privilege that comes with living in Dutch’s shadow, I haven’t been concerned with my grades or my attendance. The world suddenly felt much bigger than the halls of Redwood Prep.

But just because I *felt* that way doesn’t make it reality.

The truth is that I am *still* in high school.

I am *still* a scholarship student.

And I shouldn’t be here, so close to Dutch I’m practically sitting on his lap, when school is going on.

I edge away from him, but it doesn’t matter. Miss Jamieson doesn’t even notice me.

“I promised myself I wouldn’t mess with you boys.” She stomps forward and her tight brown curls bounce against her back. “I was going to leave you out of my fight, but now you’re starting to piss me off.”

“What are you talking about?” Zane says, folding his arms over his chest. “What fight?”

She whips around and spears him with a heated gaze. “Did you all plot to set the school on fire and have Serena expelled? Why? What did she do to you? What is your obsession with hunting down scholarship girls and ruining them?”

The boys don’t even bat an eye, so my surprised gasp echoes loudly in the room.

It drags Miss Jamieson’s gaze to me.

She blinks in shock. “Cadence.”

“Uh... hi.”



“What are you doing in here?” A crease forms over her forehead. She stiffens, her toned arms flexing and I can tell that her first thought is that I’m in harm. Then she sees how relaxed I am and her eyes flicker with confusion. “Are you... *with* them?”

“No.”

“Yes.”

I swing my gaze up to the annoying leader of The Kings.

“She’s my fiancée,” Dutch says, draping a hand over my shoulder.

My eyes bug.

Miss Jamieson has the same reaction.

“Dutch.” My voice cracks. I try to push his hand off.

“I thought you should know,” Dutch says calmly, flicking his gaze to my face and then back to our Lit teacher. “Since you’re family now.”

Miss Jamieson’s skin is the color of chocolate milk, but I still see her pale a shade. Her throat bobs and she visibly struggles to maintain her composure.

“This isn’t the time for jokes, Dutch. I want an explanation. And I want it now.”

“An explanation for what?” Zane approaches her.

“Why did you go after Serena Parker?”

Finn snorts.

Miss Jamieson’s eyes snap to him. Her full brown lips tighten. “You boys think this is funny?” Her nostrils flare. “I’ve kept my mouth shut. I’ve cowered. I’ve done everything this ridiculous school has told me to do, but I will *not* stand by while you ruin someone else’s shot at a better fut—*ah!*”

Miss Jamieson shrieks as Zane scoops her up and throws her over his shoulder. I watch her heels kick up and down. I watch her skirt ride up. I watch her pinch Zane and I see Zane smack her backside in retribution.

It feels like a slap to the face.

A brawny student like Zane.

A classy teacher like Miss Jamieson.

All the lines being blurred.

My heart jumps to my throat. It's just... so wrong.

"Mr. Cross," Miss Jamieson shrieks, "this is absolutely disrespectful. You are crossing a line here!"

"Wouldn't be the first time," Zane grumbles.

"Put me down at once!"

With a cocky nod at his brothers, Zane says, "I'll explain things to her. In private."

Dutch nods. "Have fun."

Sol shakes his head and sighs.

Finn doesn't stop playing his bass, but he does look up in acknowledgement. I can tell he approves despite his expression not changing much.

My heart rams against my ribs. Adrenaline quickens my pulse.

Are they letting Zane kidnap our teacher? Are they insane?

"Zane, stop." I bounce to the edge of my seat. If they won't do anything, I will.

Miss Jamieson helped me out so much at Redwood. After Mulliez got kicked out, she was my only ally. I can't sit by while Zane carries her away like Tarzan with Jane.

I take a step forward.

But one step is all I get.

Before I can react, Dutch grabs me by the waist and drags me into his lap. I land with a thud, falling against his hard thigh.

"What are you doing? I need to help her."

"No, you don't."

I squirm. “She’s our teacher.”

“She’s something else to him,” Dutch says cryptically. I lift my head to his darkened gaze.

I see that he’s serious, and that he’s not going to share more.

*What the hell is going on between Zane and Miss Jamieson? And why did Dutch call her family?*

Sol lazily climbs to his feet. I glance up. With us sitting down and him standing, he looks extremely tall. None of The Kings are under six feet but, for some reason, Sol feels like a giant.

He looks down at me, his face impossible to read. “Congratulations on your engagement.”

“We are not engaged.”

“Thanks.” Dutch captures my hand and presses a kiss to my ring finger.

I grit my teeth.

Sol says nothing more, but if he keeps scowling like that, the expression is going to get permanent. His footsteps thump as he leaves the room, slamming the door behind him.

“*I’m* not going anywhere,” Finn says to his brother. He keeps plucking the bass strings. “So unless you want an audience, I suggest you keep your hands *above* your fiancée’s skirt.”

“Read the room, Finn,” Dutch mutters.

Finn smirks. I get the sense that he *lets* Dutch lead the group because he couldn’t be bothered. But he’s always waiting. Watching. Calm as a still river with a rushing current underneath.

Dutch flips Finn the bird.

Finn rolls his eyes.

Grabbing the opportunity, I slip out of Dutch’s arms while he’s distracted and dance back when he tries to swipe at me.

“I’m going to class.”

Dutch leans back, surveying me like a king on his throne.  
“I’ll pick you up after.”

“Don’t you dare.”

He quirks an eyebrow as if to say *I dare*.

And he does.

Dutch walks me to and from classes, sits with me at lunch and repels every living thing at Redwood Prep just by showing up.

After school, he drives me home and I’m stunned when I see Vi climbing out of an unfamiliar car at the same time.

Panic screams through me. Fingers yanking on the handles, I push the door open and throw it aside. My feet slam on the sidewalk.

I’m running, elbows pumping. Heart screaming. Lungs tightening.

The driver could be Jarod Cross, come to get his revenge after finding Jinx’s device.

It could be the killer.

Or even worse.

It could be a boy who wants to date my sister.

Vi sees me. She smiles brightly, eyes sparkling in the sunlight. Her wave is big and enthusiastic.

She’s okay.

But what if this is a warning? What if she’s only okay this time because the driver wants to intimidate me?

I peer into the car, shocked when I see...

“Martina?”

“Have a good evening, señorita. I’m off to my tango lesson.” Unleashing a broad smile, Dutch’s housekeeper waves and drives off.

I hear heavy footsteps behind me.

Dutch.

I whirl around. “What’s going on?”

He watches me, saying nothing.

“Martina said she’ll pick me up from now on. And look. She brought me this drink called *horchata*. It’s delicious. By the way, did you know Martina speaks the ancient language of the Mayas? Dutch, did you know she was part Mayan? She said she’d teach me traditional Mayan makeup for my channel.”

My jaw drops. “Why is Martina picking up my sister from school?”

Dutch’s eyes meet mine, amber pools surrounded by light. “From now on, I’m driving you and your sister home.”

*Overprotective, controlling jerk.*

My heart pounds. “Vi, can you give me a minute? I need to speak to Dutch.”

“Okay.” My sister beams. “Later, Dutch.”

He nods. “I haven’t forgotten my promise. Pick a date and I’ll arrange the amusement park passes for your friends.”

“Yes!” Vi pumps her fist. My little sister hurries away, dancing like she just got a million bucks.

I turn slowly, pinning Dutch with a blistering stare.

“If you’re going to yell at me, at least do it in air conditioning.” He turns sharply and stalks to his car.

My sneakers thump the ground as I stomp behind him. “You’re going overboard.”

“You expect me to do nothing after hearing that your mom might have witnessed a murder?” Dutch growls.

“She’s a liar. It might not have been that serious.”

“It doesn’t matter.” He sinks into the front seat and juts his chin at the passenger side. “Get in.”

I grab his door to keep him from locking it. Dutch’s eyes slick over my body. Heat prickles through my stomach as his

gaze darkens.

The dynamic between us is different with me standing and Dutch looking up at me. I feel powerful and a little untouchable like this.

The crack of attraction thickens until it's overtaking me.

“Back off, Dutch. I can take care of my family by myself. I don't need you. I don't need anyone.”

If I say it loud enough and often enough, it doesn't feel so much like a lie. It doesn't feel like the thinly-composed armor that I've been wearing all my life. It feels real. More real than this... *thing* between us.

Dutch curves his fingers around my hips and my breath becomes uneven. He skims a rough hand down my side. His hands bear the scars of music. Years spent brutally sliding his fingers over nylon strings, wearing them down to hard beds.

“You don't have to need me. You don't even have to want me. But you've got me, Cadey. And since I'm here, you won't ever have to struggle by yourself again. I won't let you. I forbid it.”

Broken notes haunt my mind.

Quiet. Steady. Trilling.

I whimper as his fingers slip behind my back and find the dip of my spine.

“You are more important to me than I am.”

My breath catches in my throat.

Dutch tugs me forward, pulling me into the car with him. His spicy cologne fills the air around me and I inhale, getting drugged.

His lips curve up sharply. Not a smile. No, not even close. A warning.

“How long are you going to fight me?” he whispers.

I blink unsteadily. “As long as it takes.”

Dutch's hand grazes the side of my face, sliding a single fingertip down my throat. "How do you think I'd feel if something happened to you or Vi?"

"I told you. We're fine." My body loosens without my permission. It's like I have no control around him. Like all my defenses have been so badly damaged by our past encounters that I can't even begin to protect myself.

Dutch guides me up on my knees. He secures an inked arm around me, holding me steady as he rolls his chair all the way back. "Fine isn't good enough. I want you safe."

The chair makes a click sound, slamming to a stop. Dutch has it as far back as it can go, but there's still not enough room. I'm squashed between his body and the steering wheel and the space gets even smaller when he closes the door.

"No one showed up yet." I put a hand on his shoulder, my head falling back as his hands slip under my shirt.

The only bad guys I've encountered bear the last name Cross. But mom didn't exactly drag them into my life. They came on their own.

"And they won't get a chance to." Dutch frowns as he rolls his hips. His eyes burn like hellfire. "If anyone hurts you, they won't live long enough to regret it."

"Dutch." It's supposed to be a scolding, but it sounds more like a groan. I can't help it. His hands are skating over my aching skin, branding me like pure fire.

My heart is beating so loudly that I can't even hear the music in my head. My pulse drowns it out too.

It's all percussions.

All ancient, animalistic war drums.

While I'm unraveling, Dutch is in complete control. I can feel his confidence when he moves my body over his lap, scrubbing me against his jeans.

"You're lucky it's just Martina. I considered hiring a security team."

My eyes widen. “Don’t you—”

His tongue plunges into my mouth chasing away the rest of my words. A gasp tears out of me and I find myself clinging to his hair, grappling for some sense of control in the rapidly chaotic kiss.

Dutch pushes me back. His voice is a low and tortured sound. “Off.”

He’s pure beast. Pure caveman. No time for cohesive sentences even as he instructs me to undress.

“What are you doing?” I pant. “We’re right in front of my apartment.”

He rolls my tights down my legs and I arch my back as he growls, “The windows are tinted.”

It’s a good point and he makes an even better one when his hands descend on me. Fondling. Caressing. Guiding. I erupt into a flame of heat and need, wrapping myself around him as we exchange what little oxygen is left in the car.

Suddenly, I hear a knock on the window.

Both our heads launch up.

My hair is in my face and my eyes are dazed. Plus the windows are so fogged up that I can’t see anything.

And then the fog clears.

I meet a pair of familiar brown eyes.

“Oh my gosh!” I screech.

The thick, pulsing desire in my body wipes out in an instant. Shame and embarrassment floods me next. I try to climb out of Dutch’s lap, but we’re pressed so tightly together that I almost knee him in the jaw.

My elbow hits the steering wheel. The car horn blows loudly, announcing to everyone that we’ve been caught—both literally and figuratively—with our pants down.

*Can someone just shoot me and put me out of my misery already?*



“Who is it?” Dutch asks, his voice laced with a threat as he zips up. “How do you know this guy?”

I button my shirt in a panic and pull my skirt back on with shaky hands. “He’s my brother.”

\* \* \*

*Jinx: Royal Brothers Get Lonely Too*

*This royal family sure do love to pick the hardest, most thorny roads to love. But when a Snare King can have any woman he wants in his bed, it makes sense that he would choose the woman he can't have.*

*You want names, but I don't kiss and tell. Not without evidence. Whispers are all I have for now.*

*Pics of the Snare King capturing his prey for dinner or it didn't happen.*

*Until the next post, keep your enemies close and your secrets even closer.*

*- Jinx*

## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

CADENCE

“What the hell is going on?” Rick’s entire face is red. The wind tugs at his short hair as if trying to cool him off, but it isn’t working. Any minute now, his head is going to explode and pure lava will shoot out of his neck.

“Rick!” My voice is high-pitched and thick with guilt. “W-what are you doing here?”

“What are *you* doing, Cadence? Or should I say, *who* were you doing?” His eyes narrow on Dutch.

“He’s nobody.”

I *feel* rather than see Dutch glare at me.

“Nobody? It’s freaking broad daylight and you’re out here wilding out with ‘nobody’. What the hell is wrong with kids these days? Is this even legal? How old are you?”

“I wasn’t. We weren’t—”

“I wasn’t talking to you, Cadence.”

“I’m eighteen,” Dutch says calmly.

Rick’s eyes bug. “I’m going to kill you!”

I skid in between him and Dutch.

“Get out of the way, Cadence!”

“Rick, it’s not what you think.”

“Don’t even give me that B.S. The car was rocking so hard I thought we were having an earthquake. I *barely* saw your face through all the steam on the windshield and if this idiot didn’t moan your name loud enough for the neighborhood to hear, I never would have thought it was you.”

Dutch lifts his chin, his face pulled into its usual stoic expression. While I’m dying of humiliation, he seems noticeably relaxed.

Rick sees Dutch watching him and grits his teeth. “What, punk?”

“You look familiar.”

“How about you shut your face, you idiot?” Rick growls, looking three seconds away from throwing a punch.

I’m surprised by Rick’s passionate defense of my ‘honor’. Most of the time, he treats me and Vi like burdens. At his birthday party, he looked irritated by our presence. I was pretty sure he hated me.

Dutch’s gaze passes over him, thoughtful. It’s irritating how composed he is in this moment.

Rick finds it irritating too because he takes a threatening step forward.

“Oh right.” Dutch’s voice is light. As if we’re having a tea party or a casual conversation. “You’re the security who was talking to Redhead—” he smoothly corrects himself, “Cadence that night at the park.”

“Redhead?” Rick scrunches his nose. Recognition lights in his eyes a moment later. “That night when I saw you dressed up in a wig...” He pauses and says in horror. “You’re the stalker?”

I wince, remembering that night. Dutch set up a concert just to meet my alter ego. At the time, I was trying to get away from Rick and referred to Dutch as my ‘stalker’ to push them both off.

A corner of Dutch’s lips curl upward. He’s not bothered by the label.

“Cadence, you’re hooking up with your stalker now?”

My mouth opens and then slams shut. How do I explain everything to Rick? Should I even bother?

Dutch reaches out to take my hand, fingers rubbing over my naked ring finger. “I’m Dutch Cross. I wanted to meet more of Cadey’s family, but I hadn’t realized we’d already met before.”

“Don’t talk to me like we’re related, you—”

“Dutch was just leaving,” I say quickly, shoving his arm before Rick decides to break out a knife or something.

The stubborn ruler of Redwood Prep doesn’t budge a single inch.

I look up at Dutch with pleading eyes.

He arches a brow, unmoved.

Desperate, I slide my hand up Dutch’s back. Rick’s eyes bug and I can tell he wants to drag me away, but I focus on Dutch instead. My fingers skate over the expensive fabric of his starch white shirt and press into all the places where I marked his skin that night in the treehouse.

I keep my touch light and my voice coaxing, “I haven’t seen my brother in a really long time. Can you give us some space to talk?”

He tilts his head to one side, considering my request. He can see right through me, but I can see right through him too.

Back when he didn’t know I was Redhead, I could bend Dutch to my will. He was soft for me. Eager to please.

And I still have that power.

Because I *am* Redhead.

Dutch glances down at me, studying me like he expects me to admit that I’m doing all this intentionally. Does he think I’d crack so easily?

I press my body into his, one arm slung along his lean waist, and I smile. “If you give in now, I’ll return the favor.” I

rise on my tiptoes and whisper thickly in his ear, “You can do whatever you want to me for one night.”

He doesn’t even blink.

What? Sex isn’t enough to placate him?

Rick growls, “Cadence, get him out of here before I tell Hunter and my boys to teach this doofus a lesson.”

Frustrated, I whip my eyes to Dutch. “Rick isn’t going to hurt me. You can go.”

Still nothing.

“I’ll call you later, okay?” I spit.

“You’ll call?” Dutch’s lips curl up a fraction of an inch.

Internally, I freeze.

That’s it.

The crack that I’ve been waiting for.

He softens, his tense shoulders, his full, dangerous lips, his eyes.

I push on the crack just far enough to make him break.

“I’ll call you and tell you everything,” I promise. “I won’t leave anything out.”

There.

He finally loses the fight and gives in.

I can see it.

It strikes me then, in the deepest caverns of my heart, that Dutch Cross doesn’t just want to screw me. He genuinely wants to know *me*. I didn’t believe it before. Who would? The most powerful guy on campus... drawn to me? Ridiculous.

And yet I’m starting to think that I can trust him.

I offered my body up on a platter, and it didn’t mean as much as a simple phone call. An invitation into my life. A promise to share my thoughts, my burdens, my words.

It's a little disconcerting to see the depth of his feelings and I have to blink to regain my bearings.

Dutch presses his hot mouth to my cheek, sending the butterflies in my stomach flying. I have to resist the urge to turn my head and let his mouth graze my lips instead.

Rick launches over to us, but Dutch just smirks.

"See you later, bro."

"Bro? I'm not your bro!" Rick yells at Dutch's retreating back.

Dutch doesn't bother responding. He climbs into his car.

Rick fumes. "Is he one of those rich brothers in the rock band my girl likes?"

"Yeah," I say breathlessly.

"Why is he taking you home then?"

"Because he likes me." I stare at Dutch's car as it drives past us.

"*You?* Why?"

I frown and whip my head back to Rick.

My half brother gasps. "He's not paying you for sex, is he? Oh my go—Cadence, mom didn't turn you into a prostitute to feed her habit, did she?"

"No. He's..." I inhale deeply and let the word drift off my tongue. "He's my boyfriend."

Rick's eyes go wide. "People like him don't date people like us, Cadence. Not seriously."

I fold my arms over my chest, feeling dumb and a little exposed. I never in a million years thought I'd voluntarily claim Dutch Cross as my boyfriend. Rick pointing out the obvious isn't helping me feel any better.

"What do you want?" I ask roughly.

He scowls, and seems to debate whether he should continue ragging me about Dutch. My expression must show

how unwelcome that would be because he sighs and glances down.

“It’s about mom.”

I wince. Rick and mom have a complicated history. I’ve been dragging my feet about telling him mom’s back because I don’t know what that’ll do to him. The less people who suffer because of mom’s reappearance, the better.

Rick’s eyes lift to mine. “She’s not dead.”

“Oh.” I breathe out in relief. “You knew.”

His head whips up. Shock tightens his voice. “Why do you sound so calm?”

“Mom showed up a couple weeks ago.” I fold my arms over my chest. The sun is starting to set and the wind is picking up with a cold chill. “It was only for one day. We haven’t seen her since.”

Dutch is actually the last person who saw mom. I don’t know what that means or why she’d prefer to spend her time lying to him rather than visiting her own children.

“She pawned one of my rings and left half the money with me. I thought she’d be back for it, but she hasn’t.” I tilt my head. “Maybe she skipped town.”

Rick shakes his head. “She didn’t.”

“How are you so sure?”

“Because,” he licks his lips, “for the past few days, she’s been crashing at my place.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

CADENCE

I stalk into Rick's cramped apartment, grab my mother by the wrist and yank her up all before she even recognizes that it's me.

"Cadey, what a—what a wonderful surprise..."

"We're leaving," I growl. "Where's her stuff?"

"She didn't have much."

"I borrowed his girlfriend's clothes." Mom smirks. "She's a little on the thick side so the clothes don't fit right, but we have to do what we have to do."

Rick's eyes harden.

"Shut up, mom," I snap.

She slurs, "Watch your tone, young lady. I'm still your mother."

"My mother? Aren't you ashamed to call yourself that?"

Mom tilts her head, eyes innocent as can be.

Inside my chest, I'm screaming bloody murder. "We're leaving, Rick. Whatever clothes mom used, burn it. Tell your girlfriend I'll pay for new ones."

"Cadey, slow down," mom whines.

A shadow fills the door while I'm pulling mom to the exit.



It's Hunter.

His soulful brown eyes fall on me and my breath hitches in my throat.

“Cadence?”

I don't have time for an awkward reunion right now. Stepping past him, I drag mom behind me. She bats her eyelashes at Hunter when she passes him by, and slides a veiny finger down his forearm.

“Ooh. Muscles,” she whispers.

I give her a big yank and drag her down the stairs.

“Cadence, wait!” Rick's footsteps thunder behind me. “Let me help you.”

“Yes, Ricky-baby.” Mom pats his cheek. “You should help your mommy.”

Rick's jaw works. He looks like he's being tortured.

How did he put up with mom for this long? Why would he put up with her at all?

I jerk mom's arm hard. My eyes on Rick, I grind out, “We're leaving. Don't follow me.”

Rick remains standing on the stairs, looking at us and not coming any closer. Why would anyone want to come close to this mess? If I had a choice, I'd run away too. Run so far that no one could catch me.

But I'm chained here.

There's no running from a darkness this thick.

“Cadence, you're hurting me.” Mom yelps in pain when I tighten my grip in response.

I pull her with me to the bus stop. She's drunk off her face, which makes it a lot easier to maneuver her around. Unfortunately, her flopping arms means she slaps me in the face every time the bus takes a steep curve.

By the time I walk off the bus, night has fallen, my cheeks are stinging and I'm so pissed off that it feels like my skin is

on fire.

When I finally wrestle mom to the apartment and stuff her through the door, Vi is sitting in the living room with her phone, a ring light and all her makeup tools.

She sees mom and immediately shuts her camera off. “What happened? Where did you find her?”

“At Rick’s.”

Vi’s face goes pale. “All this time?”

“No, it seemed like a recent thing.”

“Where was she staying before that then?” Vi asks.

“I don’t know.”

“Ugh.” Mom kicks off her shoes and wiggles her toes. She digs her fingers into her thinning hair. “Everyone hates me. Everyone!”

Vi stares at mom with anguish in her eyes. It’s been a long time since we’ve seen mom on a bender. It’s frightening when the person who’s supposed to be taking care of you can’t even take care of herself.

“Vi,” I touch her arm gently, “go to your room. I’ll handle this.”

My sister doesn’t argue. She nods and hurries away, leaving all her makeup things behind.

I stare at my mother’s thin face. A seemingly innocent statement Rick said to me after his birthday party rises to memory.

*‘You need to be careful.’*

*‘Why?’*

*‘Just... be careful.’*

At the time, I didn’t know what he was talking about. But in hindsight, my brother was warning me about mom. That means mom was leeching off him before she even thought of stealing from us.

Disgusted, I glare at her. “Why would you ask Rick for anything after the way you abandoned him? Don’t you have a heart? Shouldn’t you be ashamed to even look at him?”

Mom scratches her wrist. She’ll need a fix soon.

My heart balloons with pain and I feel like I’m going to explode. I need a breath. I need a moment to just... not hurt.

But I force myself to keep being the strong one.

I step into Vi’s room. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” My sister’s long brown hair swings over her shoulder. “It’s just weird, you know? I’d gotten used to life without her. Now, it feels like things are back to normal and the life we were living before was the dream.”

“Vi...”

“What?” Her sweet, innocent eyes fall on me. I want to protect her so much it hurts, but I’m so tired.

*‘I won’t let you struggle alone.’* Dutch’s words sooth me. What would happen if I abandoned my senses and let myself fall into him? Would I find that protection in Dutch? Would it hurt less than it does right now?

I want to.

So badly.

I want him to rescue me.

I’m trembling, but I don’t even realize it until my sister walks into me and slides her arms around my waist. I feel the tears pressing against my eyes, but I don’t let them drop.

“It’s okay,” Vi says, smoothing a hand down my back.

“I’m the one who should be telling you that.”

Vi eases back and gives me a smile that’s wise beyond her years. “We can remind each other.”

I swallow past the lump in my throat.

Suddenly, I hear a crash from outside.

Vi and I hurry out and find mom rummaging through the cupboard, looking for food.

“Do you have any chips?” mom demands.

I’m not surprised by her sudden energy boost. Mom can crash into a drunken slumber one minute and then wake up, fully present and annoyingly smug, the next.

“My head is killing me,” she complains. “Rick buys the cheap stuff. I need to teach him where to get the goods.”

I frown. “Sit down, mom. I’ll make you a sandwich.”

“I don’t want a sandwich.”

“Then you won’t eat,” I snap.

She frowns at me and sinks into a chair around the table. “Testy.”

Vi joins me. “Need some help?”

I shake my head.

“Viola, baby, can you get your mommy some water?”

Vi gives me a look as if asking for my permission first.

I jut my chin at the fridge.

While Vi pours, I slap two pieces of bread on a plate and slather it in condiments.

“I heard you had a busy day yesterday, mom,” I say tightly.

“Mff.” She makes a coarse grunt before gulping down all the water.

“What did you think about Dutch when you met him? He’s a little intense, right?”

Mom chokes and a flood of water spews from her mouth.

Vi shrieks and jumps back to avoid getting doused.

Unbothered, I slap meat on the bread, shove the sandwich together and drop the plate in front of mom. “Why did you send Dutch to Sinner’s Den?”

She glances away.

“Did you know I’d be there?”

The dots connect.

Mom lying about having evidence on Jarod Cross.

Jarod telling me to get evidence on Dutch.

Me coincidentally spying on the brothers ‘with drugs’.

I lower my voice urgently, “Mom, are you working with Jarod Cross?”

Her eyes dart back and forth.

Vi brings mom a napkin. “Cadey, why would mom know a celebrity like Jarod Cross. That’s like a homeless guy having Oprah’s phone number.”

“Answer me, mom.”

Mom ignores me and points a strained smile at Vi. “How was your weekend, sweetie?”

“Fine,” Vi mumbles. “We hung out with Dutch and then I had to do a group project.”

I cringe at Vi’s mention of Dutch.

Mom pounces on it right away. Her body stiffens. “Cadence, you were with that boy all weekend?”

“No,” I lie.

“Yes,” Vi says.

We both glance at each other.

Mom stiffens. “You were with him *alone*?”

I say nothing.

Mom pins her dark eyes on my little sister. She looks sharper than she ever has before.

Viola breaks easily. “Cadey stayed out with Dutch all night and didn’t come back until morning.”

“Viola!” I hiss.

“Sorry. She scares me.”

Mom shoots up so fast, the chair behind her topples. It crashes to the floor, making both me and Vi jump.

“Come with me,” mom barks.

“I’m not going anywhere—”

“Now!” Mom hisses.

My anger rushes to the surface and I stay right where I am.

“No, mom. You don’t get to do that. You don’t get to rush in here after disappearing *again* and act like my mother when you’ve been anything but a mother to me. I’m not going anywhere with you. Not until you tell me exactly what kind of deal you have with Jarod—”

“Did you use a condom?”

I freeze.

“How many times did he discharge? Were you using protection every time? Was it around or before your period?”

My eyes widen.

Vi’s are about to pop out of her head.

My chest heaves, but I’m trapped. Mom is going to keep talking about this in front of Vi and I don’t want her to hear such crude discussions.

At least, not when I’m the subject.

Muscles so tense I feel like I’m a walking tin can, I stalk past mom and open the door. She doesn’t immediately follow me. Instead, she goes into my room.

“Get out of there!” I hurry after her.

But I don’t have to drag her out. She meets me in the hallway and tosses my purse at me.

“Why do you have this?”

“You’re gonna need that.” Her expression is hard.

Thoroughly pissed off, I trail mom to the door.

“Where are you going?” Viola’s voice trembles.

“Vi, lock up behind me. We’ll be right back,” I say. I try to muster up a smile, but I can’t pull it off.

Vi gives me a worried look, but I don’t have time to comfort her. Mom is already halfway down the stairs.

I follow my mother outside. “Where are we going?”

She doesn’t answer. Her body cuts through the night, dipping in and out of the shadows and the pockets of light offered by the lampposts.

We jog through the streets for what feels like hours.

Finally, I get enough and wrench mom around by the shoulder. “Tell me where we’re going.” She opens her mouth, but I stop her with a raised finger. “And if you think I’m going to buy you drugs right now, you’re insane.”

Mom gestures to the store up ahead. It’s the same pharmacy where Dutch bought me flip-flops and patched up my bleeding heel.

The man behind the counter is the same guy from that night too.

He points at me. “Flip-Flops.”

I frown.

“Where’s the Tattoo Guy?” He wiggles his eyebrows.

“How long have you been here, boy?” Mom grunts. “Don’t you know not to ask questions in this neighborhood?”

The clerk’s smile disappears and he gives mom a sullen nod.

I stumble when mom yanks me down an aisle. Past the tampons. Past the pads. Past the pregnancy tests.

“Grab them.” She reaches for a thin box and then another.

The price tag makes me gag.

I stop her, my hand on her wrist. “What are you doing?”

“We can’t take any chances.” Her voice is low, urgent. She sounds like she’s about to rehash her alien abduction. “Grab

those over there. They're more experimental, but it might be effective. We may already be too late. It's hard to be sure."

"Mom, I already asked you. What is—"

"Plan B." She spears me with her glazed eyes. I'm stunned when I see genuine fear in them. "You can't get pregnant, Cadey."

I blush, feeling exposed. Me? Pregnant? The thought is foreign. I never once dreamed of having a family someday, and I sure as hell don't dream of having one now.

"Who said I'm pregnant?" I snap.

Mom berates me. "Sex has consequences, girl. It's a principle. You jump off a roof, gravity doesn't give a damn about you or what you want for your future. It's going to pull you down. You sleep with Jarod Cross's son... it'll pull you down the same way." Her eyes cut into me. "You should have never gotten involved with him."

On that we both agree.

Dutch is temptation wrapped in ink and I kept finding myself under his spell. It's like he has a hold on me that I can't break.

"And you should have done this earlier," mom scolds me. Her hands are trembling as she turns a box over and compares it to the other. "When was the last time you two—?"

"Mom."

"When?"

I blush harder. "Today."

Her bottom lip goes stiff.

"But it wasn't..." My cheeks burn so hard it hurts. "It wasn't our first time. That was a while ago."

Mom grits her teeth. "You better hope you didn't take too long to take your meds."

"It's not like I didn't try," I mumble. After Dutch took my virginity, I went to ask for medication just in case. The



pharmacists said I couldn't buy the pills if I was under eighteen.

I didn't freak out about it. Back then, I thought me and Dutch would be a one-and-done thing. I didn't know he would be this insatiable. I didn't know... it could happen anywhere, at any time.

And it seems like Dutch wants me all the time.

"Stop." I push the pills back on the shelf because the only thing worse than buying this by myself is buying it with my mother. "I'll handle it."

"Oh, you'll handle it?" Mom taunts.

"I'll come back. I swear." I lower my voice. "But right now, I don't have enough money to get all this."

"So you're going to throw away your future because you don't have a couple hundred?"

"Dutch and I will talk about—"

She lets loose a cackle so loud, that a couple in the row behind us peer around the corner.

"Dutch isn't going to take care of this for you, Cadey. He *wants* this problem."

My eyebrows knot.

"How could you let him use you?" Mom hesitates, her hands over the pregnancy test. She swipes it into her arms. "How could you be so unbelievably stupid? At the very least, you should have made sure you were on the pill."

I lower my head. I didn't have anyone I could talk to about this, especially not Breeze who would rake me over the coals for getting this deep into the boy who tortured me.

"If Dutch gets what he wants, it's over for you," mom hisses. "Over!"

"What do you mean?"

Her eyes dart back and forth as if someone is watching her. "Hurry and pay for this. You're taking one right now."

“No,” I grab her arm, sensing that there’s something she isn’t telling me. “Spit it out. You know something.”

“No, I don’t.”

She’s shaking like a hurricane now. A mixture of withdrawal and nerves.

“I’m not taking a single pill until you tell me.”

Discomfort etches into her weathered face when she says, “Look, I’m not supposed to know this and you aren’t either.”

I lean closer, my heart pounding and my palms sweaty.

Mom’s throat bobs and she whispers, “I overheard a conversation I wasn’t supposed to. Something about the Cross family, an inheritance and two conditions the heir has to meet.”

As she talks, invisible thorns wind around my body and dig into my flesh.

“What were they?” I choke out.

Mom flinches.

“What were the conditions!” I shriek.

“Whoever gets the money has to be married...”

*‘What are those?’*

*‘Handcuffs.’*

*‘Marry me, Cadey.’*

*‘You don’t have to struggle alone.’*

I stumble back, my throat closing up.

“... And,” mom adds, “they need to have a son.”

My knees weaken and I’m crashing into the ground. My hands flail for purchase, but I can’t save myself. My mad descent is followed by boxes and boxes of pregnancy tests and morning-after pills thundering to the ground.

## CHAPTER FORTY

### DUTCH

I'm not much of a songwriter, but being with Cadey has lyrics gushing out of me like blood from a head wound.

Finn and Zane come later and catch me working out a melody with my guitar. I acknowledge my brothers with a chin dip, but I keep playing. I don't want to lose this thread.

They understand and say nothing until the last note rings through our studio garage.

"Sounds good," Finn says.

"A little more romantic than our usual sound though." Zane opens the mini-fridge. I see my twin hesitate as he reaches for his usual beer and then, in a surprising show of restraint, he goes for a soda instead.

"I'm thinking of a rhythmic bass line." I meet Finn's eyes. "Less hardcore rock. Heavier on the funk."

"Don't think a funky bass line will save you. I know a love song when I hear one." Zane takes a swig of the soda.

Finn squints at my guitar like an old man who forgot his glasses. "Did you get new strings?"

"No."

Zane bounds over and peers closer at the strings. "C-A-D-E-Y... Dutch, is that a heart on your E string?"

“Mind your own business.” I shove him back.

Zane shakes his head. “He’s gone, Finn. Totally gone.”

I rest my guitar in my lap and balance my elbows over it. “How did your conversation with Miss Jamieson go? Did she forgive you for throwing her over your shoulder?”

As expected, Zane’s cocky laughter dies a sudden death.

Out of my two brothers, he’s the last one who should be making fun of me.

Finn turns to him, eyes inquiring. “Jinx didn’t rat you out.”

“That’s because I traded a secret with her as soon as I was done with our dear step-sister.”

My eyebrows hike. This is the first time I’ve heard Zane refer to Miss Jamieson as our step-sister without descending into a drunken stupor or pounding his heart out on the drums.

“What secret?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

I set the guitar on the stand and stretch my back. I don’t feel the strain while I’m playing but, as soon as the music ends, it’s like the world chomps at the bit to remind me I’m human.

“I know you guys have been worried about me,” Zane adds soberly. He scrapes the heel of his hand against his cheek. “I spazzed out trying to force myself to do what I thought I was supposed to.”

“And?” I ask, sensing he’s come to some sort of revelation.

“After today, I’ve decided to do things my way. Even if it’s complicated as hell.”

Finn watches him quietly.

I do too.

Zane isn’t asking for our permission and I can tell that he’s made up his mind. However, I offer my encouragement anyway.

“Screw what people think,” I assure him. “Whatever your plan is, we’ve got your back.”

Finn smirks. “As long as you don’t paint her name on your drums.”

I pretend to throw a punch.

Zane slaps me on the back. “I heard about Brahm’s storming Harris’s office. You sure you can handle being married to a stubborn girl like that? She won’t let you win any arguments.”

“We’ve got our own type of conflict resolution.” I smirk crookedly.

Finn says nothing, but his eyes glint with understanding.

“You’re not fooling anyone, you filthy animal,” Zane jokes.

Finn picks up his bass guitar and slings the strap over his neck. “Play that melody again and let me see if I can find the rhythm you were thinking of.”

Zane jumps behind the drums.

I oblige my brothers by grabbing my guitar, but before I play a note, I warn them, “I’m expecting a call from Cadey tonight. The minute this phone rings, practice is over.”

*“Whipped!”*

*“Don’t bring your married vibes in here!”*

I laugh at their protests, bring my phone close so I can see when it buzzes, and start working out the new song.

Thirty minutes ticks by.

And then an hour.

And then two hours.

At first, I don’t notice.

Since meeting Cadey, my relationship with music has been changing. I find myself getting lost in it more often than before.

Eventually, I start to notice how late it's getting.

"Why the hell hasn't she called?" I mumble, swiping my phone roughly and checking my messages.

Nothing.

"Zane, can you text me?"

Behind his drum set, my brother taps on his phone.

At once, I get a message from my twin.

It's the middle finger emoji.

"It's working," I growl.

"Maybe she's sleeping," Finn says.

"She promised she'd call," I growl. "She should be done talking to her brother by now."

"Don't be clingy, bro. It's not a good look," Zane warns.

"What if she's hurt—"

"She's probably fine," Finn says, giving me a look.

"You're going to be married. Do you want to smother her before you've even said 'I do'? What if she decides she doesn't want to be with someone who can't give her a break?"

"We're in dangerous times."

"There will always be danger, bro. If this is how you're acting *before* marriage, imagine how much worse you'll be when you move in together?"

I glance at Finn.

My brother shrugs. "This might be a test. Maybe she wants to see if you go ballistic if she doesn't keep her promise."

"Ballistic? Why would I go ballistic?"

Finn shrugs again.

I tap my phone against my leg. I'm not angry. I'm just worried. Cadey's in dad's sight and, since her mom set me up, her mom is in dad's pocket too. Their entire family has a big red target on their back because of me.

“Cool off, Dutch.” Finn sets his guitar away and pins me with his quiet gaze. “If she needs you, she’ll call.”

It goes against my grain, but I take my brother’s advice and set my phone down.

Cadey might still be with her brother, or she might be with Vi, or she might even be with her other friends celebrating Serena’s return to Redwood.

I don’t want to keep her from having her own life. And I don’t want to police every free moment she has.

*Space. I can do that.*

But as the night wears on and then morning creeps into my room, I can’t shake the feeling that something’s off.

My phone has a ton of new updates—as usual.

But none of them are from my fiancée.

*Don’t panic yet, Dutch. You can interrogate her at school.*

I leave the house first, rushing to Redwood Prep before the sun is up properly. Cadey doesn’t have work service anymore, but I wouldn’t put it past her to stubbornly continue the job just because I’m the one who arranged the pardon for her.

The sun creeps over the tree tops.

My phone tags the hours as they slip past.

More students arrive.

They all watch me, prowling and pacing the front steps of Redwood like an agitated beast waiting for its mate.

No Cadey.

I send her another text.

Then a call.

Screw space.

Why isn’t she at Redwood? Is she sick? Did she get kidnapped?

A little after the first morning bell chimes, Zane and Finn walk toward me. They’re not alone.

“Serena,” I say, nodding at the goth chick with the ebony hair and bright red lipstick. With the leather jacket, she looks like she’ll either climb on someone’s bike or rob someone.

Four months ago, I didn’t give a damn about Serena Parker. I didn’t even know her name. But she’s Cadey’s friend and so she’ll have a place at my table.

I stalk toward her so intently that she drops back a step. Hauling to a stop in front of her, I growl, “Have you heard from Cadence?”

“No. Why? Isn’t she here?”

My jaw works.

Finn motions to Serena and juts his chin at the doorway.

She scowls at the instruction but, after taking a look at my face, decides to make herself scarce.

“You think she’s lying?” I bark at my brothers.

“We can’t do anything if she is.”

“Of course we can.”

“What do you want us to do? Torture her into telling us the truth?” Zane snorts.

I consider it.

Finn gives me a dark look. “Dutch.”

I run a hand through my hair. Something isn’t right. I can feel it in my chest. All the way down to my bones.

“She still hasn’t reached out to you?” Zane asks.

“She said she’d call.” My ribs feel like someone’s grabbing them, one-by-one, and snapping them like twigs. “She hasn’t called yet. She’s not at school. She’s not answering my texts.”

“I’ll call Vi,” Zane says. “Maybe Cadey’s sick or something.”

Deep in my chest, I know that’s not the case.

But there’s no freaking law against hoping, is there?



I wait while my brother makes the call.

Zane twirls a drumstick in one hand, listening. Finally, he shakes his head. “Vi’s probably in class. She’s not picking up.”

“Dammit.” I surge down the stairs.

Finn grabs my shoulder.

I stop mid-step and glare a hole through his face. “Let me go.”

“You could be over-reacting.”

“If you’re right, I lose nothing. But if you’re wrong...” I stare my brother in the eyes. “I lose everything.”

His fingers slowly drift off my shoulder.

I race down the stairs, jump into my car and speed across town to the south side. Cadey’s old high school. The first thing I see when I slow my car down are the chains. Chains so rusted and sharp they looked like they were guarding a prison.

When I get inside, I have to stop at a metal detector. I’m seething with impatience. Every security check slows me down.

*What the hell is this place?*

I hate Redwood Prep, but at least we don’t have to freaking strip ourselves of metal every morning before we go in.

*“Is that Dutch Cross?”*

*“No way!”*

*“Is that the guy from the band...”*

*“He’s so handsome!”*

*“Am I dreaming right now?”*

I hear their whispers, but I’m on a mission.

Spotting a kid who looks around Vi’s age, I stop her with a hand. “Viola Cooper. Do you know her?”

The kid starts shaking like I asked for her lunch money.

“Answer me,” I hiss.

“Y-yes.”

“Take me to her.”

She turns, drawing the eye of everyone in the hallway as we dip and weave past busted lockers, weathered school posters and classrooms that smell like hopelessness.

I grit my teeth at the thought of Cadey spending day after day here. She deserves only the finest things—bright lights, diamonds, utter adoration.

“In there.” My guide points into a cramped classroom filled with so many students I wonder if it’s legal to keep that many people in one room. On a weathered chair all the way at the back—similar to where Cadey likes to sit at Redwood—is Vi.

I stalk forward, ready to throw the door open and interrupt the class.

“You can’t do that,” my guide says, snatching my wrist.

I glare at her.

She drops her hand. “Wait a sec.”

The kid creeps to the window and waves to get Vi’s attention. She then points to me and Viola’s eyes bug.

“Miss Hendricks,” Vi raises her hand, “can I use the bathroom?”

“Make it quick.”

“Thank you.” I slip my guide a hundred dollar bill.

She gives me a big smile and hurries off.

Vi shuffles out of the classroom and motions for me to follow her.

I grit my teeth. I want answers *now*.

But I keep my composure and trail the thirteen-year-old to a quiet hallway.

She tilts her head up to me, eyes so much like Cadey's that it makes my heart ache. "I know why you're here. But I don't have any answers."

The foreboding feeling gets stronger. "What do you know?"

"I woke up this morning. There was breakfast on the stove and a note telling me she loved me and to behave when I get to Shanae's house. I was confused, so I went to Cadey's room and it was cleared out."

Pain strikes my heart like the lash of a thorny whip.

My heart picks up speed.

"Did you call her?"

"Right away. I asked where she was and what was going on. Cadey didn't say anything to me at all. She just told me that she'd talked to Shanae's mom and I'd be staying at Shanae's house for a while." Vi chews on her bottom lip. "She said not to tell anyone mom was alive and..."

"And?"

Vi chews on her bright pink bottom lip. "Cadey also said not to tell you anything."

I squeeze my eyes shut, trying hard not to punch a hole through the cheap plastered walls. This school already looks beaten-down enough.

"You disobeyed her," I note.

"Because I know you love my sister and I know the only time she's ever loosened up and depended on someone else was with you. She's not used to being the weak one, but Cadey deserves to have that. She deserves a place where she can be fragile and taken care of."

My heart clamors to my throat. I step closer to Cadey's little sister. "If she calls you again, let me know."

Vi doesn't inch back. She knows me well enough to know that I'm upset, but I wouldn't hurt her. I wouldn't hurt any of the people Cadey loves.

Nodding, she says, “I will.”

I let out a deep breath and muster up a slightly less angry expression. “Go back to class now. If you have any problems, tell your principal to call me.”

“Trust me. I won’t have any problems. In fact, I think a lot of kids will be at my lunch table today.” Vi looks up with a starry-eyed gaze.

I have no idea what she means by that, but she seems happy.

Gesturing for her to return to class, I head in the opposite direction.

My phone is out and I’m dialing Cadey’s number again when someone small and blonde steps into my path. I glance up, teeth gritted, muscles taut, ready to snap at the obstacle in my way.

Through the haze of my desperation and worry about Cadey, I recognize the girl standing in front of me.

“We need to talk,” she snaps.

I stare at her a beat longer and then it registers.

It’s Breeze, Cadey’s best friend.

## CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

### DUTCH

The basketball court behind the school is empty, which surprises me. I thought more people would be hiding out here. This seems like the sort of school where sports rule over music.

“A student got stabbed under the net at homecoming,” Breeze says, noticing where my gaze has strayed. “The cops installed cameras.” She juts her finger at the corners of the park where red blinking lights point at us. “So no one chills here anymore.”

“Do you know where Cadence is?” I ask brusquely.

“Even if I did, do you think I would tell you?” Breeze spits. Her eyes are full of hatred for me.

“Do you at least know if she’s alright?” There’s a hint of desperation in my tone. I don’t care. I’m going crazy thinking of all the bad things that might have happened to Cadey. I won’t be able to breathe until I know she’s okay.

“Oh? Now you’re worried about her?”

“Breeze,” I growl, my patience snapping.

“She never should have fallen for you.”

I freeze. This is my first time hearing someone confirm Cadence’s feelings for me. Not even *she* admitted it to me yet.

The wind picks up and the torn netting sways back and forth.

“I used to love your band,” Breeze says quietly. Her eyebrows form a pointed V. “I used to hear the anger and the pain in your music, and it spoke to me because I felt that anger too. I woke up every day, burning with it.”

She licks her lips. “But after hearing what you and your brothers did to Cadey, I couldn’t unsee it. Every time I listened to your music, every time I heard that anger, I imagined what that fury would do if it was pointed at an innocent person.”

My fingers curl into fists.

Guilt stabs me in the chest.

“The Kings, the band, Redwood, there was a time I wanted to be close to that light. I never told her, but I was jealous of Cadey. Going to school with you four became my dream.”

Her expression hardens. “But sometimes, your dreams need to stay where they are. If they join you in the real world, you realize that, in the light, they’re ugly and despicable.”

“Do you know where Cadey is or not?” I grind out.

“Why do you want her, Dutch? So you can control her?”

My eyes flick up to Breeze’s.

“You think because she’s poor, because this—” Breeze gestures to the chain link fences, the graffiti, the cameras—“is where she comes from that she should be grateful to you even if you hurt her?”

“I will never hurt her.” I pause and amend, “Not anymore.”

“You can’t make promises like that because you don’t even know what love is. Who’s to say you won’t get tired of her? Maybe in a few weeks, she stops being entertaining, and you find another poor, helpless scholarship student to play around with.”

“Whether you believe me or not, my love for Cadence is real. And it’s not going to change. I need to know where she is.”

“So you can torment her more? You think ruling and obsessing over her... you think any of that is love? It’s not. It’s delusion. It’s control. It’s evil.”

My lips delve into a scowl and I snap at her, “If you’re not going to tell me, then I don’t need anything else from you.”

I whirl around, my temper rattling under my skin and begging to pour out. Breeze’s accusations are like claws, tearing through the fabric of my mind.

Is she right? Did my love hurt Cadey rather than make her life better?

“I’m glad she got away from you.”

My entire body stops cold. I spin. Stalk forward. And then I’m in front of Breeze in a blink.

Looming over her, I growl, “What do you mean she got away from me? You’re saying Cadey wasn’t taken by someone. She *chose* to leave?”

Eyes shiny with disdain, Breeze taunts, “Why don’t you ask your father?”

\* \* \*

I crash through the doors of dad’s studio, ignoring the way Lucien eyes me and Ron moves to stop me.

“Mr. Cross, you can’t—”

My fist connects with Ron’s face before he lays a hand on my arm. I crush skin, bone and flesh and hear something crack.

A wave of satisfaction fills me.

Lucien roars. He swings at me, holding nothing back, eyes ablaze as if he’d dreamt of this moment all his life. Ron rises from where he’d staggered against dad’s mixer board. Together, they forcefully bend my arms behind my back and drive me to my knees.

I smile despite the pain. I knew I'd only get one punch in and I'm glad I made it count. Ron's mouth is bleeding harder than mine is.

I'm just sad I didn't get to give Lucien the same greeting.

Next time, maybe.

"What is all this?" Dad steps into the room, wearing a turtleneck, jeans and a smug expression. His eyes rove over his bodyguards, both breathing hard.

"Hi, dad," I say darkly.

"Shouldn't you be in school—"

"Where. Is. She?"

"Who?"

One word. One eyebrow quirk. But I see the truth as if it walked into the room with us.

Dad took Cadey—whether she went willingly or not.

He's the one behind this.

"I'm going to end you," I growl. "Where the hell is she?"

"You have to be more specific, son." Dad goads me, his tone slathered in amusement.

My father can't hide it when he sees someone else's pain. He feeds on it. Like a ghost. Like a demon.

I'm wearing my emotions on my sleeves, unable to hide my desperation and he's slurping it up like a greedy bastard.

"I'm only going to ask this one more time," I growl, rising to my feet. "Where is she?"

Dad coaches his face into a blank expression. Stepping slowly toward me, he lowers himself to one knee. Voice a reptilian hiss, he whispers, "I told you not to play this game with me, Dutch. You're far too young, far too impetuous to see the bigger picture."

"Where!" I roar. My body jerks as I fight against my human restraints, but Lucien and Ron have me locked in their grip.



Dad smacks my bruised cheek. He hits it again, harder. The sound of skin meeting skin is loud in the room.

“You’re in the big leagues now, Dutch. This isn’t Redwood Prep. This is the real world and, out here, you’re just a kid with no power.”

My eyes narrow.

“Do you see why you shouldn’t go against your father?” He says in a stern tone. “Now I have to look like the bad guy.”

“You think I’m powerless?” I raise my head slowly. “I’m going to tear your kingdom down, brick by brick.”

He arches both eyebrows, still looking amused.

“If you touch her—”

“Don’t waste my time with threats.” He straightens and walks to the mini bar, stride sure. Arrogant. Always freaking arrogant. Like nothing in this world can ruffle him. And even if it did, he wouldn’t let anyone see. “Believe it or not, she’s the one who came to me, son.”

“Bull—”

“I’m sure she made her own arrangements, even if she left in a rush.”

My mind whirrs. Vi said that Cadence told her to stay at a friend’s house. She hinted that she was leaving to Breeze.

If she was kidnapped against her will, would she have time to prepare her circle?

“This is why you never fall in love, Dutch.” Dad pours himself a finger of whiskey. He hesitates and then he pours one for me too. “It makes you weak. Makes you vulnerable. And the harder you try to protect that love,” he brings the cup over to me, “the tighter you try to hold on to it, the more it wants to escape.”

Dad gestures for his meatheads to let me go. Ron withdraws his arm, but Lucien flings me forward when he releases me.

My hands smack on the ground, sending a ricochet of pain up my elbow and into my shoulders.

I look up and glare at him. Lucien scowls, retreating along with Ron to the edge of the room.

Dad motions for me to take the amber liquid.

I take the cup and turn it over. The whiskey falls out and hits the carpet, stinking the air with booze.

Dad frowns.

“You’re right about one thing. My whole life is ahead of me. But you—” I move toward him, “have *so* much on the line. And your life is already half over. If you lose everything now, there’s no coming back.”

His eyes widen slightly, a sign of his discomfort.

I drop the empty whiskey glass on the ground. It bounces on the carpet but doesn’t shatter.

“I’m going to find her and you better pray no one’s harmed a single hair on her head. If she has so much as a broken nail, I’m coming for you. We’ll see how much damage I can do in the real world.”

Dad’s left eye twitches, but it’s the only outward sign of his displeasure.

I stalk to the door.

“She knows,” dad calls after me.

My feet are suddenly glued to the ground. I can’t move a single muscle.

“Didn’t look like she’d cried. She was so cold about it when she asked me if it was true. I said yes and she just...” Dad stops for dramatic effect. “She just took in a breath and nodded. Almost like it finally made sense to her. Why you wanted her around. Why you were pursuing her.” He chuckles and pours himself another glass. “I’ve never seen anyone so tragically composed after hearing their boyfriend only saw them as a private *whore*.”

I whirl around, my face thunderous but dad's goons are too fast. My arms are being held back and I'm once again hitting the floor.

"You're never getting what you want, Dutch. Not now. Not ever." Dad smiles at me. "I suggest you forget about that girl. She's long gone. And I don't just mean physically. Right here." He taps his chest. "You're so far away from her."

"What did you *do*?" I wrench out.

"I opened her eyes. I made her see that there's a world beyond you. She's expanding, transforming into something you wouldn't even imagine." Dad sips calmly. "I mean it when I say this is good for her. And if you truly love her, Dutch, you'll set her free."

My insides twist into a painful knot.

I don't know how she found out the truth, but it doesn't make sense. Cadence knew her mom was working with my dad. She knew dad isn't to be trusted... why did she go to him instead of me? Why did she choose to run instead of talking to me?

Footsteps thud through the hallway outside.

Dad's eyes jump to the door and his grin gets bigger. I see that expression and realize too late why he was talking so much when he'd usually keep his cards close to the chest.

It's a trap.

My eyes widen when I see police officers filling the room. Lucien and Ron step aside while a cop takes over their position.

The handcuffs are cold when they slap around my wrist. I'm still reeling from dad's words and it takes me a moment to catch up with what's happening.

The second I do, I start to fight.

"What the hell are you doing? Uncuff me!"

No one listens to me.

“I need to find my fiancée. I need to—” The rest of my words become a breathless gasp as they push me into the ground.

“Careful. Careful. He’s still my son,” dad says, grinning like a snake.

My eyes burn with anger, but I’m helpless and he knows it.

“Dutch Cross, you are under arrest for the illegal possession of drugs. You have the right to remain silent. You have the right to a lawyer...”

I tune out the police, my eyes on dad. “Doing this won’t keep me away from her.”

“Oh, Dutch.” Dad tilts his head and looks at me like an adult would look at a child’s artwork. “Don’t you get it? The girl you thought you knew, the one you fell in love with, you’re never going to find her again.”

## CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

CADENCE

I step out of the changing screen and notice there's a tray waiting on the dresser. Right next to the makeup brush.

My stomach clenches painfully, which I don't think was the desired effect. The food is different this time. Sushi. Yesterday, it was salad. Tomorrow, it'll probably be something else.

"He told me that you should eat," the makeup artist says. She's a timid, quiet woman who doesn't talk much. I've been wondering if she was instructed not to speak to me.

Doesn't matter.

Her quiet suits me just fine.

"I'm not hungry." I push the plate away.

She studies me as if gauging whether it would be more prudent to piss me off by insisting or to just let it pass.

My shoulders tighten.

Her fingers reach for the makeup brush as the moment passes.

I tilt my face up to the light, body numb. Mind empty. She pastes liquid on my face. Powders. Lipstick. Sharp things close to my eyes that could blind me.

I almost wish they would.

I don't want to look at myself.

But she turns my chair around.

My reaction is the same as it has been since I got here—nothing. Makeup on or off, I don't recognize myself anymore.

A familiar voice comes from the hallway. The door opens and lets in the screams of fans. Some of them are here to see me. Most of them are here to see *Pain & Punishment*, a new band from Jarod Cross's studio label.

It doesn't matter.

None of it matters.

"Cadence."

I glance up at the mirror. A handsome face stares back at me. Brown hair. Brown eyes. Strong jaw.

"Hunter," I call his name in the same patronizing tone.

"You need to eat."

"I'll eat when I'm hungry."

"I haven't seen you touch food since we got here."

"I ate granola bars in my hotel room."

"Granola bars?"

I shrug. The least Jarod Cross can do is pay an exorbitant amount for my forage through the mini bar.

"I'm done," the makeup artist says. She peers up at Hunter and bats her eyes.

He doesn't give her a single look.

I spot her sigh of disappointment and watch as she hurries out of the room. I wonder what she imagines her life would be if Hunter actually reciprocated her signals. What does she really want from him? Acknowledgement that he sees her? That she's pretty? Does she want him to take her up to his hotel? Does it stop there? Does she want more?

She's been flirting with him every day. Can't she see he doesn't want any of those things with her?

There's a part of me that hates her. Probably because she reminds me of myself.

I wonder why we can't let go of the people, the things that don't want us back. Or worse, that are bad for us. Is it our fault? Should we hold the blame?

I dig my nails into my palm until it hurts and then I press in deeper. Don't I deserve the pain for making bad choices?

"Cadence."

I jolt and look at Hunter.

He's frowning, lips set in a thin line. "You keep spacing out on me."

"You talk too much," I mumble.

His eyebrows tighten. He looks at me like he doesn't know who I am.

I reach for the veil, set it over my freshly-done makeup and hand him the ties.

He secures it at the back of my head. "If I knew you'd be so much trouble, I wouldn't have agreed to this personal security gig."

"Go home then," I say.

I didn't ask for anyone to follow me into my own version of hell. In fact, I'd prefer to be alone. Hunter's constant worried looks only make me feel worse.

"Done," Hunter says.

I step out of the chair. Hunter's eyes slide over me. If I wasn't so dead inside, I'd probably be flattered by the glint of admiration.

Jarod Cross's costume designer made me a black dress with elegant sequins and a long veil that trails from the top of my head and fans out behind my piano stool when I sit.

The back of the dress is slightly sexier with a scooped out design that shows off a ton of skin beneath the veil. There's a matching mask to hide the lower portion of my face.

When Jarod asked me what I wanted to wear, I told him it didn't matter. As long as when I step out into the audience, the only thing I'm exposing to the world is my eyes.

I notice Hunter is still staring and I frown. "Isn't it time for me to get on stage?"

"Oh. Right." He clears his throat and opens the door for me.

I walk with him down the hallway, carrying the tail end of my veil over one arm.

Hunter's stride falls in line with mine. "You get a day off on your birthday tomorrow. What do you want to do?"

"Nothing," I mumble. We're closer to the stage now. The sound of Pain and Punishment's edgy music fills the air. The bass slips under my skin and makes my body vibrate.

Hunter gives me a scolding look. "Eighteen is a big number."

"Miss Soprano." The crew manager offers his hand to me.

I slip my fingers into his grip and meet Hunter's eyes. "It's just another day."

"Let's do something special. Tonight. We'll celebrate your birthday the right way." Hunter offers an encouraging smile.

My lips remain flat. My heart remains cold.

I climb on top of the lift.

As the platform rises, I see the packed room. Faceless blobs. Screams loud enough to shatter my eardrums. Lights too big and too bright.

I adjust my ear piece, glad that I have an in-ear monitor so I can hear myself when it's time to play the piano.

The leader of Pain and Punishment, some guy whose name I forgot the moment he shared it, gestures to me. The spotlights shift, bearing down on my head. It's hot, like the sun and yet I'm still shivering.



The screams get louder. Everyone seems keyed up, wound so tight I could send them to the moon on a rocket.

I'm featured in the band's last set.

The grand finale.

The emotional punch.

That's what the fan who met me backstage last night called me.

And maybe that's what I am—the world's emotional punching bag.

I take a seat behind my piano, fingers to the keys. Mask on.

Not Cadence Cooper.

To them, I'm Soprano Jones.

I place my fingers to the keys. A low, haunting melody crawls out of the piano. Notes too dark, too dangerous to exist in the light.

I bend my face over the keys and wild, violent emotions seep through the cracks in my heart.

It's unfortunate.

Every day, I get up and I put my feelings in their cages. But they always break out and escape into the night when I play. Music does that. It unlocks the door to the pain, the pleasure, the fear, the joy.

Everything.

I'm masked, yet I can't hide here.

The crowd is silent. They're always silent. Listening. Waiting. Holding their breath until I remind them to breathe.

The leader of the band strums his guitar.

Acoustic. Dutch preferred electric...

But I'm not thinking about him.

I hammer my fingers against the keyboard. Angry stabs. Louder. Louder.

The music builds around me, feeding on my angst. Greedy for more of the pain that crawls out of my melody.

The audience starts singing and screaming. A mass of bodies sway from somewhere beyond me.

I don't see it. I don't hear it.

My fingers move lower. Lower. Until I've run out of octaves and there aren't enough keys to express the depth of my anger.

I climb back to the higher octave and hold the chord just as the song ends.

I'm breathing hard, wrung out over my piano when the last note fades. The crowd roars and chants my name.

'Soprano! Soprano! Soprano!'

The band members smirk at each other. They think it's a gimmick when I flop over my piano like this. The hidden girl, covered from head to toe in a veil and mask. A marketing shtick. A one-way ticket to going viral.

They don't mind that I don't practice with them. Or talk to them. Or care about them. For a no-name band on Jarod Cross's roster, I'm what sets them apart.

The leader turns with his guitar and smiles at me. Suddenly, his image putters out and I see Dutch at the mike, guitar over his shoulder. Blonde hair messy. Amber eyes molten gold under the spotlight.

He's smiling cockily at me like he did the night he dragged me on stage to play the triangle. The night I made the first real step into overcoming my stage fright.

*'Don't look at them, Brahms. Look at me.'*

My skin suddenly feels too tight. My fingers curve on the edge of the piano desk, but I can't shake the striking-hot agony inside me.

And I really can't breathe.

I shoot up from the piano.

My heart is squeezing so intently that it hurts.

Tears sting my eyes and then I'm moving.

The leader of the band glares at me.

The drummer mouths, "Where are you going? We have another song!"

I stomp off the stage.

Hunter is right there. He throws a coat over me. He slings a hand over my arm. If he sees the tears running down my face, he doesn't mention it.

I'm swept away to my dressing room where I change into a regular T-shirt and jeans. Hunter leads me out of the private show and into a black car.

The Christmas-decorated buildings become a blur of lights, fog and concrete outside my window. Finally relaxing a bit, I take out my phone and thumb through my messages.

*Vi: I went by our apartment today. There's still no sign of mom. Should we call the police?*

I almost snort. Call the police and tell them what? That our mom who died came back to life and is missing?

I send Vi a reply.

*Don't worry. She's probably fine.*

The other message is from Breeze.

*Breeze: Sending this early since you're five hours ahead of us. Happy birthday to the best bestie in the world.*

The message has a kissy face emoji and a video collage of me and Breeze together.

I smile for the first time since I stormed into Jarod Cross's office and heard his proposal to go on tour.

The last message is from Serena.

I sit up straight when I see it.

She constantly asks me why I'm taking a break from Redwood, and I'm not sure what to tell her.

*Serena: Redwood Prep is not the same without you, Cadence. Ps. Check out Jinx's latest post. Do you know anything about this?*

I scroll through the post and my stomach clenches in anger.

The car stops in front of the hotel.

Hunter hustles to get my door and open it for me. His eyes scan my face. "I'll order something for you to eat. Go to bed early."

"No." I grip the phone tighter, Jinx's words tattooed behind my eyelids. "I want to do what you suggested."

"What?"

"I want to celebrate my birthday the right way."

\* \* \*

*Jinx: Prince Charming Moving On?*

*Cinderella has been missing from Redwood Prep for three days now and sources say she might never come back. Prince Charming has been MIA lately too. But what first appeared to be a joint romantic getaway is now a royal scandal.*

*Prince Charming has been busy finding himself a new lady love. Pictures of him getting up close and personal with a mysterious blonde bombshell have been circulating everywhere.*

*You snooze, you lose Cinderella.*

*It seems like the queen's throne is about to be claimed by someone new.*

*Until the next post, keep your enemies close and your secrets even closer.*

*- Jinx*

## CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

### DUTCH

Chains rattle close to the door of my holding cell. An officer appears, face flickering in the shadowy night.

I jump to my feet, throwing myself against the iron bars like a man possessed.

“My name is Dutch Cross and I am innocent,” I growl.

“Aren’t you tired, kid?” The officer chuckles. “You’re like a broken record.”

Laughter booms from the holding cells around me.

I’m glad they can laugh.

I’m freaking thrilled this is amusing.

The officer’s eyes drop to the food tray at my feet. It’s empty. I forced myself to eat the gunk, knowing that I needed my strength—either to dig my way out or *punch* my way out of this hell.

“Jarod Cross’s kid sure has spunk, doesn’t he?” The officer taunts. “Look at him glaring me down.”

“I’ll do worse than glare, you piece of—”

“Finish that and you’re threatening an officer, punk.”

My nostrils flare, but I slap my mouth shut.

Smiles get wider. Eyes start glinting.

I want to punch him.

I want to burn them all.

But I can't jeopardize an opportunity to get out.

The door of my holding cell creaks as it swings wide.

The officer moves closer. Head bent toward mine, he says, "You stay out of trouble from now on, alright?" His eyes sweep over me. "Or the next time, it won't be you alone in here."

My eyes narrow. Is he threatening my brothers right now? Who the hell does he think he is?

I mark his face in my mind.

The handcuffs fall away at that moment, distracting me. I woodenly rub my wrists, staring at the marks left on my skin.

"You're free to go," the officer says loudly, stepping back. "Get outta here, kid. Hope you learned your lesson."

If I wasn't in such a rush, I really would swing at him. Let him send me right back to this holding cell for assaulting an officer. Let him charge me if he wants.

But I have more important things to do.

Like find Cadence.

I haven't seen her in seventy-two hours.

Three days. Twenty-five minutes. Seven seconds.

An eternity.

The longer I've been held up in jail, the more urgent I feel. It's like there's something inside me, prodding me forward, telling me to hurry or I'll be too late. Too late for what? Hell if I know.

I step out of prison and I'm stunned to see my brothers waiting outside.

Zane's face twists with relief and he rushes toward me. Even Finn looks unusually nervous.

“Dutch.” Zane grabs my shoulder and looks me over. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“Did they hurt you or... did anyone...”

“No, I was in a holding cell. Alone.” I drill a hard stare into Finn’s face. “What took you so long?”

“We had no idea you were in jail.”

I grunt and tap on my blank phone screen. The cops gave me my phone back and the device is taking forever to turn on.

“Where the hell did you think I was for the past three days?”

“With Cadence,” Finn says.

A ripple of anxiety washes over me.

“After you went to see dad, we got a text from your phone saying you’d found Cadence’s location and you’d gone after her.” Finn scrolls to show me the text in question.

It’s my number.

Written exactly how I would have spoken to them.

“We thought you’d come back to Redwood with her. We didn’t ask questions.” Zane glares into the back of a tree. He looks ready to pummel something, anything. “We should have freaking asked questions.”

“When did you figure it out?”

“When Jinx wrote a post about you being with a blonde.” Finn’s voice is dry. Matter-of-fact.

“A blonde?” I grind out. For the past three days, I’ve been in jail. When would I have time to meet...

Breeze.

Dammit.

Jinx must have gotten pictures of me talking to Cadence’s best friend.

“Neither of us believed it.”

My eyes widen slightly.

“I’ve seen you with other girls,” Zane fills in. “The way you are with Brahm is different. You were—*are*—serious about her. After everything you’ve done for that chick, you wouldn’t jump ship. I had to hear you confirm it with your own mouth.”

My lungs burn. *Well played, dad.*

Our psychopathic father found a way to keep me away from Cadence, while convincing my brothers I was happily spending time with my fiancée.

“Did you hire a lawyer to get me out of jail?” I ask, stomping to the car.

“The cops couldn’t charge you with anything. You were being released today anyway.” Finn stops me and prods me back. He gets into the driver’s seat instead. “It was just a coincidence that Jinx told us your location around the same time.”

I scowl as I climb into the passenger seat. “Jinx? Why would she know I was in jail? Dad told the cops to keep it private. They didn’t even take me in through the front because they were afraid I’d get my picture taken.”

Finn shrugs. Despite his outward calm, his fingers are squeezing the life out of the steering wheel. “We don’t know how Jinx knows anything.”

“Here.” Zane shoves a burger at me from the backseat. “I’ve heard that prison food tastes like crap.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“Eat it.”

“Give me your phone instead. My battery’s shot.”

“I’ll give you when you take a bite,” Zane insists.

I grit my teeth, swallowing back a wave of anger. My brothers are being ridiculous. I’m fine. I don’t need coddling. In fact, I’m burning with energy.



Zane gives me a hard look. It's enough to convince me I shouldn't push my luck.

My fingers close around the burger. It smells like heaven. Especially after eating that jail gunk for three days.

I take a bite for my brother's satisfaction.

He hands over his cell.

"I'm calling Vi." The phone is heavy in my palm. My fingers tremble. "It's been three days. By now, she must know where her sister is."

"Before you do that..." Finn murmurs.

"What?" I stare at the side of his face.

"Show him."

Zane takes the phone away from me and my gut reaction is to lunge for it.

"This video appeared on my feed two days ago," Finn explains.

Zane presses play and the video begins.

On screen is a slim woman draped from head-to-toe in a sparkly veil and face mask. Even covered up, she looks sexy and alluring. The fabric of her veil is slightly sheer and the dress underneath shows off her body.

I suck in a sharp breath. Something about the way she moves over to her piano is familiar.

In the video, the woman sits.

She takes a breath before she presses on the keys.

At the first note, I know.

"It's her," I whisper. The music is full of emotions, ragged, raw, and real. Like a girl stripping down bare and opening herself up for the world.

I'd recognize that music anywhere. Cadey doesn't know how to play any other way than honest.

“She’s a featured guest in the band Pain and Punishment,” Zane says. “She’s crazy good.”

“Pain and Punishment?”

“Dad’s latest new project.” Zane scoffs. “It’s like a rip-off of us.”

“Online, I’ve seen them tagging her as ‘Soprano Jones’.”

“Soprano.” My eyes jolt to the phone. “Cadence used that name the first time she played at Redwood.”

“We didn’t want to get your hopes up,” Finn explains.

“And yet,” I peer at the road sign, “you’re taking me to the airport.”

“The band’s on a European tour. Now that we know Soprano Jones is Cadence, it’s safe to assume she’s over there now with them,” Finn says.

“Just for the record, I don’t think you should do this.” Zane’s chest expands with a breath. “Cadence got sent away. You went to jail. It’s clear Dad’s getting desperate.” He runs a hand through his hair. “If he really went to all this trouble just to keep the inheritance, there’s no telling what he’ll do next. And what if Cadence really gets pregnant?”

My stomach twists into knots.

“I keep thinking it might be safer for you, and for her, if you two stay apart.”

“That’s not happening,” I growl at Finn.

Zane nods as if he’d expected that response. “What are you going to do when you see her? If she’s keeping up with Jinx’s app, she probably thinks you’ve moved on to someone else.”

“She knows that’s bull.”

“Does she?” Finn challenges.

“I don’t care what she believes. I’m going to remind her of the truth,” I spit, my fingers tight on the phone. “She belongs to me. And she always will.”

## CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

### CADENCE

Rowdy laughter breaks out from the crowd behind us. The pub's been getting louder and more crowded as the night wore on.

"Maybe you should slow down," Hunter says, moving my mug away.

I hiss at him and grab the beer from his fingers. The contents slosh over the rim, splattering against my hand and the darkly varnished table.

Hunter gives me the stink eye, but I don't care.

We're sequestered at the back of the pub. Above me, triangle-shaped Union Jack banners hang from the ceiling and there's not a single Christmas tree in sight.

I told Hunter to take me away from the hotel's bar because they were playing Christmas carols and it was making my head hurt. In here, the songs are Europe's version of country music. I can work with that.

"Hold still," Hunter grumbles. He swipes a bunch of napkins from the dispenser and dabs my fingers.

I stare at the napkin, remembering the day at the amusement park when Dutch decided he didn't need a napkin to clean me up.

*'You're melting, Cadey.'*

I refuse to think about his tongue sliding over my skin, or his wicked smile as I gasped.

But now it's all I can think about.

Dutch smiling.

Dutch frowning.

Dutch growling into my ear, '*You're mine, Cadey*'.

Pain strikes me hard.

I react on instinct and send the empty mug flying.

Hunter barely manages to catch it before it hits the ground.

"What the hell?"

"Something's wrong with this beer." I bristle. Lifting another one of the mugs in front of me, I stare at the frothy liquid from underneath. "I shouldn't be able to feel. Why do I still *feel*?"

"Cadence, it's your first time and you're overdoing it. You need to stop now."

I plant my hands on the table and shove myself up. The world tilts and I windmill my arms to keep it from spinning so much.

"Be careful." Hunter hauls on me.

"Get me something stronger," I beg him. "From there to there." Pointing to the liquor on the top shelf, I giggle. "That should do it."

"It won't."

"How do you know?" I counter.

"Even if you get black-out drunk tonight, you're going to wake up tomorrow feeling the same gaping hole in your chest." His eyes are on the table. His tone is contemplative. As if he's gone through it before. "Nothing except time can heal a wound like that."

"Wound?" I laugh raucously. The tables close to us peer at me like I'm crazy.

Maybe I am. Maybe this insanity was handed down to me from my mother. A dark curse that spans generations.

“I don’t have a wound. I’m great. Everything is...” I sway and almost bash my head on the low-hanging lights. “Ow.”

Hunter shakes his head. “I’m taking you back to the hotel.”

“No.” I push him off. “I want another drink.”

He stares down at me like he’d want nothing more than to throw me into the nearest river.

I point a finger at his reddening face and giggle. “You’re angry.”

His jaw works.

“Don’t be angry, Hunter.” I grab his hand and wrap his fingers around the mug. “Drink with me. See?” I smash our mugs together. “Cheers!”

The beer runs down the side of my face and stains my T-shirt as I gulp it down. The brew tastes horrible. Why do people overindulge at parties when beer isn’t even that sweet?

Hunter goes still. I glance aside and notice him staring hard at my face.

“What?”

“I’d rather you talk about him,” Hunter says quietly. “I’d rather you tell me that you loved him and you miss him. This hurts worse. Watching you in pain, in agony—you’re killing me, Cadence.”

His softly spoken words slash my heart in two. I hate seeing the pity in his eyes.

Forcing a laugh, I reach for his drink. “I’ll finish this if you won’t.”

Hunter plants a big hand on top of the beer to keep me from lifting it.

My eyes shoot to his. He’s gazing at me as if I’m a broken doll, shattered on the floor.

Anger spurts from the depths of my soul and causes me to shake.

I curl my fingers into fists. “You’re wrong. I don’t love him. I never loved him. He was... he meant nothing to me.”

Hunter presses his lips into a thin line.

“I never believed him when he said he’d be there for me. I never trusted him when he kept showing up for me and saving me. I never wanted to belong to him.”

The frigid armor around my heart is thawing, releasing a torrent of emotions that I don’t want to deal with.

But it’s like spilled beer.

Once it’s out, you can’t scoop it back in.

“I didn’t like him touching me...”

*When he touched me, my numbness cracked and broke apart. I wanted him to touch me more.*

“... I didn’t like him treating me like I was his property...”

*He made me feel vulnerable and out of control.*

“... I didn’t like that he was always around.”

*But now that he’s not around, all I can think about is how I can see him again.*

“Does that sound like love to you?” I challenge Hunter. “Does that sound like I miss him?”

Hunter’s face goes dark all at once, like he’s been drained of every emotion. Like he’s so incredibly tired.

I see it and I feel particularly cruel. “Why did you come on this trip with me, Hunter?”

His eyes slant over my face.

“I know Jarod Cross approached you. I know it was a good-paying job.” I pause for a minute as the room spins again. “But why did you say yes? You should have just left me alone. It would have been better for the both of us.”

An alarm pings.

It's Hunter's phone.

He glances down at it and then looks up at me. "Happy birthday, Cadey."

"I turned eighteen five hours ago."

"In the UK, but not in the US." He nods. "Now you're eighteen in both countries."

"I'm eighteen." I scoot closer to him. Leaning toward Hunter, I say, "What do you want to do?"

His hand rises to my face.

I close my eyes and tilt my head up. Since the beer didn't do its job properly, maybe Hunter can.

He moves in close. So close I can feel his beer-scented breath on my cheek. He smells different than... no. I'm focused.

This is Hunter.

Hunter.

Hunter.

"What I want?" he breathes.

I nod and purse my lips.

He stops an inch away from my mouth and whispers hotly, "I'll tell you in your hotel room."

## CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

### DUTCH

The airport is colder than a Siberian winter. Both my brothers are dozing in the uncomfortable black chairs. Outside, the sky is dark.

My watch says it's two a.m.

Yesterday, we rushed into the airport, ready to buy a ticket, but we missed the last flight and couldn't bribe, fight or pay our way onto another one.

After that, we called mom. She couldn't get clearance for her private jet to pick me up this late, but she promised to pull some strings. I've been waiting hours for her call.

My phone lights up.

Finally.

"Mom?" I scramble to my feet. "Did you find a way to get me over there?"

"Before I answer that question, I want to ask you something."

"What?" I grouse, hoping she'll hurry up. I don't have time for questions. I need to see Cadey.

"If you found out that Cadence was pregnant—"

I choke on a breath. "Pregnant?"

"... for another man..."



My fingers nearly crack the phone in two.

“... would you still want to be with her?”

“That would never happen.”

“Answer the question, Dutch.”

“It’s a ridiculous question. Cadence isn’t like that.” She’s never been with anyone except me. Never been with anyone before me either. It was obvious. Every time I touched her, she reacted like it was her first time. “Mom, did you get the plane or not?”

My phone beeps.

Confused, I pull it back and glance at the screen.

“Is that the tickets?” I ask excitedly.

“Open the message, Dutch.” Mom’s voice is strangely subdued.

I tap on the screen and pictures of Cadey and Hunter fill my vision. He’s got his face close to hers. From this angle, it looks like they’re kissing.

Dark, violent emotions swirl through my chest.

“Do you see?”

“What the hell is this?”

“There’s more.”

My vision turning red, I swipe through the pictures.

An older guy’s got his arm around Cadey and she’s leaning into him. He’s leading her into a hotel. He’s carrying her into a hotel room.

I grit my teeth and try to keep a clear head. “Mom, you can’t believe anything dad sends you. This is all part of his elaborate plan to break us up.”

“Dutch...”

“I won’t fall for it,” I say agitatedly.

“Dutch...”

“If you knew what dad did to keep me and Cadey apart, you’d—”

“It wasn’t your dad, Dutch.”

I feel the world tilt. “What do you mean it wasn’t dad?”

Mom remains quiet.

“What do you mean, mom?” Spit flies from my mouth. I’m trembling hard.

“My son insists on marrying a girl I’ve never met. Did you think I wouldn’t investigate this young lady?”

Finn’s eyelashes flutter and he stares sleepily at me. “What’s going on?”

I give him a panicked look.

He instantly wakes up and rouses Zane too.

“Your grandmother’s inheritance is more than you can imagine, Dutch. Even if you split it with your brothers, even if you give half of it away, it’ll still be enough for you and your children’s children. If you were to marry this girl, she’d receive a windfall—whether or not you two work out. I had to make sure you weren’t being conned.”

My heart feels like it was flung into a grinder.

“My sources say she and this young man have history—”

“No.” I’m not sure if I’m trying to convince her or myself. “There’s got to be another explanation.”

“Since the tour began, Hunter and Cadence have been very close. They spend all their time together. Tonight, they were kissing, drinking, and acting like a couple. And then he took her to a hotel room. You can imagine the rest.”

My eyes squeeze shut.

My shoulders are taut.

Zane walks up to me. “Dutch?”

I shake my head.

Something dark and sinister drops into my stomach.

“Maybe I’m wrong. Maybe she really does love you and this was one mistake, but that mistake has big repercussions. If you insist on marrying this girl, Dutch, and she eventually finds out she’s pregnant, you won’t know who the baby’s father is until it’s born. And by then, it’ll be too late to start from scratch. You won’t qualify for the inheritance and you’ll be stuck raising another man’s child.”

I’m barely breathing.

“Is that the life you want? Is that the *love* you want? Think about it.” She pauses. “The plane will be on standby in twenty minutes. You can be in London before noon. I love you, son. Choose wisely.”

The line clicks.

She hung up.

“What was that about?” Zane asks.

Finn’s gaze is steady on my face. “Nothing good.”

“Cadence is in London,” I croak.

“We knew that,” Zane says cockily.

“With Hunter.”

Both my brothers fall silent. They were with me that day in the diner when Cadey acted like Hunter was her boyfriend.

I show them the pictures of Cadence kissing him.

Finn frowns.

Zane pales.

“What are you going to do?” Zane asks me.

I fall into the chair, unable to find the strength to stay upright. Cadey’s betrayal cuts deep and I don’t know if I can do it. I don’t know if I can survive the angst. If I get her back and she’s pregnant, will I have to hold my breath until I find out whether the baby’s mine? And what if it isn’t?

“Dammit.” Zane plops into the seat beside me. “No one would expect you to raise another man’s kid, Dutch. It might

hurt like hell now, but you can cut your losses. No one would blame you.”

I drop my head in my hands and scrub my cheeks.

“Dammit!” Zane’s voice is louder now.

I squeeze my eyes shut. My knee is bouncing like I’m already on the plane experiencing turbulence.

“Why the hell aren’t you saying anything?” Zane flings the words at Finn.

“Nothing I say matters.”

“Of course it matters.”

“No, the only thing that matters is what Dutch wants.”

I look up at my quiet brother.

He meets my stare head-on. “This is the moment you decide if you meant all that crap you said about her.”

“It’s not that simple, Finn.”

Finn ignores Zane’s outburst. “Did you really love her? Or did you just want to own her?”

“Of course he loved her. But this is... man, this is insane.” Zane paces up and down.

“Now that she’s of no use to you, now that it can cost you something, now that you really have to sacrifice what you want, what will it be? Does she still belong to you? Or did she only belong to you when she did what you wanted?”

Finn’s words lodge in my brain. I fight them as hard as I can, my instincts going wild.

I’ve always lived in full self-protection mode.

My world.

My rules.

I’ve never had to give up that power for anyone. Never felt the need to.

I close my eyes and try to picture a world without Cadey in it. All I feel is immeasurable pain, darkness, lashing winds and

so much emptiness.

I can give up here. I can move on. I can find some other girl to screw and bear me a child, but I don't want to.

Even if it means I have to die, it's Cadey or nothing.

"I love her," I say, my eyes springing wide open. "I love her."

Finn bobs his head, looking pleased. "Then what the hell are you waiting for? Go get on that plane."

\* \* \*

## CADENCE

The first thing I see when I pry my eyelids apart are beautiful amber eyes. Gold and honey. A worried gaze.

My heart picks up speed.

*Dutch?*

I reach out and touch his face. It's warm.

Tears sting my eyes and I cup his cheek. What is this feeling in my chest? This... swelling emotion. Why does it feel like home?

"Cadence," a voice that is not Dutch's rings in my ears, "drink this."

I blink and gasp when Hunter's face comes into focus. He's stripped out of his shirt and is just wearing a wifebeater. He holds out a bowl of soup to me.

Panicked, I scramble up and look down at myself. When I see that I'm wearing a robe and nothing else, I grab the blanket and pull it up to my chest.

"What happened last night?" I croak.

"You drank too much, so I took you back to the hotel room and then..." Hunter glances at the floor where my panties and bra are lying haphazardly.

My heart lurches to my throat. I don't remember much about last night except for drinking too much and goading Hunter into kissing me at the pub.

I try to sit up straighter, but my head hurts like someone's slamming it with a hammer.

"Don't try to move too fast," Hunter says.

I flinch when he puts his hand on my arm to help me. He notices and withdraws.

Awkwardness falls heavy between us.

"I need to use the bathroom," I whisper.

Hunter nods.

I roll out of bed and scramble to the bathroom. Once I'm in there, I lock the door and try to make sense of what happened. It's hard to think straight with my pounding headache, but I collect all the evidence.

The rumpled bed.

My naked body.

Hunter's naked body.

It's obvious we slept together—even if I don't remember it.

Moaning softly, I shake my head. "Why, Cadence?"

I wouldn't have slept with Hunter just because I was drunk but...

I would have taken my clothes off eagerly if I pretended that Hunter was Dutch.

My head sinks low and I squeeze my robe tightly.

Hunter knocks on the door. "Can you open up for me?"

"W-why?"

"I need to talk to you."

Nervously, I pull the door. Hunter's in the frame, looking tall, purposeful and much older than me. Normally, I don't notice the age gap, but there's something about his clenching

jaw and the way he watches me that makes me feel small and young.

“H-Hunter, I don’t exactly remember last night.” I scrub my scalp with my fingernails. “But I don’t... I mean, whatever happened between us, I’m not interested—”

“The only thing you did to me yesterday was vomit all over my shirt.”

My eyes widen.

“Then you got into bed and started stripping.” His throat bobs. “So I left.”

“You... you mean we didn’t—”

“No, Cadey.”

“Thank God.” I wilt against the sink.

Hunter smirks. “I’m slightly offended.”

“I didn’t mean it like that. I’m just... not in a place to get into another,” I squint my eyes, “situation right now.”

Hunter observes me so long and hard that I start to squirm.

“After last night, I’ve decided to tell you what I think, even if it hurts.” Hunter steps into the bathroom with me. His broad shoulders take up so much of the space. “Because I’d rather be in pain than see you suffer another day.”

My body locks in place. I stare into his eyes.

“You love him, Cadence.”

“No.” I shake my head, fighting it hard.

“You can’t hide it. Leaving him devastated you and the more you pretend you’re fine, the less believable it is.”

“I *am* fine.”

“You’re not eating. You’re not sleeping. And your music —”

“What about my music?” I snap.

“Every note sounds like you’re calling his name. If you need someone that much, then you shouldn’t be running

away.” He lifts his chin. “You should fight for what you love.”

“It’s not that simple,” I croak.

“Since when has love ever been simple?” Hunter’s lips curve into a sad, pained smile. “You either choose it or you don’t. There’s no in between.”

I breathe in deeply and realize that he’s right. The more I’ve tried to run from my feelings, the greater they became.

I fell for Dutch Cross.

The ruthless, dark and twisted ruler of Redwood Prep.

Giving my heart to him scares me because it means losing myself to a power that’s bigger than I am. What if I lose my ability to see clearly? My ability to choose? My ability to fight?

Something clicks into place, like curtains being lifted and revealing the truth.

I can still fight, but it’ll be a fight for love.

I can still see, but those visions will include two people instead of one.

And I still have choice.

I can choose to love him despite my fears.

“Thank you, Hunter,” I say, squeezing his hand. Determinedly, I stalk out of the bathroom. “I need you to do me a favor.”

He remains in the doorway, his smile more broken than I’ve ever seen. “Anything.”

“Take me to the airport.”



## CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

### DUTCH

I don't have any bags with me, so as soon as I'm off the plane and through with customs, I escape into the London fog.

Rain drips steadily over me.

I raise my arms above my head and try to flag down a taxi. My movements are urgent, but none of the damn cars will stop for me. Ridiculous.

I thought it would be easy to catch a cab outside of an airport.

*Apparently, not when it's raining.*

Finally, a taxi stops.

I wrench the door open and grunt out the name of the hotel nearest to the concert venue. Knowing dad's habits, I'm certain he wouldn't have housed his rock band—and Cadence—too far from the show.

Just as the taxi's pulling out, I hear a car beeping behind us.

"You forget so'mim, mate?"

"What? No. Just drive," I growl.

The car behind us blows its horn instantly, but I ignore it in favor of checking my DMs. I sent Cadey hundreds of messages, and I'm hoping she responds.

There's nothing from her.

My taxi pulls into traffic.

Suddenly, a sleek black car speeds up, brushing against us and almost crashing into the taxi's fender.

"Bloody hell." The driver throws his door open and goes right up to the driver's side of the black car. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Hey!" I yell at him. "I'll pay for the damages. Let's just —"

Knuckles ram against my window.

I whip my head back and see Hunter's face behind the tinted glass. My eyes cut through him like a knife. In a second, I ram my door open.

He jumps back, narrowly missing a serious blow.

"Dutch, what are you doing here?" Hunter demands.

"Why the hell are you asking me that?" My fingers dig into his collar and I shove him up against the taxi. "Where's Cadey?"

"Ey, ey, young man." My taxi driver motions to Hunter. "This man is saying you told him to cut me off. What the bloody hell?"

I shake Hunter, slamming him harder against the car. "Where is she?"

His expression grim, Hunter pauses and looks up at me. "I really wish it wasn't a rich prick like you."

"Where?" I roar in his face.

"Ey, now. Calm down." The driver puts a hand on my shoulder.

I wrench him off.

Hunter eyes me like my face makes him want to vomit. And then he growls, "She booked a flight back to the States... so she could see you."

“What?” My fingers go lax. I drop his collar, taking a second to process the news. “How long ago?”

Hunter rubs his neck. He just stares at me, not answering.

“Dammit!” I spin around and race back into the airport. A sea of people press around me, all swirling in a pulse of movement, exhaustion, and excitement.

I didn’t think to get her flight information from Hunter before I barged in here. She could be anywhere.

It doesn’t matter.

I’d search the end of the world to find her because I can’t live without her. I’ve waited my whole life for Cadence Cooper.

I let her slip through my fingers once.

But it’s never going to happen again.

\* \* \*

## CADENCE

“Sorry.” I smile sheepishly at the man who just tapped my shoulder and told me the line moved.

I roll my suitcase forward, moving ever so closer to the jet entrance.

Through the rain-soaked window, I see giant jets coasting onto the runway. Red lights flash before my eyes.

When it first started raining, I was half-afraid my flight would be canceled. This was the earliest ticket I could book.

Every minute that I’ve been waiting felt like torture.

Hunter stayed with me until he got a call from Jarod Cross asking him to ‘report my location’. He’s going to say that I’m at the hotel and buy me more time, but our ruse will be exposed if I don’t get on this plane.

Three more people in front of me.

My knee bounces.

My throat is dry.

*Come on. Come on.*

There's a sudden shriek from the PA system in the airport. The noise is followed by a male voice that sounds nothing like the calm, collected announcers who usually make these broadcasts.

My suspicions are amplified when the speaker clears his throat and mumbles, *"Is it on?"*

Chuckles erupt from the travelers around me.

I take a giant step forward. Shake my head. Tune out the announcer.

I'm almost there.

One more person before I can get on that plane.

*"Brahms."* A dark, rough voice that I haven't heard in far too long makes my muscles seize. *"Brahms, it's me."*

I freeze and glance up.

*"If you're still here, if you can hear my voice, I want you to know something..."*

"Miss." The flight attendant collecting the tickets gestures to me.

*"The first time I felt regret...was after meeting you."*

A knife lodges under my ribs. He... regrets meeting me?

"Miss, your ticket." The flight attendant frowns my way. "Do you have it?"

"Sh." I lift a finger.

Her eyebrows twitch and she screws her lips in annoyance.

*"I regret the way I hurt you. I regret every time I made you cry. I regret lying to you about that stupid will."*

"Is there a problem here?" A big, burly security officer arrives.

The people behind me are grumbling.

I'm holding up the line.

"Ma'am, step aside," the security says.

I can't feel my legs, so I honestly don't know how I walk. The floor is gone. The ceiling blew off. I'm drifting, floating somewhere beyond this busy airport and the guards who are looking at me like I'm a criminal.

*"In front of all these people, I want you to know that I'm sorry. I'm deeply, truly sorry."*

I lift a hand to cover my mouth.

My knees shake.

"Ma'am, are you on any drugs? LSD? Heroin?"

I'd laugh if I wasn't so blown away. They have no idea who I am. Seeing the way drugs ripped mom's life to shreds, I'd rather chew a bag of safety pins than get caught up in that life.

*"And I love you,"* Dutch says.

Gasps break out.

One woman groans, *"That's so romantic."*

"Ma'am, I need you to focus," the security guard says.

"He's talking about me," I mumble.

"What?" He arches a bushy eyebrow.

*"I'll be waiting for you in front of the information desk on Floor 3. If you're still in the airport, meet me there in five minutes."*

"Where is that? Where's Floor 3?" I shriek.

The security guard finally seems to catch on and he motions to me. "This way."

I scramble behind him as the giant man clears a path for me and squawks into his walkie. "Referring to the Code Adam, I have the target in custody. Repeat, I have the target in custody. We are en route. Hold the train."

He tugs me through the crowd and I notice there's a train waiting for me.

"Boyfriend?" The security asks as he helps me onto the carriage.

My heart races and I feel a zing of excitement. "Fiancée."

The security winks. "Congratulations."

I smile distractedly at him and grab the bar of the train as the doors close. The three minute travel between floors is the most nerve wracking of my life.

When I step off the train, I'm surprised at the sight of another security guard.

"Brahms?" She points to me.

I nod.

"Get in." She motions to the golf cart waiting near the train.

My eyes double in size.

"Quickly."

I jump on and my head snaps back immediately as she takes off like a race car driver. We weave through travelers, zipping across the airport.

Finally, she stops in front of the desk and juts her chin. "I love a good happily ever after." She winks. "You kids be happy."

I grin and glance toward the information desk.

My breath catches in my throat when I see him. Steel giant. Broad shoulders. Eyes like the setting sun and a mouth that's crafted for absolute bliss. A worried frown mars his handsome face but it disappears when he catches sight of me, replaced by gratitude, regret and wonder.

"Brahms."

I hop out of the golf cart and start running.

## CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

CADENCE

My arms close around his neck and he catches me soundly. I look up into eyes of fire and golden sunlight. The numbness that consumed me peels away until it feels like I'm standing in the sun.

“Cadey.”

“What are you doing here?”

He glances around and his shoulders stiffen slightly. “Come with me.”

I stumble behind him as he leads me away from the information desk. We weave through the crowd, moving briskly.

“What are we running from?” I ask, panting as I keep up.

“Our tail.” He grunts.

“Did your dad send someone to spy on me? How long have they been watching?” My face pales.

“It's not just my dad.” He shakes his head. Messy blond hair curls under his ears, damp with rain. “It's a long story.”

We fast-walk through the airport. His grip on me is like granite. Everything about him is hard-concrete, from head to toe. From skin to soul.

Did he really declare his love for me over the airport PA?

Dutch Cross?

Ruler of Redwood Prep?

More cheesy than heroes at the end of a romantic comedy?

My lips curl up.

He glances over his shoulder and his eyebrows furrow.  
“What’s so funny?”

“Everything with you has to be intense, doesn’t it?”

His nose scrunches. He doesn’t understand.

I don’t either.

A light, bubbling feeling is spreading through my body. Whatever danger Dutch is sensing, the sensation inside me is ten times more lethal. It’s consuming. Blinding. The kind of resolution that made Romeo and Juliette choose a tragic ending.

A kind of violent, all-or-nothing, take me to hell and back kind of commitment.

The curse of love.

Now, it’s settling around me.

A tight hug.

No resistance.

Dutch leads me to the entrance of the VIP section.

“Mr. Cross.” Someone unclips a velvet rope.

He drags me inside without acknowledging him.

Once the door closes, I step around in a slow circle, my eyes wide.

“Is there a hotel in the airport?” I gawk, temporarily distracted by the sofas, counters lined with snacks, and massage chairs.

“It’s a private lounge.” He sweeps the curtains closed and locks the door.



I watch him prowl the room and shivers run down my spine. Love didn't soften him the way it softened me. He's still moving darkness. Hard edges. Shadows shifting through his eyes. He's still the cruel leader of The Kings.

But he's also...

What is it?

He's also... mine.

All of him—the good, the bad, and the... well, Dutch Cross is many things, but definitely not 'ugly'.

*What are you getting yourself into, Cadey?*

"There are some things I need to clarify." Dutch growls, turning to look at me with those sharp eyes. "And I need you to listen because I mean every word."

I nod.

"My mom told me about my grandmother's will recently, but I wanted to marry you long before that. The night I came to your apartment, I'd already decided that my future belonged to you."

I open my mouth.

He keeps talking. "And that blonde girl from Jinx's app?"

"It was Breeze."

"I—" He stops and looks at me with a question in his eyes.

"She texted me this morning and clarified what those pictures were."

*'I don't want you to think I went after your man. I don't approve of him, but I certainly wouldn't steal him from my best friend.'*

He juts his chin down. Prowls in the other direction. "I've been trying to get you pregnant."

I flinch.

He stops and stares at me. "I want you to have my children, but not at the cost of losing you."

“So you’re giving up on the will?”

“If that’s what I have to do.” His face darkens. It’s like looking into a rumbling storm cloud, lightning flashing inside a hurricane. “You’re mine, Cadey. Always have been. Always will be and nothing can change that. No one can change that. Not my dad. Not my brothers. Not... even if I find out you’re pregnant with Hunter’s child, I’d still lay my life down for you and the baby.”

My eyebrows hike. “What?”

Dutch studies my face. Suddenly, he crosses the room to me. Hard fingers squeeze my waist. “Listen up and listen well, Cadence. I told you once that I’ll love who you love and I’ll hate who you hate. If one day, you’re pregnant and it’s Hunter’s baby, I’ll love him like it’s my own damn blood.”

I blink up at him in shock. “Dutch, what are you talking about?”

“I mean that.” He grabs my face gently and holds my head up. “We can have children or we can hold off. You can tell me right here, right now, that you never want kids, ever. Or you can tell me that Hunter’s... that you two...”

*Dutch thinks I slept with Hunter last night.*

Feeling especially cruel and wanting to test him, I say, “Would you really take care of the baby if it was Hunter’s?”

There’s not a second of hesitation. Not a glimmer of unease.

Dutch gathers me by the small of my back and growls darkly, “I’d rather have you and some other guy’s baby than not have you at all.”

“What about your dad?”

The muscles in his face go taut.

“He’s not going to just... let us be together. He sent me away. He made me think you were a drug dealer. If you and I... if things change—”

Dutch's eyes glint with danger. He bites out, "I won't let anyone take you away from me." Rough hands cup my cheek. "You're my drug, Cadey. I'm addicted to you. I'd do anything to have you. The more of you I taste, the more I want." His thumb slides over my cheek. "I've never loved like this before. Nothing else matters but you. And I have no intentions of hurting you again."

My hands cover his.

"Tell me," he demands, an edge of violence to his voice. "Tell me I haven't lost you."

"I showed up, didn't I?"

His eyes narrow. "I want to hear it."

I lick my lips and stare up into a face that used to feature in my nightmares. A face that morphed into my secret dream.

"I wanted to hate you. You're annoying. You're pushy. You're absolutely unreasonable."

His eyes narrow slightly.

"But," I push up on my tiptoes, "I don't hate you. I never really did."

"Then what is it, Cadey?"

Those words. They're so big. So absolute.

At least for me.

I lick my lips and whisper, "I love you, Dutch."

His smile is decidedly more wicked as he steps into me. "Again."

"No."

He advances. A predator on the savannah. And I'm the clueless gazelle who doesn't even realize she's prey.

I inch back.

Not that I get far.

Dutch pushes me into the wall and pens me in with an arm on either side. "Again, Cadey."

“You heard me the first time,” I whisper, my fingers sliding over his broad shoulders.

He leans in close, his face up against mine. My eyes fall shut automatically. Emotions arc through me like burning asteroids plummeting toward earth.

“Scared already?”

“We’re not going to be that cheesy couple who says ‘I love you’ every second. That’s gross,” I murmur.

Dutch’s breath whispers across my lips and I shiver.

“We *are* going to be that gross couple,” he grinds out. “It’s...”

My eyes open. “Inevitable?”

Amber eyes burn into mine. The edge of his mouth twists up in a cruel sort of smirk.

“So much to learn,” he mumbles.

And then his mouth descends.

His lips are hot, scalding. So is his tongue as it strokes mine to a rhythm that obliterates every thought. His hands rove my body with an incessant demand. *More*, he’s saying without ever tearing his mouth off my face.

I kiss him back with everything in me, a whirlwind of passion drumming up from the depths of my soul.

Dutch called me his drug.

But I think he’s mine.

My desire.

My need.

My obsession.

His fingers roam lower and I think he’s going to unbutton my jeans but, instead, he palms my stomach and pushes slightly.

My mouth disconnects from his and I groan in frustration at the distance.

“Marry me,” he growls. “Be my wife, Cadey.”

I don't think in that moment. I just feel and let it sit.

My choice.

What do *I* want?

And Dutch waits.

For several seconds, we stand there, staring at each other.

I tilt my head up. “Yes.”

## CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

### DUTCH

I adjust my black suit jacket and run my fingers through my hair. Throwing the door open, I step out of the boutique's changing room and throw my arms wide so my brothers can inspect me.

"Where's the bow tie?" Finn asks, slouched in the corner of the pristine white sofa.

"I'm not a bow tie kind of guy."

Zane rolls his eyes.

Finn scolds me, "Cadence chose this suit for you. You should wear it the right way."

"I hate tuxedos."

"It's a suit, not a tuxedo. And without the bow tie, you look like you're a drunk eloping in Vegas, not New York," Zane says.

I glance through the windows, admiring the New York skyline. "It's almost the same thing."

I preferred Vegas actually. There, we could have gotten married on the same day. Here in New York, we had to wait twenty-four hours after receiving the license.

It worked out though. My brothers were able to fly over and bring Vi with them. The moment Cadence saw her sister, they collided in a tangle of arms, hair and tears.

I really don't understand women.

"This isn't my only shot. I plan on getting married again," I growl.

"You're already thinking of divorce?" Finn raises both eyebrows.

"Divorce isn't in my vocabulary." I adjust my cuffs. "Cadey is never getting rid of me. I meant I'm giving her the big, million-dollar wedding she deserves later on, when I'm sure dad won't try to ruin it."

Zane snorts. "It's strange that he's not barging in right now."

"He probably thinks Dutch wouldn't go through with a wedding after seeing the pictures."

"What pictures?" I ask, fixing my collar.

"Right after you left for the airport, we got a package. Inside were pictures of Cadence and Hunter together," Finn says dryly.

"Dad *and* mom were spying on her. It's insane." Zane blows out a breath.

"We don't have normal parents," Finn agrees.

"Maybe that's why we're not normal," Zane muses. He walks up to me and holds the bow tie up.

I grit my teeth and dutifully tie it around my neck.

There's a knock at the door.

"Come in."

Vi slips through, wearing a frilly pink dress. I told her to choose whatever she wanted from the store and she spent the next three hours agonizing over all her favorites. In the end, I told her to choose one and I'd buy her the rest.

"Wow." Vi's eyes light up. "Dutch, you look really handsome."

"It's the bow, right?" Zane says proudly.

“I can’t believe my sister’s getting married to the lead guitarist of The Kings.” Her voice sounds dazzled.

“Is Cadence ready?” Finn asks, checking his watch. “We told the wedding planner we’d meet at three o’clock and it’s two forty now.”

Vi scratches her nails into the door knob and chews on her bottom lip.

“Is Cadey okay?” I ask, my eyes fastening on her nervous expression.

“Not really.”

I’m in front of her in a snap. “What happened?”

So many things could go wrong.

Dad might have kidnapped her.

Hunter might have rushed over to declare his love.

Sol might be trying to steal her away.

Breeze might have found out and flew over here to dissuade her from marrying me.

“What is it?” I demand.

“Cadey’s blowing chunks,” Vi whispers.

My eyes meet my brother’s.

“She said it was just nerves, but I don’t know. My sister doesn’t throw up much. And she never gets sick...”

I rush out of the room.

Vi, Finn, and Zane are right behind me.

“This way,” the manager gestures with white-gloved hands.

I storm into the bathroom and notice there are other women who are inside.

“I need the room,” I bark.

The women watch me like I’m insane.



“His fiancée’s in here,” Zane says, flashing a smile and charming the ladies into doing his bidding.

Finn gestures to the door, helping to escort them. “This way.”

The room empties in three seconds flat.

“Cadey, I brought Dutch,” Vi says, tapping lightly on the closed bathroom stall.

“Why?” Cadey’s voice sounds weak. “I’m fine.”

I glance under the slit of the stall door and see tulle creeping out like an explosion of white, lace, and fabric.

“Throwing up in your wedding dress is your definition of ‘fine’?” I growl, worried out of my mind.

“I drank too much before I left London.”

“Hangovers usually don’t last for two days,” Finn says thoughtfully.

I hear a retching sound and my heart shatters.

Scrambling up, I grab the handle of the door. “I’m coming in, Cadey.”

“No,” she moans. “It’s bad luck to see the bride in her wedding dress.”

“I don’t give a damn.” I ram my shoulder into the door when it won’t open.

“Dutch.” Vi slides in front of me before I can kick the door. She gives me a stubborn look.

Small and delicate, but brave...

Like her sister.

I remain frozen in place, but I’m breathing hard and ready to crash through the doors if I hear Cadey in pain. Finn and Zane will hold Vi back for me.

“Cadey?” Vi says, whirling around and putting her ear to the door.

“I’m okay.” Cadey’s voice is shaking. “I’m... okay.”

“Did you eat something bad?”

“I didn’t eat much this morning,” she admits.

“And you didn’t get much rest last night either,” I mumble, feeling a twinge of guilt. Since it was Cadey’s eighteenth birthday, I made sure we... celebrated in our own way.

Vi gives me a curious look.

I clear my expression, knowing instinctively that Cadey wouldn’t want her little sister suspecting what we do in the bedroom.

Zane stands beside me and whispers in my ear, “It might be nerves.”

“Or...” Finn joins me too. His almond-shaped eyes bore into mine. “It might be—”

“A baby?” Vi says excitedly.

I smirk and cross my arms over my chest, pleased even if I don’t think that’s the case. Cadey told me about her mom giving her pills last week. And I doubt we’d be pregnant this fast, even if we did spend all last night making sure a baby was in our future.

The toilet flushes.

“Dutch, turn around,” Cadey orders.

I hear the steel in her voice and decide not to stress her out by arguing.

Turning, I face the mirror.

“Go outside.”

“Just let me make sure you’re okay,” I plead.

“I’m fine,” Cadey says again.

I remain where I am.

“Leave or I’m not getting married to you today.”

My shoulders tighten. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“Try me.”

I grit my teeth.

Zane glances at Finn. “I thought they’d stop fighting now that they’re finally getting married.”

“Marriage doesn’t change people, Zane. It only joins what’s already there. That’s why you shouldn’t jump into it without making sure your partner’s ready.” He glances at the bathroom stall. “Are you sure you want to go through with it? He’s not going to get any better than this.”

“Screw off, Finn. I’m leaving. I’m leaving.” I stomp out.

I hear Vi and my brothers laughing at me.

Freaking backstabbers.

Since I’m all the way in the corridor, I only faintly hear the bathroom stall swing open.

“Don’t get your hopes up. I’m not pregnant,” Cadey says loud enough for me to hear from outside. “I think it might just be the stomach flu.”

“Do you want to postpone the wedding?” I ask, holding my breath.

“No,” Cadey says. “Let’s do this.”

I smirk.

That’s my girl.

Finn, Zane and I pay for our wedding attires and get into the car waiting outside. The boys put a blindfold on me so Cadey can get into the same car.

There’s no freaking way I’m letting her out of my sight until we’re declared man and wife. Maybe I’m paranoid, but I don’t know what dad’s going to do when he finds out I made up with Cadey at the airport.

For the foreseeable future, I’m sticking to my woman like glue.

We stop in front of a penthouse and climb out.

A familiar voice greets us in the lobby.

“Wow. I’ve done some wild things, but nothing as wild as getting married at eighteen.”

I smirk at the sound of Bex Dane’s voice.

Another reason why we chose New York—dad doesn’t mess with Bex Dane. I think a part of him is intimidated by Bex’s rising fame, which is why he hates him so much.

“Everything’s ready?” Zane asks.

“Penthouse is that way.”

I’m still blindfolded, but I assume Bex just pointed up.

“Someone pinch me. I think Bex Dane just looked me in the eyes,” Vi squeals.

“Hi, pretty lady.”

“She’s thirteen,” Cadey says immediately.

I snort.

Bex laughs too.

“I’m dead. I’m deceased,” Vi hisses like a hot air balloon soaring through the sky.

My brothers separate from me to take Cadey upstairs. I stay back with Bex and finally take my blindfold off.

He slaps me on the back. “You turned down my press tour manager so many times that when you finally reached out first, he fainted.”

“Sorry to barge in like this.”

“It’s fine. Not often that you make genuine connections in this industry. I’d say if you find the right one, you hold on tight.”

There’s a dark glimmer in his eyes. Almost like regret.

If I cared enough, I’d probably ask.

But I don’t.

I just want to get married to Cadey as soon as possible.

“Hey, Dutch,” Bex says, “since I kindly lent you boys my penthouse, how about you return the favor by opening for me next year on my world tour? You’ll be out of high school by then.”

I smirk. “I’ll think about that *after* I make the best decision of my life.”

Bex chuckles. “Better than a no.”

I head to the elevators.

It’s time to make Cadence Cooper a Mrs.

## CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

CADENCE

“I can’t believe you’re getting married in Bex Dane’s penthouse,” Vi says as we line up outside the doors to the balcony. “One of the biggest celebrities in the whole world and we’re just... standing in his living room.”

My sister looks like her head is about to explode.

“How is this my life?” Vi squeals.

“This isn’t your life. We’re just borrowing this place.”

She slowly turns to face me. “I don’t get it. You’re so calm.”

“I’m nervous.”

“No, I mean about meeting Bex Dane. And about marrying Jarod Cross’s son. We’re like... our family’s going to be royalty now.”

“Rock stars are just people,” I tell her.

“Yeah, super rich, super hot, super talented people. Let’s not act like any of this is something normal people get to do.” She gestures to the suite.

I hook my arm around hers. “Royalty or not, I wouldn’t have wanted to do this without you. Thank you for being here.”

“Of course.” Her eyes meet mine. Sparkling brown. Soft and innocent. “I’ll always be here for you, Cadey.”

My bottom lip trembles.

I feel strangely emotional.

Maybe it’s the nerves.

The enormity of what I’m about to do is finally settling on me.

I’m going to be a wife.

I’m going to be *Dutch Cross’s* wife.

The world still has so many obstacles in our way. It almost feels like we should wait to conquer them all before we take this step. But I’d rather face those obstacles *with* him, than alone.

And that’s a big freaking one-eighty from the way I’ve always been.

He’s changed me.

I think, in some ways, I’ve changed him too.

Music strikes up. It sounds like drums and a bass guitar. I’ve never heard such a beautiful resonance from an instrument that deep.

My eyes widen. “Is that live?”

“I think so,” Vi says.

“That must be our cue.” I shake out my sweaty hands, accept the bouquet from my sister, and take our first step.

“Are you happy, Cadey?” Vi asks.

Another step.

“I am.”

“I wish dad could have been here,” Vi whispers.

“He’s here.” I smile down at her.

She smiles back.

None of us mention our mother. Right now, I just want to focus on what I can. Mom is... she's someone I don't have to handle alone anymore.

And there's comfort in that.

I'll deal with her when I get back home.

"You look smoking by the way." Vi winks. "Dutch is going to faint."

"Let's hope not. His tux is a rental."

Vi giggles.

We turn the bend and I finally get to see how the balcony's been decorated. A dazzled exhale gets trapped in my throat.

Bex Dane's people managed to transform this balcony into a wedding destination. Delicate white flowers. Beautiful arches. White cloth tastefully draped over white pillars.

But nothing is as breathtaking as the backdrop of the New York skyline. I don't even want to *think* about how much it costs to see a view like that every day.

Finn and Zane are to the side. Zane is playing an electric drum kit, looking sharp and mischievous as always. Finn has on a white shirt and black pants, but the simple outfit looks like a fashion statement as he plucks his bass guitar.

My eyes skip over the brothers and land on the man at the end of the aisle.

Dutch.

He's wearing a black suit and a bowtie. His hair is slicked back for the first time since I've met him.

As our eyes collide, something strange happens.

All the nerves in my stomach settle.

It's like I'm right where I'm supposed to be.

Vi and I get to the front of the aisle. She breaks off to stand behind me while Finn and Zane stand behind Dutch.

The officiant is a small man with a long, Santa beard. I don't know if they just grabbed a Salvation Army Santa off the



street to do this or if that's just how he grows his facial hair. It doesn't matter.

My entire focus is locked on Dutch.

As the officiant speaks about love, commitment and forever, Dutch leans forward and says soft enough that only I can hear, "After I marry the hell out of you, I'm going to rip that dress off." His fingers tighten around me.

My heart beats faster and heat washes over my skin. The memories of him touching me last night are still sharp around the edges. *Am I marrying a man or a beast? And why doesn't that scare me anymore?*

"We'll be traveling home right after this," I mumble.

"Then we'll have our honeymoon on the plane," he murmurs.

I shudder, my body tightening with the promise burning in his eyes. I can already feel his body pressing into me and my heart trembles in anticipation.

"Dutch," the officiant says.

Dutch cuts him a hard glance.

"Your vows?"

He nods. "Cadence Cooper, I'm going to love you, honor you and serve you for the rest of your life. Words don't mean a damn. So take this as day one of me showing you—and I'm going to show you every day going forward—why you're the most important person in my life."

"Aw," Vi says behind me.

I squirm and push at my veil. "I didn't write vows."

"That's okay. Just say what's on your heart," the officiant says.

I look up at Dutch. "I won't promise you that I'll always say what you want to hear. Or that I'll always do what you tell me to do."

"You don't do that already," Zane mumbles.

Vi laughs.

“But I will promise you that I’ll be with you through thick and thin. The world might not understand us, but they don’t have to. We’ll make our own world. And we’ll rule it together. There will never be a Dutch Cross without Cadence Cooper.”

Dutch looks touched. My heart flutters when I realize I’m the only one who brings out that soft expression.

“With the power vested in me, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

Dutch yanks me toward him and kisses me like he’s branding me. Like he’s drinking from an everlasting fountain. Like it’ll never be enough.

I faintly hear cheers but, inside my heart, fireworks are going off.

“Cadey.” Vi tugs at my sleeve.

I realize that what I think are fireworks is actually my phone’s ringtone.

“Cadey, someone’s been buzzing your phone for a while,” Vi admits. “I didn’t want to tell you before the wedding, but they haven’t stopped. I think it’s important.”

“Who is it?” Dutch grunts, looking like he’ll strangle whoever’s on the other end of the line.

“It says ‘Miss Jamieson’.”

Zane’s head whips up and he barges over.

I glance at Dutch. “What do you think she wants?”

“I don’t know.”

Vi purses her lips. “Do you want me to—”

“Answer it,” I say, my stomach quivering.

Finn joins us.

We’re all crowding over the phone, waiting.

A foreboding feeling rolls over me.

Dutch senses it and grabs my hand, squeezing my fingers in encouragement.

“Put it on speaker,” Zane growls.

Vi does what he says.

“I’m here, Miss Jamieson.”

“Cadence?” Miss Jamieson sounds harried and nervous. “Thank God. You finally picked up. Where are you?”

“I’m in New York.” I glance at the curious officiant, the stunning skyline and the bright blue sky.

It’s my last chance to enjoy the view. This pit in my stomach isn’t going away, and I have a feeling all this beauty is going to collapse around me when this call is over.

“You need to catch a flight back. Now,” Miss Jamieson insists.

Dutch wraps an arm around me.

I smile at him. *I’m not alone. Dutch is here. Vi is here. The Kings are here.*

“Why? What happened?”

“I don’t want to tell you over the phone...”

“You can say it.”

She inhales a deep breath and lets it out. “I don’t know what’s going on, but your mother...”

Vi’s eyes widen and she flings me a desperate look.

Miss Jamieson croaks, “your mother is dead.”

\* \* \*

Thank you for reading! Cadence and Dutch’s love story is complete, but Redwood Prep still has so many secrets to spill.

The Kings will return in 2023.

**[JOIN THE MAILING LIST](#)** for an exclusive, cut scene of Cadence and Dutch before the wedding.

## A WORD FROM THE AUTHOR

Thank you so much for reading **The Broken Note**, Book 3 in the Redwood Kings Series. If you've enjoyed visiting Redwood Prep, show other readers by leaving a review.

The series continues with Zane's POV coming next year so stay tuned! Join my mailing list [HERE](#) for exclusive alerts and sneak peeks.

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