

WALL STREET JOURNAL AND USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MARY MARTEL

*Till Death*  
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US  
PART

AN ARIEL KIMBER NOVEL

# **TILL DEATH DO US PART**

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AN ARIEL KIMBER NOVEL

MARY MARTEL

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## Blurb

Ariel Kimber and her coven are under imminent threat from the Council. They are monsters, without fangs or horns, who hide behind their mantle of power, and they will do anything to get what they want.

The problem is, they want Ariel. They want her so badly that every other person around her is in danger just by being near her.

The Council forgot one very important fact though—Ariel Kimber is no victim. She's a survivor, and the Council is stupid to think they can simply take her and destroy everything and everyone she loves.

She will do whatever it takes to keep her coven safe, even if she has to go through hell to do it. They are all more than willing to fight alongside her because she's finally agreed to spend the rest of her life tied to them in every way possible.

They have a lot to fight for.

The goal is to make it to the other side without losing anyone along the way because they want their happily ever after.

And they want to be able to say till death do us part.

But life for Ariel Kimber is never that easy.

And it never will be.

*J*une twenty-fourth.  
Today was the day.  
My birthday.

Eighteen years old, and I felt like maybe I should be turning forty-five instead.

Eighteen was supposed to be *it*. The year you magically became an adult and could legally gamble, vote, and buy cigarettes if you wanted. I didn't give a crap about any of these things.

Oh, and porn. Couldn't forget that little doozy.

I didn't give a crap about magically becoming an adult, and I also thought eighteen was overrated. I didn't want a party and had never actually had one before. Why change now? If it were up to me, no one would have even known it was my damn birthday.

It wasn't up to me.

Fancy that.

Rain had tried to take over, but Damien was not to be denied, and he'd enlisted the salt and pepper twins in his endeavors, so Rain had been forcefully shoved to the side.

Rain hadn't much cared for this, and nobody else seemed to care that he felt that way. I actually felt bad for the guy because this was our first birthday

together since I'd been taken from him—and the only one I would remember—but I didn't step in to smooth things over or stand up for Rain. First of all, I hadn't wanted to make a big deal out of my birthday and nobody stepped in for me there, least of all Rain, so he was on his own. Secondly, they needed to work their shit out amongst themselves and leave me out of it.

I had too much other shit on my plate and refused to be drawn into petty squabbles amongst the males in my life, my father included.

The cell phone plugged in on my nightstand vibrated, and I reached over, unplugged it from the cord, and lifted it up to my face so I could see the screen.

I had a text from Raven.

**Raven:** *Heard word it's your B-day. I wanted to send you flowers because every pretty girl deserves flowers, but I figured you'd be the only person in your coven who'd appreciate the gesture. I sent something less offensive instead. It should be there sometime this afternoon.*

My phone vibrated again, and another text from Raven appeared on the screen.

**Raven:** *And just in case you're wondering, and we both know you are, everyone is fine and doing great. Enjoy your special day.*

*Raven.*

Finally, something to smile about. I had learned to enjoy the gifts the people in my life gave me and to simply say, "Thank you." Whatever he sent me, I knew it'd be thoughtful and kind, and I'd love it regardless because he'd taken the time to send it to me in the first place.

The first time Raven texted me, he'd ended it with his name at the bottom of the text. I saved him into my contacts so I'd know who he was when he contacted me again. Still, he placed his name at the bottom. I'd told him he didn't have to do it since I knew it was him, but he'd completely ignored me and kept right on doing it.

It was absurd and made me laugh every time I saw it. Raven was a very



serious but oddly weird dude, and I really, really liked him. And not just because he'd remembered my birthday and took the time to let me know he'd remembered. All that said good things about Raven.

I seriously hoped Isobel wasn't attempting to poison him or date rape his ass, because I'd have to kick hers if she did.

Something inside my chest moved and slithered down my body. I looked down to see silver strands wrapped around my body, and my limbs began to appear and then I felt them being nudged slightly.

Dash was being nosy and wanted to know where I was, and he was trying to get a good read on my emotions without actually coming to physically seek me out himself. I sighed in frustration. This was beginning to get on my nerves, and somehow I had to find a way to put a stop to it.

Romero had settled into life at the Alexander big house with ease that nobody else felt. The man made everyone but myself and Dash incredibly uncomfortable. I might have found this more amusing if Dash didn't act as if he were uncomfortable *with me*.

I got it, really I did.

I fucked up by not telling him and running off to save the day, and I left everyone behind. Boys didn't like to take that kind of hit to their pride—or manhood, if you would—and Neanderthal ways. Dash especially with his pride, since he wasn't the Neanderthal type. More of a nurturer.

But, and this was a *huge* but to him, he'd said horrible things to me, essentially treated me like garbage, and then felt bad about it when I put myself at risk to bring his long-lost father home to him safe and sound. I had come home safe and sound as well, if you didn't consider my mental state when I got here.

Dash had wholeheartedly apologized, and I'd easily forgiven him without even having to think about it. I had assumed that would be that and we'd wash our hands of it.

Wrong.

Way the fuck wrong, and this was definitely worthy of the use of the F-word.

Dash couldn't let it go, because apparently Dash couldn't forgive himself for the way he'd treated me. I'd confronted him about it several times, and he'd since begun avoiding me in order to avoid confrontation so he could hold on tight to his guilt and bullshit for whatever stupid reason.

I'd finally had enough, and I was going to do something about it.

He'd see me.

He'd pay attention to me and see that I was just fine.

And he'd get *the fuck* over it.

That was just all there was to it.

I climbed off the bed and headed toward my closet. I had a birthday party I didn't want to go to that I needed to get ready for, and a boyfriend whose ass I needed to kick. Or maybe what I really needed to do was remove his head from his asshole instead of kicking it.

I ran back to my bed and picked up my phone. I knew Damien had been busy getting everything just right, but I needed him right now. No one else could help me.

In the closet, I made sure the door was locked on Dash's side so he couldn't come inside despite the fact we actually shared the damn thing and no way should I be locking him out.

Damien answered on the third ring, sounding vastly amused. "Problem, sugar lips?"

I did not appreciate him calling me sugar lips. Mostly because whenever he said it, he got this arrogant look in his eyes and this weird, little sinful smirk that just screamed he wasn't talking about my mouth but my nether regions instead. He called me that in front of everyone, including Rain and Romero who acted like they had no idea there was a hidden meaning behind his thinly veiled words. It was downright embarrassing

This time I sucked it up and moved past it. At least he wasn't calling me

sugar tits, though I wasn't sure lips were any better when he was talking about my girl parts.

"I need your help."

That was all it took for him to get serious. "Where are you? Tell me and I'll come to you."

"My closet," I whispered for fear of someone standing on the other side of the door, hearing me. I knew Dash wasn't in there because I'd feel him, but some nosy guy could be in there eavesdropping.

"I'm on my way," he said before hanging up on me. Not that I expected a goodbye or even for him to come rushing up here like a bat out of hell.

As quietly as possible, I crept toward the door and unlocked it. I whispered a quick spell to keep me hidden and pushed the door open hurriedly. There was no one there on the other side. Quickly, I shut the door and once again locked it. I didn't know why I was so paranoid, but I couldn't help but feel like someone was always around the corner waiting for me, watching and listening to my every move like a creep.

Less than a minute later, my closet door banged open as Damien stormed inside with Julian behind him.

"What's he doing here?" I asked accusingly as I pointed at Julian. This wasn't embarrassing for me with Damien here, but add Julian to the mix, and it was a whole new story. Would he laugh at me or think I was nuts? Probably yes, because I was.

Damien frowned at me while Julian glared. "I couldn't help it. He was standing beside me when you called and overheard the conversation. He was worried about you. We both are. What's going on, and why are you standing in the middle of your closet wearing nothing but your underwear?"

I had a bra on too, but that was beside the point.

I focused solely on Damien, and as hard as it was, I somehow managed to ignore Julian when I said, "It's personal. Private, ya know? Something I'm only comfortable sharing with—"

Julian waved his hand in the air dismissively and cut me off. “I guess it’s a good thing we’re both your boyfriends then and you can share anything personal and private with both of us. Spill it.”

“You better listen to tootsie dick over there.” Damien smirked evilly at me. “He knows what he’s talking about.”

Tootsie dick, huh? Fair enough, since we both knew how many licks it took to get to Julian’s good stuff.

Julian’s cheeks reddened, and he looked like he might be considering strangling our mutual boyfriend. Suddenly, I felt a whole lot better about this entire situation and being called sugar lips.

At least I wasn’t a tootsie dick. That had to count for something, I hoped.

I threw my hands up in the air in defeat and snapped, “Fine! Whatever. You both can be here for my humiliation if that’s what you want. Dash is being stupid and ignoring me because he can’t let shit that doesn’t even matter anymore go. But he keeps using our link to check in on me and it’s pissing me off. I’m over the whole thing, and I figure if there’s a day where I can get him to pay attention to me, then today should be that day. You know, he can’t be mean to me on my birthday. Right? Someone say something.”

They both stared at me like they thought I was a moron. I didn’t appreciate the looks one bit. This was why I only wanted to have to explain this to one of them. Two was not always better than one. I could feel their judgment from here and wished I’d had more clothes on.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Julian asked, sounding genuinely confused. I wanted to throw something at his stupid head. Was I the only person who saw what went on around here?

“Did you just say link?” The hurt in Damien’s voice made me flinch. “What kind of link do you have with Dash that he can check in on you without actually having to be around you? And how the hell are we just now finding out about this?” He crossed his arms over his chest and glared at me.

Ugh, shit.

Totally busted here, and I had nobody to blame but myself. I knew it'd be me who spilled the beans and not Dash. I thought he was the type to take secrets to the grave.

Time to deflect. "Can we stay on track and stick with my original problem I needed you to help me with? I'm having a crisis."

I should have felt bad, but I didn't. It was my birthday, and I was not going to let these boys bully and push me around in the slightest. Not today, not any other day. I wore the pants in the relationship, thank you very much.

Just, you know, not exactly literally at the moment because I was standing here in my underwear, but whatever, you got the point.

"And what exactly is your current crisis? You've yet to properly explain it to us."

"But, Jules, what about—"

Julian cut Damien off. "Don't worry about it, we'll get it out of Dash since she obviously isn't going to tell us without putting up a fight. And she's right about one thing, it's her birthday, and we can't be mean to her on her birthday. But she's forgetting something we've got going for us. A secret weapon, if you will."

"Oh yeah?" I challenged. "And what's that?"

Julian laughed, and they both said, "Quinton."

Oh crap.

If they enlisted that beast's help, Dash stood no chance against the three of them together. Since he'd been acting like a child lately, I'd take a page from his book and leave his ass out there to swing. Normally I'd give him the heads-up this situation deserves, but not this time, sucker.

This was where things got embarrassing for me for real. "I want your help with what to wear. I want to wear something that's going to make it even harder for him to resist me. The problem is I suck with clothes, and if it were up to me, I'd end up in leggings and a ratty old hoodie."

They both looked properly disgusted with my clothing choices. I knew I

needed help.

Damien snapped his fingers and bounced on the balls of his feet excitedly. “Since we’re going to be outside for most of the day, I’ve got just the thing. I bought it for you a while ago and can’t believe I forgot all about it. When I bought it, I actually had Dash in mind. Trust me, beautiful, it’ll blow his mind.”

I nodded my thanks. Blowing Dash’s mind sounded like just the thing I needed right about now and exactly what I was going for.

However, I absolutely was not excited about spending the rest of my day outside with my family. I enjoyed spending time with them. It was the pool that put a damper on things for me.

As soon as Quinton found out I couldn’t swim, he’d gone ahead with putting a pool in the backyard and forced me to learn how to swim. I wasn’t an expert and likely never would be, but now the fear of drowning had been eliminated entirely, which had been Quinton’s point. He didn’t like for me to have any weakness that could be used against me were the wrong people to find out.

These were dangerous times we currently lived in.

Still, I didn’t like the pool because it was a glaring reminder of how much Quinton got away with where I was concerned. I held a little bit of resentment toward him and even more so because I knew he’d been right.

We had a tumultuous relationship at times, but it worked for us.

“Here we go!” Damien cried out triumphantly.

He clutched something orange tightly in his fist and my lip immediately curled in disgust.

“No. Absolutely not.”

They both ignored my protest, like I knew they would, and forced me into the stupid thing.

I wasn't ashamed of my body, and ever since my face had been permanently messed up, I no longer put much stock into the rest of the scars on my body. When you had to wear one on your face for the whole world to see, it worked well to desensitize you to people's remarks or personal opinions. I was well over caring about my scars and rarely even thought about them anymore.

Hello, my name was Ariel Kimber, and I was growing up.

The problem was I'd never worn a bikini before, and it felt all kinds of wrong to be mostly naked and headed through the house toward the back deck where everyone else waited for me. And this bikini seemed absurdly small.

"Damien, I don't think—"

His hand on my back sent warm tingles shooting through my body as he gently urged me forward. "Nope, I don't want to hear anything else out of you about it. Besides, this one might actually be the one I got for you that covers up the most of your body."

Oh, good grief. I was picking out my own clothes from here on out, no matter how hurt his feelings got.

At least when Quinton was teaching me to swim I'd been allowed to wear a one piece swimsuit he'd gotten for me. He'd been smart enough to know

better than to push his luck and went for my comfort so I wouldn't try to drown him in the pool like the crazy girlfriend I actually was.

This was what I got for asking for help.

Never again.

“Come on.” Julian squeezed my hand and pulled me forward. “Stalling isn't going to help your situation. You need to get out there and stick it to our resident ginger.”

“Yeah, so that maybe he'll stick it to you later.”

Damien snickered, and I briefly wondered if they'd perhaps switched brains with the salt and pepper twins because they were usually the immature ones of the group.

I dragged my feet while they forcibly dragged me toward the sliding back door that led to the deck. I was practically shoved through the open doors and stumbled on the wooden planks in order not to fall on my face in front of everyone.

“Yay! The birthday girl is here! And looking hot no less,” one of the salt and pepper twins called out, and my cheeks immediately began burning with embarrassment.

Every single person standing around the deck and the pool turned to look at me and call out their own happy greetings.

“Happy birthday, pretty girl,” Tyson said.

“My baby girl is eighteen today, and I can't believe I actually get to be here for it this year,” Rain remarked.

“Babe, come here,” Quinton called.

“You look beautiful today, Ariel,” Addison said, which meant it'd been Abel who'd originally gotten this farce started. Go figure.

“Happy birthday, sweetheart,” Marcus told me.

“Eighteen isn't really anything special. Don't let them fool you with their lies,” Romero scoffed.

That last one made my lips twitch into the semblance of a smile. Romero



remained prickly, and I was one of the only ones who found it endearing.

Dash said nothing verbally, but his eyes did a whole lot of talking as they left a trail of scorching heat across every inch of my body they ate up. That was greeting enough for me, and I no longer felt uncomfortable in my bright orange bikini. It worked like freaking magic, and I felt like jumping up and down while pumping my fist in the air.

Now I just had to get him alone and corner him so I could have my wicked way with him. Not happening while the dads were here though, they killed the vibe.

“Happy birthday, Ariel,” Trenton said.

“What my brother said,” Simon added.

It felt wrong to be missing Isobel and Baxter. They were family, and they belonged here with us while we celebrated this milestone in my life, but they couldn’t be here because their safety had to be taken into consideration and they needed to be kept hidden. So long as their existence remained a secret, they remained safe.

“Fuck it,” Quinton muttered irately. “If you won’t come to me, I’ll come to you. Like usual with your stubborn ass.”

Both Damien and Julian laughed openly as they released me, leaving me alone to wait for Quinton’s approach.

He wasted no time wrapping his arms around me and lifting me off my feet.

He shoved his face in my neck and inhaled. “Jesus, baby, why the hell are you wearing this thing? Are you trying to kill me? Your dad’s here, and the guys are all going to be walking around with hard-ons.”

I couldn’t help it, I laughed. The thought of my guys walking around like that and trying to hide it from Rain for fear of sudden death was hilarious. I thought that was the first time I’d laughed today, and the tension just flowed right out of me.

I relaxed into his hold as I put my hands on his shoulders and pushed

back so I could look down at him.

His brown eyes were soft and warm today. As my eyes traveled down, they widened in shock.

“Holy mother effer. What have you done?” I shouted.

On his chest, above his nipple and over his heart, he’d gotten a new tattoo—one word in beautiful cursive and black ink.

My fucking *name*.

Good fucking God.

Had he lost his mind entirely?

“What...What?” I sputtered. “Why would you do that to yourself?” Tears sprung to my eyes, and I blinked rapidly in an attempt to chase them away. “When did you do this? Is it permanent?”

I rubbed my hand over the raised lettering on his chest, and it didn’t smudge or wipe away. It was real, and judging by the redness and the fact that it was raised, he’d had it done recently because it wasn’t healed yet.

Quinton Alexander had my name tattooed on his chest right over his heart. He so totally loved me.

“It’s real, baby.” He grinned big and beautiful up at me. It was a rare sight to see him so relaxed and happy that my own heart skipped a beat while my throat tightened with emotion. “It’s not going anywhere, just like you. You’re right where you belong. Happy birthday, baby.”

I was not going to cry. I absolutely would not cry.

Nope.

Not happening.

I knew it was my party and I could cry if I wanted to, but not today, damn it.

“Put my daughter down, you idiot. Stop trying to monopolize her time. It’s not our damn birthday, but hers. I shouldn’t have to be explaining this to you *again*.”

I laughed out loud and leaned in to give Quinton a quick kiss on the lips.

He groaned and set me down on my feet. I leaned forward and gently brushed my lips over my name. It was the best gift I'd been given so far. Well, except for Bone and Ash, and they'd come from Quinton as well.

Maybe one day I'd return the gift and get his name tattooed onto my body. I knew he'd love that. Perhaps on his birthday, or maybe even sooner because now that I had the thought in my head, I couldn't shake it and wondered where on my body it would go best.

“Love you, Quint.”

“Always, baby.”

Rain had had enough. “This is my first birthday with my girl that she's going to remember. Keep your filthy paws off her for a few minutes so the rest of us can spend some quality time with her.”

My dad was so sweet, and I absolutely hated that I'd been forced to miss so much time with him. He didn't bring it up so much anymore, but it was a wound neither of us would ever really heal from. I thought only an emotionless psychopath could just forget about it like water under the bridge and move on as if we'd always only been one big happy family.

I smiled at my dad, and for the second time today, I was wishing I had put more clothes on. My plan was suddenly backfiring and blowing up in my face.

Rain didn't seem to care. He wrapped his arm around my shoulders and steered me toward the stairs. “Your gifts are down here with your cake. Come on. I'm ready for you to open them. I don't know what the hell took you so long to get your ass out here, and given that you showed up with those two, I don't want to know, but I'm an old man and I don't have the patience to wait anymore.”

I rolled my eyes and allowed him to guide me down the steps. I tripped and would have fallen down the stairs without Rain's hold on me when Damien yelled out, “I made the cake. Red velvet with cream cheese frosting. I might have gotten a little excited and therefore out of control with the

sprinkles, but you're going to love it. I promise."

I turned wide eyes on Rain and choked out, "He's joking, right? Tell me he's joking."

Rain chuckled happily under his breath. "No can do, baby girl. That fancy ass boy up there went all out for your special day. I heard almost everyone argued with him and tried to talk him out of it besides Julian, and he refused to be denied."

I stepped off the last step and tugged on the hem of his T-shirt. "Have you eaten any of his food before?"

"Nope." He laughed out loud this time. "But I heard it gives you diarrhea."

I sputtered as he tugged me toward one of the patio tables around the obnoxiously large pool. The umbrella in the middle of the table had been opened up wide to keep the entire table safe from the sun. The table had been covered with a light purple tablecloth, and all of the presents on top of it were wrapped in a pretty mess of black and yellow wrapping paper. They were topped with silver and white bows in different sizes.

The cake sitting atop a white circular cake stand looked spectacular, and yeah, maybe there were too many sprinkles on it, but I couldn't help but love it. Too bad it was going to destroy my insides to eat any part of it. Maybe I could fake it by smooshing it up and pushing it around a lot on my plate. A stack of paper plates with princesses on them sat beside the cake stand, and it made me wonder just exactly how old these guys thought I was.

Beside the cake in a clear fat vase was a huge bouquet of vibrant yellow roses. They were beautiful and in my favorite color. The Council had once had a dinner party in my honor, and they'd prettied up the table with yellow roses, and I'd thought then it'd been quite the waste. Now, I simply thought they were stunning and couldn't wait to see them on my nightstand for as long as it took for them to wilt and lose their beauty. Even then I'd keep the petals and place them between the pages in a book, even if they were just

crunchy bits. One day I might be able to use them for something.

Rain guided me to a chair and urged me to sit down. I sat down and looked around, not surprised to find all of them had followed and were circled around the table.

Damien dropped something lightweight across my shoulders and kissed my cheek briefly. “It’s a wrap. Slide your arms through the holes and you can pull it closed in the front if you’re uncomfortable.”

I thanked him quietly as I did as he instructed and slipped my arms through the holes. It was short sleeved with incredibly wide sleeves. White, but see-through, and so lightweight I barely felt it against my skin, but what I did feel was incredibly soft. It was long enough that if I stood it would come down to mid-thigh. The front was completely open with no buttons or a zipper. Since I felt a whole lot less exposed with it on, I didn’t bother to pull the front closed tightly.

I should never doubt Damien when it came to my clothes. He always had my back. Obviously, food was an entirely different story.

“Here,” Rain said as he laid a gift down on my lap. “Open one of mine first.”

He’d done things differently than everyone else, and the gift had been wrapped up in delicate silver paper covered in white sparkles. Before I could tear at the paper, he placed another identical one down on top of the first one.

I cleared my throat. “Which one would you like me to open first?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

Okay then. I picked up the one on the top and placed it on my knee. Picking up the original one, I flipped it over and used my fingernail to tear at where the tape covered the paper. I tore it open even though I hated to destroy such pretty paper. I peeled the paper back, ripping it and tossing it to the ground beside my chair.

An old, leather-bound book was uncovered. There were no words on the front. I flipped it over and checked out the spine. There were no words there

either.

“Open the other one.”

I looked up at Rain, confused. “But I haven’t—”

“Just open it.”

I set the book down in my lap and picked up the gift on my knee. I tore into it the same way I had the first one. An identical book appeared beneath the paper. I looked up at Rain seated beside me. “I don’t understand.”

His eyes, the same color as mine, took on an emptiness I hadn’t seen in a good long while. I absolutely loathed seeing the lack of emotion in his eyes, it crushed my soul.

“These are journals that belonged to your mother. They were part diary and part spell book. She started writing in the first one when she was thirteen, I believe, and her last entry is from the day before she died. I figure since you don’t remember her this is the best way for you to get to know her. I’ll warn you though, my beautiful daughter, after you were taken from us, those entries get darker and darker. They also get more difficult to read, and I want you to know that before you even try. However, despite that, they rightfully belong with you.”

Damn the man.

Rain gave the best gifts ever too.

“Dad,” I croaked as tears finally spilled from my eyes and raced down my cheeks. “I... I...” I clutched the books to my chest and held them tightly. I wanted to tell him I couldn’t keep these and take them away from him, but that was a lie, I was far too selfish for that. Since finding out Vivian wasn’t my real mother, I’d been aching to know the woman who’d given birth to me. Rain had just given me the best and only way for me to do that.

I swiped the wetness away from my cheeks with the back of my hand. Thankfully I hadn’t put on intense makeup today because I’d look like a fool if I had.

“Thank you, Dad.” I almost told him I loved him, which I rarely did, but I

figured I'd wait until it was just the two of us so neither of us would get embarrassed by the people around us gawking like we were a side show in the circus. Neither one of us enjoyed sharing this much emotion in front of other people. We very much preferred to be vulnerable in private.

Not that this wasn't a safe environment for the two of us, because it absolutely was. We were amongst family here, and that was supposed to be the safest place for you. Still, emotions were dumb that way.

"I'm not done yet, but you don't need to thank me for things that should rightfully be yours."

Oh no, there was more? I didn't know if I could handle or even wanted more gifts from Rain right now. Not if they had any type of sentimental value in the slightest and were going to make me cry again.

He handed me one more silver wrapped gift, and by the shape of it, I already knew it was a picture in a heavy picture frame. My tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth as I peeled away the paper, and I wasn't surprised to see the back of an expensive looking frame.

I flipped it over and the breath inside my lungs escaped me in a rush.

This gift giving shit with Rain was so not fair.

A young Rain stood beside an older man who looked just like his son, only he was twenty years older. The picture was black and white, and that almost made it better, more like it really was a moment frozen in time. The younger version of Rain had his arm thrown around the older man's shoulders, and he was grinning from ear to ear at the camera. The older gentleman who was clearly my grandfather wasn't looking at the camera at all. He only had eyes for the tiny bundle wrapped up in a blanket that he held reverently in his arms. The look on his face was full of love and downright adoration.

I knew without asking that I was that baby and this man in the photo, who was dead and therefore I would never get the chance to meet, was Rain's father, my grandfather.

Another precious gift given to me by my father that I had no words worthy enough to thank him for.

“He’d be so proud of the young woman you’ve become.”

Fuck.

I could take no more.

I pushed my chair back and attempted to stand so I could run away from the table and hide from them for a little while as I cried all my emotions out. A firm hand on my shoulder held me in place, and I knew without a doubt Damien was no longer behind me, but Quinton had taken his place.

“Somebody else give her another present before she cries again or bolts.” Quinton snapped his fingers and pointed in the twins’ direction. “You two, give her something that’ll make her smile.”

Oh no, those two would do or say something that would only serve to make the situation worse.

Addison and Abel stood up from their chairs and started digging through the black and yellow wrapped presents.

Shit.

“I think it’s time to get a drink. Marcus, Romero, would you care to join me?” Rain said as he stood up abruptly, proving he was far from stupid. He knew the twins’ game and wanted no part of it. He scooped up the journals and the frame from my lap. “I’ll take these up to your room for you to make sure they stay safe and sound. I’ll also check on your baby girls and see if they need a snuggle or two.”

That was incredibly thoughtful and very appreciated.

**A**t the same time, I also knew it was an excuse to sneak off and play with my cats while nobody else was around to interfere with his time with them.

Rain had taken one look at my precious little hairless babies that Quinton



had gotten for me and then pretended like they were his, and my dad had fallen deeply in love with them. Just the same as I had.

Also, I figured he could probably use the emotional break like I could but was being denied.

Rain walked away from the table with Romero and Marcus behind him. I couldn't help but notice Romero checking out my dad's ass on their way up the stairs to the back deck.

I just hoped that situation didn't eventually blow up in Romero's face and end badly. We didn't talk much because he was a bit of a nut job, but I had a special place for him in my heart and didn't want to see him get hurt any more in any way. He'd already been hurt more than enough to last him fifty lifetimes.

"Here," Addison chirped happily as he shoved a small box into my hands.

I was almost afraid to open it. My salt and pepper twins were jokesters, and they didn't take a whole lot seriously unless they had to or were forced to. When we were alone, lying in bed together late at night, they liked to tell me all their secrets and hopes and dreams.

I had no idea what to expect out of a gift from either of them.

I tore away the wrapping paper, revealing a small box that most likely held a piece of jewelry inside. I sure hoped there wasn't something embarrassing in there.

Feeling brave, I flipped open the box and a small smile crept over my face. It wasn't anything I had expected to find in there.

It was a necklace on a silver chain. The pendant hanging from it was in the shape of a heart. Half of it was black, and the other half white. The heart sparkled and the whole thing looked like it was something Betsy Johnson would make.

I loved it immediately. It was beautiful.

"I love it," I murmured happily as I slipped it out of the box. I held it up to Addison. "Help me put it on, please."

Addison took the necklace from my hands without a word. He didn't need words when the heat in his eyes said it all. He was pleased with my reaction, and we were overdue when it came to taking our relationship to the next level.

The problem was he wasn't alone, there were two of them, and I'd been terrified of what that meant for me when all of our clothes came off at the same time.

Google had ruined it for me.

Recently, Quinton had taken it upon himself to show me I'd be alright.

Now I was just ready.

I hoped he saw that in my green eyes as I stared into his own pale, light blue orbs.

He was my salt twin with his pale blue eyes and white-blond hair that was less blond than it was white. His brother, Abel, was my pepper twin. He had black hair with vibrant green eyes that were far more mesmerizing than my own dull green eyes.

They were both tall and built wide but stacked with muscles. They were also a package deal, and I loved them both fiercely.

My hair was lifted off my shoulders and pulled away from my neck. I looked over my shoulder and up into Abel's green eyes. Like his twin, his own eyes were filled with an intoxicating heat that left me breathless and squeezing my thighs together.

Just one look from both of them, and my bathing suit bottoms were already getting damp.

Boy, was I glad Rain and the dads had gone inside momentarily, because I did not need them to witness this.

Turned on by a damn look.

For fuck's sake.

Addison put the necklace on me while his twin held my hair up for him. When the necklace was secured in place, Abel dropped my hair and they both

stepped back. They gravitated toward each other like magnets until they stood side by side, staring down at me in my seat. They both looked pleased, happy even.

“Beautiful,” Addison murmured.

“Perfection,” Abel added.

I blushed but refused to hide from them this time. I was ready. I wanted them to know. And hiding would make them think I wasn’t.

“Here,” Dash interrupted rudely as he pushed the twins aside. He held out two long, skinny, rectangular boxes, and I reluctantly took them from him. I didn’t like how aloof and disconnected from the whole thing he tried to be.

Yeah, he was really starting to get on my very last damn nerve, that was for sure.

I couldn’t tell him that in front of our family though. Some things needed to be handled in private, and this thing between the two of us was one of them.

I avoided eye contact with him as I opened the boxes. Each box contained a dainty cat collar that was blinged out. One was black and the other was white. The small round gold disks hanging off of them each had a name on them. One said Ash, and the other read Bone.

I wondered if the diamonds on them were real and assumed they were. None of my guys would give me the fake shit, even if it was for my cats. That was how fabulous they were.

I felt kind of bad because Binx didn’t have anything like it. In fact, I didn’t think Binx had a collar at all. I’d never seen him wear one. Binx did whatever the hell he wanted.

“Thank you, Dash,” I said as I smiled up at him sweetly. “I love them, they are beautiful.”

I meant every word.

He smiled at me softly, tipped his head down in acknowledgment, and looked away from me.

And now I was angry all over again.

“Hey, Dash,” I called out as I slipped my hands inside my cover-up. I palmed my breasts and pushed them up and together, giving myself insane cleavage. “Do you like my bathing suit?”

I felt kind of stupid.

Maybe I should have asked if he liked my tits instead.

His eyes dropped down to my breasts, and he visibly gulped before quickly looking away. “I think you look beautiful. You always do. You’re welcome for the gifts. I know they’ll look great on your girls.”

“Our girls,” Quinton snapped, making sure to stake his claim not only on me but our cats. He was so out of control it wasn’t even funny.

And so was I sitting here palming my breasts like a wanton, sex craved fool.

“I’m going to go check on my dad really quick,” Dash said as he practically ran away from the table and me.

I lowered my hands to my lap as I watched his back as he walked away from me. I guessed I’d been wrong about thinking he had to be nothing but nice to me on my birthday.

“What in the hell is going on with the two of you?” Tyson demanded like the nosy BFF that he was.

Secrets didn’t make friends, and I’d been keeping what was going down between Dash and me to myself. Though, all someone had to do was pay a little attention around here and it was glaringly obvious to see that something was off between us.

“She said something about a link earlier but wouldn’t say anything else,” Julian shared. He looked directly at Quinton, and I swear I saw him bat his eyelashes. “Do you know anything about that, Quint?”

Jesus, was this his attempt at trying to seduce Quinton into telling him what he wanted? If it had been anyone else, I’d be angry, but with Jules, I was far more amused than anything else.

I mean, really, wasn't it enough that he was already sleeping with one of my boyfriends? What did he want now, two?

I loved Julian very much, but I wasn't going to share Quinton Alexander with anyone ever. He was mine, and that was all there was to it. I'd fight anyone who tried to tell me differently.

Quinton rolled his eyes and leveled Jules with a bored look. "Of course I know they share a link, dumbass. Just who the fuck do you think I am? This is my coven, and I know everything that goes on between its members. It's not a big deal that they share a bond. If you take the time to think about it, you'll realize he's the absolute perfect person to share that with her and her with him in return."

My mouth dropped open in shock. I hadn't known anyone else knew about my bond with Dash, and I hadn't been ready to share it with anyone. I still felt too raw about it, and it was special, something I felt like we needed to cherish between the two of us.

Now I felt exposed and put on a pedestal for everyone to examine and pick apart. I didn't like it, and it didn't exactly feel fair to me. I never prodded into Julian's relationship with Damien, and I knew I never would. If they shared some type of bond, I'd think it was great and I'd be more than happy for the both of them.

As much as I was annoyed at Jules right now, I was kind of in awe over Quinton's words. I thought maybe he'd be jealous and angry when he found out. Not whatever this was.

Everyone gaped at Quinton as if they had no idea who the hell he was. It made me want to laugh. He always surprised me.

"Open the rest of your presents, baby," Quinton commanded in an incredibly soft voice he only ever used with me. "After, we'll choke down that monstrosity of a cake Damien made for you, and then I will help you keep everyone else busy while you run off to seduce Dash. Sex will make it all better for the two of you. I bet if you cry, he'll cave so fast and give you

whatever you want. You should try it and let me know how it goes.”

He kissed me on the cheek and handed me another present.

Everyone continued to gape at him as if he'd lost his damn mind, but not a single one of them spoke a word in protest. Not that I could blame them, Quinton's word was law. I mean, he was the head of our coven, after all.

I opened up gifts that were all incredible and thoughtful.

Damien bought me summer shoes—sandals, flip-flops, and the like—and earrings. He also got me a bunch of headbands and, hilariously enough, a cookbook that focused on baking that he told me he wanted us to work our way through together.

Julian got me books on plants and potions. He also gave me a bunch of silver bangles that were covered in runes and spells meant for health and positivity.

Tyson gave me candles with crystals in the wax. They were lovely and smelled divine. He also gave me a gold bracelet with a heart-shaped locket, along with several other charms hanging off of it. Inside the locket on one side was a picture of Ty and me together. On the other side was a picture of all the guys together. He also got me several pairs of fuzzy socks.

Quinton gave me what he called an antique mood ring. When I touched someone, it would change color to whatever mood they were feeling at the moment. He promised to go over the moods and their colors with me later. I also counted his tattoo as the sweetest gift ever.

I got several other things, and the guys had to help me carry them up to my bedroom because there was so much stuff.

Rain, Marcus, and Romero showed up in time to be forced to eat cake with the rest of us.

The cake didn't exactly taste bad, but it didn't taste normal either. Not even all that frosting could mask the taste of something being off.

Damien had a rare gift in the kitchen, I had to give him that. He could make almost anyone sick just from eating a bite of his food.

He had mad skills.

Pool floats were unearthed, and everyone acted like this was a pool party. I was just happy that they all seemed happy and occupied enough for me to slip away and escape them.

Thankfully I didn't have to spend any time on the toilet, but my stomach did cramp up a little bit. Then again, I only ate half of my piece of cake.

Marcus Cole had eaten two pieces.

Lord help him. Then again, there was something off about him, and the way he was looking at me kind of freaked me out, so maybe he had it coming.

I went back to my room and locked myself inside with my two baby kittens and a mound of birthday gifts.

It felt good to be alone for a moment.

The wooden box in my hands hummed with magic. It was almost intoxicating to touch, and the residue of magic on my fingertips was impressive.

It was beautifully crafted, and I could tell Raven had put a lot of work into the thing. He was a master at woodworking. I knew he'd made every piece of wooden furniture in his coven's home, and everything I'd seen while there had been quite lovely. I had almost asked him if I could purchase a few pieces.

I opened the box and picked up the envelope inside. I pulled out a note, a card, and hand drawn pictures. The card and the pictures were from Baxter. He'd made them for me for my birthday. They were incredibly sweet and made my heart hurt to look at them. He might not have been in my life for very long, but I sure missed the little guy. I knew Rain missed him like crazy too.

My dad had practically adopted the boy after his mother had died. Then he'd taken in Isobel too, and I think he missed her also, but he never said anything.

I didn't miss her very much.

Honestly, it was almost a relief to not have her around for the time being. I thought maybe some time away from my dad might do her some good, and



maybe she'd be able to get over her slightly psychotic crush she had on him.

For the time being, she was Raven's problem, and I did not envy him in the slightest. Maybe she could latch onto him and his coven and find a new obsession.

I set the pictures and the card aside and picked up the note. I unfolded it and read.

*Ariel,*

*This box is a place for you to keep your secrets safe and all to yourself. It'll only ever open for you, and you can put as many things in it as you'd like. When you open it, just think of what you'd like, and it'll show up on top for you. I thought it might come in handy for a girl like you. I hope you like it, and I hope you have a lovely birthday.*

*-Raven*

Huh.

A girl like me? Just what the hell was that supposed to mean? If I could overlook that one line, the gift was incredibly cool. A magical box that only ever opened for me and hid all my secrets? Um, yes please.

Not that I had secrets from the people I lived with, but it would be nice to at least be able to keep a diary and know no one would be able to sneak a look through it. Like, say, some nosy twin in the mood to make trouble. They did that a lot. Or a nosy BFF.

But still... A girl like me?

I sighed as I placed the box on the foot of my bed and picked up my phone. I typed up a quick thank you text and sent it to Raven. I refrained from asking him just what the hell he meant, because it would be rude when he'd been so thoughtful and sweet to take the time to make me such a gift in the first place.

I tacked the pictures up on the cork board by my dresser. I stood the card up on one of my nightstands. I'd have to call Baxter later and thank him myself. A text wouldn't be good enough. Plus, I missed the sound of his

voice.

My phone pinged with a text message, and I ignored it. I didn't feel like talking to Raven or anyone else at the moment.

I felt a gentle tug on the strings connected to my bond, and a smile stretched across my face. Dash. He just couldn't seem to help himself today.

While everyone else had decided to take advantage of the pool, Dash had snuck away and followed me inside. He was in our living room doing who the hell knew what.

Now was my chance.

This was my time, and I wasn't about to waste it.

I rarely got time to myself these days, and I thought maybe that was why the guys were outside. They were giving me some space to be alone because they knew how overwhelming this whole birthday party business had been for me.

I appreciated them so much at the moment, but I didn't exactly want to be alone. Nope, I wanted to corner Dash and force him to pay attention to me.

I slipped out of my cover-up and tossed it onto the bed, careful not to disturb my sleeping princesses. There was a small set of stairs on the side of my bed that allowed them to climb on and off whenever they wanted to. Quinton had one next to his bed as well.

If it were up to him, Ash and Bone would spend all their nights in there with him, but I refused to allow that. And since the cats didn't like to be separated, they spent most nights in my room with me, which meant Quinton spent more time in here with me even when one of the others slept with me, which wasn't something he normally liked to do. He liked his time with me to be spent with just the two of us.

When I spent the night at Julian and Damien's house, the cats had a sleepover with their Daddy Quinton. When I slept in any of the other guys' rooms, they stayed in Quinton's room with him.

I knew he wanted them all the time, but he needed to get over himself.

We had shared custody, and they were my babies too.

I left my room in nothing but my tiny orange bikini and headed down the hallway toward the living room, following my link that led me directly to Dash.

I found him on the couch drinking a beer and flicking through the channels on the television. His hair was all mussed and wild on top as if he'd been roughly running his fingers through it.

He should have been outside with everyone else instead of being in here alone watching television.

But I guess he wasn't really alone though, was he? I was here with him.

I walked across the room on silent feet, and he was too lost in his thoughts to see me coming.

His head snapped up as I came into view, and I rushed him before he could get any funny thoughts. I climbed into his lap and straddled him.

"Ariel?" His eyes widened in alarm. "What in the world are you doing?"

Oh goody, I'd surprised him. I'd use that to my advantage, because clearly I needed all the help I could get where his stubborn ass was concerned.

"Why are you still avoiding me, Dash?" I asked bluntly, done pussyfooting around with him. "Don't you think it's been long enough? Don't you think you should stop punishing me by now? It's my birthday, and you can't be a dick to me on my birthday. It's practically a law."

Dash groaned as he wrapped his hands around my hips and held me in place to stop me from inching forward any more. I wanted to rub my wet heat over the bulge starting to grow in his swim shorts.

It had been far too long since Dash and I had been intimate. I missed him. Now that I had him beneath me, I knew exactly what I wanted, and I wanted him. Desperately so.

He closed his eyes tightly almost as if he were in pain. "Ariel, I'm not trying to punish you, I swear I'm not. Please, I don't want you to think I'm

mad at you because I'm not. I'm mad at myself, with good reason, and you know that."

Man, he really drove me nuts.

Dash had issues with women because of his mother and grandmother. They'd really done a number on him and had fucked him all up. He also had more scars on his body than I did. His entire back was covered in a layer of scar tissue.

As a result, he'd been a bit of a manwhore when it came to the ladies before me. He'd had girlfriends, but they'd never lasted longer than a few months, and they were a means to a sexual release.

I was the first female he'd ever had a long-term relationship with and the first woman he ever loved. We were the forever kind of love, and if shit went south, we were fucked because that link between us was going absolutely nowhere.

And I finally understood what he was saying. Dash hadn't been punishing me this whole time. He wasn't mad at me. He was mad at himself. And he was punishing himself by pushing me away and keeping me at arm's length.

His recent behavior was really hurting me, but what I hadn't realized was that it might be hurting him more than it was actually hurting me.

"You need to stop doing this," I said in a gentle voice as I cupped his cheeks. The rough, coarse hair of his beard scratched against the palms of my hands. "You're hurting both of us, and I'm tired of hurting, Dash. You ought to be tired of hurting by now too, damn it. I don't even understand why you're still mad. I'm fine, and you got your dad back home, and we're both safe. I don't know what you had to be mad about in the first damn place."

My chest rose and fell rapidly as I panted. I'd gotten myself all worked up, and now I was good and mad and more than ready to fight with him if that was what it took to make him see sense.

"Stop talking," he bit out angrily, and his eyes flashed dangerously. "I already told you I wasn't mad at you, and I meant it. I'm upset with the way I

treated you and the fact you put yourself in danger for my dad. I don't know how—”

I leaned forward and brushed my lips against his gently, silencing him. “Prove it to me. Prove you aren't mad at me.”

I ground down against his cock and rubbed myself on him through our clothing. It was my none too subtle way of letting him know how he could tell me he really wasn't mad at me anymore. I also thought that if we had sex, it would put an end to his bullshit behavior and we could finally get back to normal.

“I miss you,” I whispered hoarsely.

I'd seen the war in his eyes and knew I had to pull out the big guns or I'd lose, and who the hell knew how long he could continue to do this dance for?

“I love you and I miss the fuck out of you.” *And fucking you*, but I left that part out, I didn't want to scare him. And yes, this was most certainly a moment worthy of the F-word.

Too much quality time spent around Quinton had me feeling like most moments were worthy of the F-word. That man had a mouth on him. It was rubbing off on me.

I wished something else would rub off on me.

It looked like the time to take matters into my own hands was upon me once again.

I reached behind me and reached for the strings on my back that belonged to my bikini. When I got the knot out, I reached up and untied the one at the back of my neck.

My bathing suit top fell away, and Dash's eyes immediately dropped to my breasts.

“Fuck, sweetheart.” He groaned as he licked his lips hungrily. “You're trying to kill me.”

Why was he making this harder than it really needed to be? He talked about how I was trying to kill him, but I was the one who was going to die if

he didn't give me what I wanted.

I scooted farther up his lap. He made a noise that sounded almost as if he were in pain when I leaned forward and pressed my bare chest into his.

My nipples immediately hardened as soon as they came in contact with his hard chest that gave off an incredible heat that sent shivers down my spine. Heat pooled between my thighs, and I couldn't stop myself from grinding down on his erection, rubbing myself against it.

“Shit, Ariel. I think we should slow down.”

Fuck slow. Things had been nonexistent between us for what felt like months now. Wasn't that slow enough? I thought so, but clearly he thought differently because he was ridiculous like that.

I arched my back and placed my hands behind me on his thighs as I continued to grind down on his cock. There were too many layers of clothing between us.

I wanted to sit on his cock for real and feel him move inside of me.

“You're like a damn siren, and I'm not strong enough to stand up against your song.”

Wasn't that quite the compliment to be had?

He buried his face between my breasts as he wrapped his arms around me. He slid his palms up my back. One stopped below my shoulders while his other hand slipped up my neck and into my hair. He gripped a handful of my hair at the back of my head.

He stood up quickly, and I let out a little girly scream as his legs went out from below my hands and I had nothing else to hold onto. I wrapped my legs around his hips as his hands went to my ass to support me. He chuckled as I wrapped my arms around his shoulders and clung onto him.

“You better not drop me!” I grumbled as I shoved my face in his neck. I knew there was no way he'd ever drop me, but I had to give him a hard time for scaring me.

I kissed my way up his throat and along his jaw as he carried me down

the hallway and toward his bedroom. I was happy when he chose his room instead of mine. My babies did not need to be disturbed—yes, mine! Eat your heart out, Uncle Quint! The one was a bit of a hellcat, and the other one was kind of lazy. They both needed their beauty rest.

Plus, didn't babies sleep a lot? I figured cats were no different.

Dash left the door open as he prowled toward the bed. If I wasn't so ready to get it on, I might have asked him to shut the door because people around here could be nosy, and we needed this moment to be just between the two of us.

Dash sat me down on the foot of his bed and kissed me. I sighed happily and opened my mouth for him. His tongue slipped inside, and I could have cried. It felt like he was finally coming home to me after years of being away.

It felt fucking *great*.

He kissed me like a man who'd been starved, and I was the only meal in sight and the tastiest one.

It was him this time who ground his erection into me. We both groaned and broke the kiss.

He cupped my cheeks and stared into my eyes. "You know I love you more than anything in this whole world, right?" He paused and waited, so I nodded as I chewed on the corner of my bottom lip. His eyes dropped to my mouth and they heated.

"I need to know that you forgive me for being an absolute dick to you. Just the thought of you leaving me, us, our coven, ripped me apart and brought out the absolute worst in me. I feel like the only good things I've ever had in my life are Binx and the guys. Then I got you. It felt like everything I'd gone through had been worth it if it meant I got to be with you in the end because you're worth everything to me. Then it felt like you just threw it all away and tossed it in all of our faces so you could run off to greener pastures."

Pissed off, I opened my mouth to argue with him but snapped it shut

when he held up his hand to stop me.

“And then to find out you left me only so you could rescue my father?” He shook his head, and I swore I saw a sheen of tears in his eyes. “I don’t know how I’ll ever be able to thank you for that, or how I’m ever going to be good enough for a girl like you. I just know that I can’t have you leaving me for anything ever again. But I know it’s not fair of me to ask that of you. We have so much shit coming down on us right now that I know we’re all going to have to do things that all of us aren’t going to approve of just to make sure we get through this alive and together. I guess I’m just scared, and I don’t know what the hell I’m supposed to do about it.”

I could see it took a lot out of him to admit all of that to me, and I really appreciated his honesty.

But I was way the fuck over it. And he should have known that by now.

What was he trying to do here, distract me so I wouldn’t try to get him to have sex with me anymore?

Not on his fucking life.

I loved how he felt about me, but I was so damn tired of talking about what I’d done and listening to their opinions on the matter that I had actually started to shut down when anyone brought it up to me.

I damn well knew I should have been honest with every single one of them rather than just the select few before running off to join the Council for deceitful, selfish—but good—reasons. But I hadn’t done that, and I’d yet to find a way to go back in time to fix my mistakes. Not that I would if I could because I liked where living my life had gotten me.

“Do you want to know what I think you should do about it?” I asked him. I really hoped he liked my solution, because I was over talking about things.

He frowned at me. “I don’t think you’re taking this seriously enough. This isn’t a joke, Ariel.”

I knew it wasn’t a joke, but damn, enough was enough already. I had to take matters into my own hands just to shut him the hell up.



I sat up and grabbed hold of the hem of his swim trunks. He kept talking to me, but at this point I just blocked his words out. I yanked his shorts down and his cock was finally right in front of my face.

That shut him up, just as I had hoped.

I wrapped my hand around the girth of him and leaned forward. He sucked in a sharp breath as my lips met with his mushroom-shaped head, and I lowered my mouth down on him until my lips hit my hand and his dick hit the back of my throat. I could take no more of him in, but I didn't need to for this to be good for him without having to choke to death.

"Fuck yes," he hissed through gritted teeth, and I knew that was his way of giving in.

I'd won, and hopefully this would be the very end of the conversation for good.

He gripped my hair in his fist so tight it was almost too painful, but I enjoyed it. I didn't think too much on that because I didn't want it to fuck with my head and take me out of the moment.

I breathed through my nose as I slid my mouth up and down his length, making sure to slick him up with my saliva. I hollowed my cheeks out as I sucked and ran my tongue all along the underside of his cock.

His grip in my hair changed, and he took control of me. He was always so careful and sweet with me, but I truly loved it when this side of him came out to play. It was like his control snapped and he couldn't rein it in anymore.

His hips kicked a fast pace as he held me in place while he fucked my face. I submitted to him completely as I slid my hands around his hips and down to the round globes of his ass. I grabbed handfuls of each cheek and sunk my fingernails into his flesh.

He grunted as his hips stilled. He pulled on my hair roughly and dragged my mouth off his cock. Drool ran down my chin, and he swiped it across my jaw with the pad of his thumb.

I wanted to be embarrassed, but the way he was looking at me with heat

in his eyes made it impossible for me to feel anything other than desired and loved.

“I don’t want it like that,” he gritted out in a hoarse voice that shook. “I want to look into your beautiful green eyes when I come, and I want you to be right there with me.”

I was so down with that.

I stripped off my bottoms, lay down on the bed and spread my legs in an open invitation. I was more than ready for him, and when his eyes dropped down to the wetness between my thighs, I knew he saw just how ready I was.

“My eyes are up here,” I murmured huskily.

I almost laughed when his eyes snapped up to mine and a harsh red blush spread across his cheeks. Holy shit, Dash wasn’t the blushing type. I wished I’d had my cell on me so I could take a picture of him in all his naked, blushing glory so I would have something to remember this moment by.

It would give me something to put in my magic birthday box.

“What are you waiting for?” I placed my feet flat against the bed and cocked my knees.

His eyes dropped down to my pussy, and they practically glowed inside his face as my hands wandered down so I could play with myself. I had his full attention now, and I wasn’t about to waste it.

I spread my lips apart and ran my fingers through my wetness. I shivered as I circled my clit with my fingertip, and my nipples were so hard they were almost painful.

If I had an extra hand, I would pinch them myself.

I didn’t, my hands were too busy with something even better.

“Put your mouth on me,” I demanded. “Play with my tits. Suck on my nipples. Bite them. Just touch me, damn it. I’m tired of you watching and not acting. Fuck me, Dash. Show me.”

I trailed my fingers lower and dipped two of them inside of my tight, wet heat. Damn, that felt so good. His cock would feel even better. So would his

fingers. It was always so much better when someone else was doing the touching.

I groaned as my hips picked up the rhythm of my fingers as I fucked myself with them. If he wasn't going to do the work, then someone had to.

He stood frozen at the foot of the bed, save for his jaw that kept ticking as he avidly watched my fingers and hips move almost as if he were hypnotized or afraid to move.

“Fuck me, sweet girl,” he ground out. “I’ve missed you. Missed *this*. Missed your goddamn pussy. *Fuck.*”

He lunged forward and grabbed hold of my thighs. I cried out in surprise as he dragged me down the bed until my legs hung over and my feet touched the carpet. His hands slid around to the backs of my thighs and up. He cupped my ass and lifted my hips off the bed.

He lined his cock up with my entrance and thrust inside, sheathing his entire cock inside me in one go. I pressed my thighs up to his hips and crossed my legs around his ass, wrapping him up tight while he drove his cock in and out of me.

He leaned over me and lowered his mouth to my breast. His teeth scraped against my nipple as he sucked it into his mouth.

Finally.

I whimpered happily as I ran my shaking fingers through his wild red hair and latched on, pulling at his hair. My back arched up off the bed as I held him tightly against me.

Dash let go of my ass, but it stayed lifted off the mattress because I had my legs wrapped around him so tightly I was going absolutely nowhere.

His hands smoothed over my hips and up my sides. His knees went into the bed and pressed up against my hips as his arms slipped beneath me.

He let my breast go and kissed his way up my chest, over my collarbone, and up my throat as he wrapped me in his arms and picked me up off the bed so our chests were pressed tightly together. His one hand slid up the back of

my neck, and his fingers weaved through strands of my hair.

He tilted my head down and his lips captured mine in a hungry, desperate kiss. It was wet and hot. I ground myself against him as our tongues battled for dominance, my clit rubbing against him deliciously.

My teeth sunk into his bottom lip as my pussy spasmed around him, and I came with a rush. His eyes flew open, and he pulled back slightly so he could look me in the eye. His were full of so much love and possessiveness, my entire body lit up for him as I trembled with my release.

“God damn,” he groaned. “You’re so fucking beautiful I can hardly even believe you’re really mine. I love you so damn much, Ariel.”

I loved him too, but it felt like my brain had fried and I couldn’t get my mouth to form the words to say it back to him. I just hoped he could read it as easily in my eyes as I could in his.

He leaned in and kissed my temple sweetly and pressed his cheek to the side of my head as his body shuddered and he groaned out his orgasm.

His side of the link reached out toward me, and I felt all the love he had for me. The incredible bond that we shared between the two of us enveloped me completely. His feelings for me were overwhelmingly sweet and immediately brought tears to my eyes.

“Dash.” I choked out, my throat clogged with raw emotions as tears spilled out of my eyes and raced down my cheeks.

I hated crying, it usually made me feel weak, but right now, I felt like these were happy tears. Tears of goddamn joy at finally connecting with Dash once again and being allowed to bask in his love and all that was him.

But still...

“I hope you know I’m never doing that with you again,” I whispered, my voice thick thanks to my tears and out of control emotions.

“Sweetheart,” he murmured, his voice shaking with humor, “you just came so hard on my dick your entire body is *still* shaking. I can promise you that when you get the chance to jump back on my dick again so you can take

it for a ride, you are not going to pass it up. You love it too much.”

And now that warm, happy buzz that had me crying started to evaporate and the urge to smack him had taken over. He damn well knew that was not what I’d been talking about.

“Dash,” I said in warning. I knew he was just joking, but I didn’t find anything he’d said to be amusing in the slightest. This wasn’t something to be joking around about. He’d really hurt me, and in doing so, he’d really hurt himself, and that made it even worse. Hurting each other was a vicious cycle I didn’t want us to fall into. It needed to be curbed before it could possibly get any worse.

“Sorry, beautiful. I couldn’t help but joke with you. I feel lighter than I have in a really long time and wasn’t quite ready to take things back to heavy just yet. I’ll stop making jokes though because I know it’s not funny. I know I was wrong, and I know it hurt us both. I want to promise you that it’ll never happen again, but our lives together are hopefully going to be long, so there’s no telling what could happen or what trials we’re going to be forced to go through. I don’t ever want to lie to you. So I’m cracking jokes and trying to keep the mood light. I apologize.”

That was more like it. And I didn’t even mind that he didn’t want to make me promises for his future behavior. I appreciated his honesty, because if he had tried to fill my head with lies and bullshit, I would have resented him for it.

I smoothed the palms of my hands up over his horribly scarred back and was relieved when he didn’t flinch away from my touch. I think Quinton and myself, and probably now Romero, were the only people he allowed to touch his scars without him shifting away.

I was grateful. If he were to ever flinch away from my touch, it would rip my heart clean out of my chest and run it through a garbage disposal.

“I can’t lose you,” I whispered honestly. “Just going through this with you has tested me beyond what I knew my limits could handle. Especially

where you're concerned. You and I have an intense connection, we've been through a lot together."

I sucked in a large, shaky breath and paused as I tried to get the riot of my thoughts in order. They were a jumbled mess inside my head that was hard to make sense of.

"I never wanted to move in here in the first place, you know?" I shared. I figured this was something most of the guys were well aware of, but I'd never been so openly honest about it before.

"I thought that it'd be the ultimate loss of my independence. Not that I really had a whole lot of good going for me before I met you guys, but still... I never relied on anyone but myself, and I had never wanted to. But Quinton had been so damn bossy. So controlling. So intense. Just fucking straight-up overwhelming at times. If I had moved in here in the beginning, right after Vivian died, I don't think I'd be the same Ariel I am today. I don't think I would have been strong enough to have infiltrated the Council to find your dad. I don't think..."

I didn't think Quinton would love me like he did now, and that would be a fucking tragedy of epic proportions.

"I think Quinton being all that he is, he understood this about me, even when I had no clue myself. It's just a small part of why he makes such a great leader of our coven. Whatever the reason, he knew I needed you, and you, well, you needed me too. Your cottage was the perfect place for me to call home and you became... someone I could trust and love. Which is something I also needed that I had no clue I desperately required in my life."

All of that was the truth and a whole lot easier to say than I had ever thought it would be.

It was much harder to admit that Dash might have been the first one of them I had thought I loved, and it wasn't something I would ever speak out loud. Too many feelings would get hurt for too many people.

I knew most people probably thought it had been Quinton for me, or

maybe even Tyson. They'd be wrong. Tyson had filled the role of my best friend when I'd never been fortunate enough to have one before meeting him.

Quinton had been someone I found sexy as hell and intimidating, and he'd scared the ever loving shit right out of me the first time I'd heard words come out of his stupid mouth. It had most certainly not been love at first sight on my behalf where Uncle Quinton was concerned. Though, I was fairly certain the opposite could be said from his perspective.

In the beginning, I hadn't really given Julian or Damien much of a chance. And my salt and pepper twins were glorious right from day one, but I didn't take either one of them seriously for a good, long while.

But Dash?

He'd been different right from the start. I had overheard him being an absolute dick about women in general and specifically where I was concerned. He'd been a manwhore and was proud of it, and he had wanted nothing to do with me.

But then Uncle Quint had shown up on Dash's doorstep with me in tow, and the beautiful ginger had been nothing but good to me ever since, treating me like I was made of gold and precious diamonds.

Hell, he'd even been stabbed because of me and my stalker—and Quinton!—but he'd never once blamed me for it or held me responsible. I didn't know if he blamed Quinton or not, he'd never said anything. It would be easy to blame Quinton, and if I'd been stabbed, I might have blamed him myself. I'd only had my face sliced open though.

Dash always just took care of me, no questions asked, with absolutely zero hesitation to be seen on his part.

All the women in his life, including his own damn mother and grandmother, had worked really hard to destroy him. The fact that he'd let me in the way he did still amazed me.

I loved him, and I would never, ever let him go. No matter what.

“I know I got all that with you, from you... but I feel like it was Quinton

who gave that to both of us. He knew just how much we needed each other to feel complete. And I do need you, Dash. I'll always need you. And you need me too. Which is why what you did was stupid bullshit, and I'm not going to put up with that kind of crap from you anymore. Mostly because I can't stand to watch you hurt yourself. Don't try to make me."

He was getting me all worked up again, and he needed to fuck the aggression right out of me or there was a good chance I was going to punch him right in the throat if he so much as looked at me funny.

"I hear you, sweetheart. I swear I do. And I swear I'm going to do better in the future, that much I can promise you."

I'd take that. Just so long as he tried, that was more than enough for me.

I couldn't ask for him to be perfect, and I wouldn't because that shit wasn't possible. I just wanted him to try not to hurt both of us. He was used to hurting, we both were, but our life with our coven was supposed to be better for us than what we'd had before. That was all I wanted.

I pushed on his chest, rolling him over onto his back. His eyes widened as I straddled his hips and climbed on top of him.

"I'm not done with you." I smirked down at him. "We've got a lot of time to make up for, and this greedy pussy of mine has missed you."

"Hell yes," he muttered as my lips brushed hungrily against his.

He made me do all the work, which was okay because that just meant that next time it'd be his turn, and my man had no problem working up a sweat while giving me what I wanted and needed.

I hid in Dash's room with him for the rest of the day, not caring in the slightest that it was my birthday and my whole family was there to celebrate with me.

It was my birthday, and I did what made me happy. Not a single one of them complained. They all just gave me my space to be where I needed to be.



The bell over the door jingled, and I looked up in time to see a pretty purple-haired woman walk through the door with a young, pink-haired child behind her, holding the hand of a giant burly man with silver hair. Two more beasts of men came in behind them.

The woman looked friendly enough, if a little sad, but the men looked like straight-up killers. And they all gave off a vibe that screamed dangerous.

They weren't human.

But they weren't witches either.

Color me intrigued.

I knew there had to be more supernatural beings out there, but no one would tell me exactly what was truly out there. Except for demons. I'd heard enough to know those creepy fucks were definitely real, and I hoped like hell I never got to meet one.

Trenton and Simon appeared on either side of me, and I let out an embarrassing squeak that had me turning red and wanting to go hide in the bathroom until these new people left, because they were looking at me with concern. They'd so totally heard me.

My bodyguards sucked ass sometimes. I was blaming them for this, and maybe I was going to get them each a collar with a bell on it so they couldn't do this crap to me anymore.

“Alphas,” Trenton muttered darkly. “Every single one of them save for the little girl.”

“What?”

“Shifters,” Simon clarified as he moved closer to me.

Bless him. I knew he was just doing his job, but I didn’t actually need protection anymore. I thought I had it down all on my own.

I didn’t need to identify what type of shifters they were to know I could easily set them all on fire in two seconds flat so I could watch them burn.

Though that didn’t stop me from being incredibly curious. I wanted to know what type of creatures or animals they could turn into.

Nosy, nosy little witch.

“Hey, lady.”

I looked over the counter and down at the little pink-haired girl with the voice of an angel, and I couldn’t help but smile at her. She looked far too serious for a child with pink hair.

I cleared my throat, and my embarrassment slid clean away. “Hey yourself, shorty.”

She scowled at me, and Simon moved so close to me his chest brushed against my arm. If he wasn’t careful, he was going to smother me.

I peeked out of the corner of my eye and found both his eyes glowing silver.

At a damn *child* of all people.

“Simon,” I said in an angry voice full of warning.

He shrugged, not caring. She could be a child or a crippled little old lady, and it wouldn’t make one lick of a difference to either of the brothers. They were born to protect me, and they took their jobs more seriously than they did with anything else in their lives.

“Are you a witch?” the little girl asked me somewhat rudely.

You didn’t see me demanding to know what type of shifter she was. Nope. Because that shit would be rude.

I answered her anyway, because apparently I was a sucker for pint-sized people with pretty hair and a serious attitude. “Yup.”

“I’m a wolf,” she told me proudly.

“Cool.” I responded as if this were an everyday, normal type of conversation for me, which it actually was *not*.

I had questions, so many questions, but I was smart enough to refrain from asking them. She was just a child, after all, and no matter how rude or bold she’d been toward me with her questions, I would not be inappropriate with her.

“I’m Ariel, what’s your name?”

There. Start off small. Then maybe she’d just blab without me having to ask. It usually worked with Baxter.

“Rosie.” She beamed up at me, and I was momentarily starstruck by just how pretty she was. “It’s nice to meet you, Ariel. If you aren’t too cray-cray, maybe we can be friends.”

I blinked at her stupidly.

What the fuck did she just say to me? Cray-cray? As in crazy? This kid was kind of an asshole, and I wasn’t sure if I actually wanted to be her friend.

Kids were overrated. I wished all the guys were here so I could point this out to them by using little Rosie here as Exhibit A.

“Rosie, not cool,” a deep male voice rumbled.

The silver one had approached.

Simon tensed even more. I put my hand on his arm and rubbed it soothingly in hopes of calming him down. It worked, and he relaxed slightly.

I pulled my hand away quickly and pretended like I couldn’t feel the lingering tingles just touching his arm left me with. I couldn’t imagine what touching something like his cock would do to me.

It’d probably blow my mind.

And now I was blushing.

Damn.

The silver-haired one eyed me critically. “Sorry, she’s a bit of a wild one. We try to let her be because she’s usually not so rude.”

“That’s a lie,” one of the other men grumbled under his breath. “She’s spoiled rotten and fucking perfect.”

That one sounded like a proud daddy.

Jesus.

He reminded me of Rain. What a lucky little girl.

“To be fair, she’s probably never seen a female witch before,” the silver-haired one rumbled out. “You’re either something incredibly special or you’re a liar.”

Well now, weren’t they just one big happy family of shapeshifting assholes? Seriously.

“Get out,” Simon snarled menacingly, sounding part animal himself.

As for me, I had no desire to throw them out if they were planning on buying something. Tyson had a business to run here, and I assumed he liked making money. In order to make a buck, we actually had to sell some things every now and then.

Still, I had a point to make first because I was apparently a bit of an asshole myself.

Who knew?

My eyes shifted between them as the corners of my lips curled up in a smug smirk. I lifted my hand and casually flicked my fingers in their direction.

The glass jars on the counters that the twins filled with ridiculous things rattled as their contents burst out. They blew up into the air and floated around the shifters as the lights overhead flickered.

Rosie gasped delightedly as the purple-haired woman and the other man rushed over.

“What in the world?” the woman whispered in awe.

Why the twins thought we needed jars full of black and silver glitter,

yellow rose petals that never wilted but smelled wonderful, and yellow skittles, I would never know, but I was sure they would be laughing their asses off if they could see them floating around now as they danced and weaved in the air.

Nobody moved or so much as twitched. It was almost as if they were too afraid to move. Perhaps they were terrified of being attacked by a skittle.

I snapped my fingers, and everything went back to where it belonged and the lights remained on once again.

I smiled at them, which was really more of a baring of teeth. “I apologize for my bodyguard’s rude behavior, but perhaps he’s partially right. If you aren’t going to buy anything, then maybe it’s best that you leave.”

*Just buy something then get the hell out. Please and thank you.*

“Whoa,” the woman breathed out. “Just what in the hell did I miss over here?”

“That was really cool!” Rosie exclaimed as she clapped her hands together and beamed up at me. “Can you do it again?”

I really didn’t want to like the kid, but she was starting to grow on me. Like fungus. She was like the mold that grew in the walls no amount of bleach could get rid of so it just never went away and you breathed it in and hoped like hell it didn’t kill you. Or something like that.

Maybe I was going crazy.

“What’s this?” one of the men asked. “A female witch? I always thought that the very few still alive were locked away for their own safety and obsessively protected by their covens.”

I closed my eyes and prayed for patience. I had been stupid in showing off. I’d known it was stupid, and I’d still done it anyway.

Quinton was going to be so mad at me when this nonsense got back to him. I could already hear the lecture and just knew it would give me a headache and a bad attitude. And I’d have no one to blame but myself, like usual.

Did everyone think female witches were locked up little princesses? How obnoxious. I mean, it might have been right for most of them, but not for this girl right here, and a lot of those women might not have been given a choice in the matter.

“Jesus Christ,” the purple-haired woman muttered irately under her breath. Then louder, she said, “Hi. I’m Clover. That’s my daughter, Rose, but we call her Rosie. These three idiots are my mates. They mean no disrespect, I swear. Sometimes men are just dumb. I think it’s a requirement for having a cock.”

She rolled her eyes skyward, and a bubble of laughter burst out of me. This chick was preaching to the choir.

I raised my eyebrow at her and shared, “I have seven boyfriends and two permanent bodyguards.” I tossed my hands out at my sides, indicating the two men standing beside me. “Meet the bodyguards, Trenton and Simon. The boyfriends aren’t here at the moment, but don’t be surprised if one or more of them show up. They like to be where the action is, and that’s usually wherever I’m at.”

I shrugged like this whole thing wasn’t weird and uncomfortable for whatever reason.

She whistled and looked impressed. Her mates were looking at me like maybe they thought I was a liar, but they’d learned their lesson and were keeping their mouths shut, and the kid’s eyes were huge. Maybe I shouldn’t have shared so openly about my relationship. Seven did sound like a rather large number. Nine if you included the bodyguards.

I’d long since gotten over people thinking it made me a whore. Fuck what other people thought, the only people whose opinions mattered to me anymore were my family’s.

“I was actually hoping to see two guys who worked here before. Maybe you know them. They are witches too. Heck, maybe they are even part of your harem.”

Now, see, this I didn't much care for at all. We had plenty of repeat customers who came back just for the boys, and I swear I hated every single one of them. I had a whole *grin and bear it* thing going on with it, but I wasn't doing that with this chick. She clearly had enough dicks of her own, and she didn't need to be here trying to moon over any of mine.

When I didn't respond, Trenton did the adult thing for me. "Who are you looking for exactly? I'm sure we can help you out. We know everyone who works here, we're all family."

Simon glared at his brother as he wrapped his arm around my waist and pulled me into his side. I couldn't be sure if he was trying to contain me or comfort me, but I appreciated the effort either way. I also appreciated him looking at his brother as if he thought he were the devil himself.

I pretended like I couldn't feel the heat coming off of his body or the way it made my nipples harden.

God fucking dammit. What was the matter with me? There were lines I should never think about crossing that I thought about crossing almost every single day. I had a problem, and I needed to get over it and myself really quick before everything went sideways because I was too damn stupid.

"They are twins, but they are weird. Identical except for their hair and eye color."

My eyelid twitched.

"The salt and pepper twins," I said in an empty voice that reminded me too much of Rain sometimes. "Addison and Abel."

"Yes!" Clover said as she smiled brightly at me. "The salt and pepper twins is a perfect description for them, really. I wanted to thank them. Are they around?"

They weren't, but they could be here in ten minutes with a simple phone call.

Trenton pulled his cell out of the back pocket of his jeans and started hitting some buttons on the screen. "You got this?" he asked his brother

without looking up from his phone.

Simon snorted in reply, and his brother wandered away while pressing his phone to his ear. Huh. I guessed he deemed the shifters nonthreatening, otherwise there was no way he'd ever walk away from me with them being so close.

I cleared my throat. "They aren't here, but they will be in like ten minutes. Why don't you look around, shop, and hit up the coffee cart while you wait? Make yourselves comfortable. There are some chairs toward the back with a table. If you get coffee, you're welcome to go sit back there and chill while you wait. Just don't touch any cards if they are on the table."

I had a special deck of tarot cards that I never brought to work with me. I always kept them at home and used them on the guys to practice with. Not that I needed to practice anymore at this point, I had it down, but I still didn't give out readings here at the shop. I didn't know why, but I wasn't comfortable with it. I did enjoy watching the guys do it though.

What I didn't always enjoy were the reactions of the people getting their readings. People could be serious assholes when they paid for something and they weren't given exactly what they wanted. The guys always handled it well, but it made me angry, and I had a hard time keeping my mouth shut when it happened. I wasn't about to put myself in that situation.

So I didn't do readings, and sometimes people got nasty with me when I said no. But that was what bodyguards were for, and once Trenton and Simon inserted themselves into the thick of things, people usually backed off and tried not to shit their pants.

I didn't like the way two of these shifters were eyeing me up when I mentioned cards. I didn't want them getting any sort of ideas, because I didn't want to deal with them when I told them no.

I was more than ready for them to leave. They were giving me anxiety just by being here.

I was over it, over them, and ready for my shift to be over.



“Kitty!” Rosie shrieked, and she took off running, her shoes pounding against the floor.

“Oh shit,” I muttered as I spotted Binx glaring at her, his tail swishing back and forth angrily. If she got ahold of him, he was going to bite her, I just knew it.

“Binx!” Trenton yelled in a commanding voice. The cat switched his glare from the little girl to my bodyguard before hissing and sprinting away.

Phew, that was a close call. The stupid but lovable cat didn’t much care for women who weren’t me, bless him. Many a female customer had run out of the shop in tears and bleeding thanks to him. The boys found it hilarious, but it always made me feel bad. I felt like maybe I should offer every woman who walked through the door a band-aid to hold onto just in case he sunk his claws into them or decided he was in a biting mood.

I loved that little beast with all my heart.

Rosie’s shoulders started to shake. She turned around and tears streamed down her cheeks. “It’s mean!” she whispered in a broken voice.

“Yeah,” I readily agreed with her. “He really can be mean sometimes. You shouldn’t take it personally, he does that to most people.”

I didn’t want to apologize to her because I hadn’t hurt her feelings, but I felt bad for the kid. Trenton had really done her a favor though, and she really, honestly, didn’t have any reason to be crying. She should be thanking him.

Her bottom lip wobbled. “But cats love me.”

“Not this one.”

She burst into loud, messy tears and turned to run deeper into the store. She disappeared from sight, and I really hoped she didn’t run into Binx in her hurry to get away from me. That would be bad for her.

This kid was really solidifying my need to never have children of my own, even if I did kind of like her.

Every single one of the shifter men chased after her. Clover watched them

go with a sweet, soft smile on her face.

Who smiled when their kid cried and then their boyfriends... husbands... whatever they were ran off after said crying child?

Maybe shifters were the real cray-cray here.

“Sorry about the drama,” Clover murmured as she placed her hands on her flat stomach. “For most of Rosie’s life it was just the two of us and she didn’t have to share my attention with anyone else because she had me all to herself. When the guys came along, she had to share me, but it was okay because they all immediately fell in love with her too, so she didn’t lose out on any love. She actually gained so much more.”

She paused as she ran her hands lovingly up and down her stomach.

Oh boy.

I figured I knew where this was going. Better her than me.

“Now that we just found out I’m pregnant... Well, she’s a bit emotional and has been having odd outbursts. The guys have asked me to let them take care of it in hopes of them bonding deeper with her, but it’s really hard for me to just stand back and watch. I feel like it’s my responsibility to chase after her and soothe her worries.”

Well, damn.

Now I felt bad for even thinking anything bad about her in the first place. Clearly whatever reason she had for being here to see the twins had nothing to do with her wanting to get freaky with them.

It was time for me to stop acting like a crazy, jealous girlfriend that I really was.

Maybe it was time for me to stop looking at every single person as if they were personally out to get me and it was only a matter of time before the real ball dropped. Then again, with the Council lurking around every dark corner, maybe now actually wasn’t the right time to start trusting people.

I didn’t know what to say to her. Did she expect me to give her some advice? I didn’t think that was wise. Maybe I should call Rain. He had a kid,

he might know what to say to her.

Romero was out. He might have a kid, but the dude was completely nuts and entirely unpredictable.

Marcus was out for me because I didn't think he could be trusted, and I'd never call him unless there was absolutely no one else left to call. The thought made me sad. I couldn't pinpoint exactly when things had changed, but they had. I no longer looked at him like a father figure whom I loved so very much and who loved me the same right back. Those days were long since dead and gone. I didn't think he knew that though, because he just kept right on trying with me. The whole thing was terribly sad for me.

I was saved by the bell above the door jingling, signaling the arrival of someone else.

The salt and pepper twins were here. That was fast.

They were both tense, and their green and blue eyes immediately found me and stayed locked on me. They came right to me, ignoring everyone else in the store. Both Trenton and Simon moved away from me, fading into the background like good little bodyguards.

Abel leaned into me and cupped my cheek gently in his big hand. His green eyes shone brightly with his concern as they roamed over my face, searching for something. "Pretty girl, tell me you're okay. I need to hear your voice."

I smiled sweetly up at him. My pepper twin could be absolutely adorable when he was being serious and staying out of trouble.

"I'm okay," I told him honestly. "I promise. I don't know what Trenton said to you on the phone, but there's a shifter named Clover here to see you and your brother. She's brought her family with her."

I turned away from him and gestured toward Clover on the other side of the counter. Her hands still covered her flat stomach lovingly. She had a small, curious smile on her face as her eyes darted back and forth between Abel and Addison.

Addison rounded the counter and came right up to me like his brother had. He placed his big hand on my hip and pulled me into him. Abel grunted in amusement as Addison's lips came down on mine, and he kissed me like he needed me to breathe life into him.

When he pulled away to smirk down at me, my cheeks were heated with a blush, and my lips were parted and likely slightly swollen.

I turned on Abel and pointed my finger accusingly at him. "Why didn't you kiss me like that, huh? I think my salt twin is winning today, mister. And, in case you didn't know it, that means you're losing."

Both twins laughed outrageously, like neither of them took anything that came out of my mouth seriously.

Abel crossed his thick arms over his wide chest. "What exactly is it that my twin is winning, Ariel? Tell me, I want to know."

Shit.

Now why had I started this game in the first place? I'd likely be the one losing. Neither of them played fair.

"Well..." I paused as if I had to think about it and tapped the tip of my finger against my bottom lip. "Me, I think. Yes, that's right."

Abel's eyes flared, and I knew he understood exactly what I was talking about. But he was nuts if he even thought for one second that I'd ever take his brother without him. They were a package deal, and I'd never try to separate them. Not ever. It was fun to tease them though, they both deserved to be played with from time to time.

And that was exactly what I had in mind, playing with them.

I winked at him. "Date night tonight in my apartment. With me and Addison. I'm in charge, and if you're a good boy, you can join us. Only if you're a good boy though."

He could never be good, neither of them could be. It'd be fun to watch him try.

Addison laughed, and his brother flipped him his middle finger and

waved it around.

Someone cleared their throat, and my head snapped in their direction. Four adult shifters and one child stared at us with varying emotions on their faces—surprise, amusement, relief, curiosity.

Son of a bitch.

I had completely forgotten about everyone else but the twins, and now I was more embarrassed than anything else.

“*Y*ou’re just okay with leaving them there with those people?” Simon asked me incredulously from his place in the front seat of the SUV.

Someone wasn’t very happy with me, that was for sure.

I dropped my phone onto the seat beside me, not bothering to answer him. I could have told him I had just finished texting not only Quinton, but Rain as well, and now they were both on their way to the shop, but for some reason I really didn’t feel like sharing.

I hated having so many people to answer to all the time. It got annoying and on my nerves, and if I thought for one second that the twins were in any sort of danger, then no way in hell would I have ever left them alone with *those people*.

I only texted for backup because these were unsafe times we were living in, and it never hurt to be too cautious.

“Will you take me to the super store really quick?” I asked Trenton who was driving.

Simon turned around in his seat to give me the stink eye while Trenton mumbled a stilted, “Of course.”

At least one of them wasn’t mad at me and was being very agreeable. Then again, Trenton was always that way with me. I had no idea what the

hell Simon's problem was. He hadn't acted like this toward me in the shop earlier.

"What are you planning on getting from the store?" Simon asked me. I could feel his eyes on me, but I refused to look at him and kept looking out my window.

"Now you're just being nosy," I mumbled.

It wasn't that I was trying to push his buttons, but I let him get under my skin, and I would not be me if I didn't poke him back just a little.

"I feel like I have a right to know what we're going to the store for since I'm going along for the ride. Seems only fair that you tell me."

"Simon," Trenton rumbled in warning.

He was right to try and chastise his brother. Sometimes I felt like Trenton just got me way more than Simon did, and what Simon had said was definitely the wrong thing to say to me.

"I'll talk to Rain when we get home later," I told them without taking my eyes off the window. At this point, I didn't even see what we were driving past, it was all a blur to me as I figured out in my head what I was going to say to Rain later.

It wasn't a conversation I was looking forward to, but I supposed it was past time for it to take place.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Simon demanded.

I sighed heavily. This wasn't a conversation I wanted to be having with him because I knew he was going to argue with me and put up a fight. But I pulled up my big girl panties and got to it because avoiding shit never got me anywhere I wanted to be.

"Rain has his own car, so there's really no reason for him to be driving mine around all the time. I'm just going to take mine back from him, and then you guys won't have to be driving me around all the time. You won't have to worry yourself with what it is I'm going to buy from the store. Problem solved, just like that."

The car remained silent after that, but it was the kind of tense silence that happened when everyone knew there was a bomb that was about to go off. I just knew neither of them were going to like what I had to say, which was partially why I'd said it in the first place.

Trenton found a parking spot close to the entrance of the store after doing a lap around the lot and we parked, stealing it from a red minivan that honked repeatedly at us as they drove past. Men who drove minivans always seemed to be very aggressive drivers, in my experience. It was like they had to prove to the rest of the world that they didn't have to trade in their balls when they drove the family vehicle, and to prove it, they acted like even bigger assholes toward everyone else behind the wheel.

There wasn't anything manly about it.

Real men drove their families around and didn't care if they had to do it in a minivan. All they gave a shit about was that it got their family to their destination safely and in one piece.

I got out of the SUV before either of them could start in on me. Once we were in the store, I knew neither of them would broach the subject for fear of being overheard. They wouldn't want to risk embarrassing me or upsetting me in public. They were awesome like that.

As the only form of apology I was willing to give him, I took hold of Simon's hand and threaded my fingers through his. His arm jerked and his head snapped down so he could stare at me with his wide, gray eyes that were shining silver with the depths of his emotions.

I'd surprised him and caught him off guard—two things someone like Simon, who'd been training his whole life to be able to protect me, wasn't used to experiencing.

And it made me realize something important... I never really touched either of them if I could help it.

Had I never held his hand before? If I had, it'd been so insignificant to me that I didn't even remember it, but I was willing to bet that if it had happened,



Simon would be able to tell you the where and when of it.

Damn.

I chewed on my bottom lip. Now that I was holding his hand, maybe it wasn't such a good idea. Maybe I should pretend to cough or something and let his hand go so I could use my elbow to cover my mouth.

No, that just seemed mean, and I didn't ever want to intentionally hurt him. I didn't want to hurt him or his brother.

No, I wanted the exact opposite of hurting them. I loved them both very much, and I wanted to show them love and affection.

But I couldn't. I was afraid of what the others would think if I got too friendly with them. Not that they gave me reason to worry. We were family, and a little hand holding between us wouldn't bother anyone. Anything else past that though... who the hell knew?

I tried to pull my hand away, but Simon's hand tightened around mine, and he refused to let me go.

"Nope." He shook his head. "You wanted to hold my hand, so that's what we're doing. You told me so when you slid your fingers through mine and held on. Now I'm not going to let go. Deal with it."

I looked to Trenton for help since he was the more sensible one of the two, but he refused to look at me. No help there.

Damn.

I had a feeling that all this emotional bullshit and turmoil I was feeling over a little hand holding meant that I was destined for a very uncomfortable conversation with the members of my coven in the very near future, because I had agreed to not keeping secrets or lying to them, and the longer I kept these feelings to myself, the more they felt like I actually was keeping a secret from them by not being open with them. Even though I absolutely was not lying to them, sometimes it could come across as a lie just by not saying anything at all.

Would that be considered lying by omission?

I wasn't exactly sure, but I knew that whatever it was, it didn't sit right with me.

"Shit," Trenton hissed under his breath as we walked through the automatic doors that had opened up for us.

"What's wrong?" I asked as I followed the direction his eyes were aimed in.

A man wearing tan khakis and a light blue polo was jogging after us with a nasty look on his face. I'd never seen him before in my life.

"Walk faster," Trenton urged as he put his hand on the small of my back and gently pushed me forward.

Simon squeezed my hand, and all three of us picked up the pace until we were practically jogging. I had no idea what was going on, but I trusted them both with my life, so I listened to what they told me to do.

I knew when to behave and when not to. I wasn't always a dumb girl.

"Hey!" a male voice shouted out from behind us, and somehow we picked up the pace and still made it look like we weren't running away. Hopefully.

People turned to stare at us. I guessed it totally looked like we were running away from someone inside of a super store. Bummer.

Every time I went anywhere now, I always tried to blend in and never stand out. I didn't know why, because it was dumb, but I always felt like people would take one look at me and they'd know I was a witch. Hello, insecurities. They screamed loudly and clearly whenever I surrounded myself with normal people.

Most people didn't even believe in witches these days, so I knew I was safe in that regard, but I just couldn't help but worry.

People turned to look at us, and every single one of them got a load of my face and quickly looked away.

Oh no, who needed to be worried about being outed as a witch when everyone who looked at me took in the wicked scar on my face and decided

to never look at me again because said scar made them uncomfortable? The damn thing wasn't even that bad anymore. Or maybe I was just so used to it now that it didn't seem that bad and weak bitches couldn't handle it.

Sometimes I absolutely hated people. They could be so damn stupid.

I ignored all of them like I usually ignored this type of behavior, and I kept hustling with my bodyguards, neither of whom even seemed to notice the looks I was receiving. They went pretty much everywhere with me, but they never paid the looks I got any attention. Either they lived in their own world, or they just really did not give a fuck.

“Hey, I know you heard me. I'm talking to you.”

People actually stopped this time to stare. Jesus, this was not good.

“Do you know this guy or something?” I finally asked.

What if he worked for the Council? And why hadn't I thought of that before now? The threat was serious, I just didn't live my life scared or worried like the rest of the guys did.

The Council wasn't going to hurt me, I knew that much, but there was nothing stopping them from hurting everyone else.

“It's the guy who was driving that red van from the parking lot,” Simon told me, and I stopped dead in my tracks. My hand yanked on his, and he stopped with me rather than simply letting go.

“Why are we running away from him?” I asked incredulously.

Had they lost their damn minds? We were drawing more attention by running when we didn't even need to be running.

I wasn't afraid of normal human beings anymore. Yeah, I knew they were capable of being monsters, but I had bigger and badder monsters to worry about and be afraid of.

Fuck the normal ones.

I turned around and dragged Simon along with me. Trenton, never one to be left out of my foolishness because he didn't want to miss out on the chance to either lecture me or protect me, wasn't far behind.

“Fuck me,” Trenton grumbled under his breath. “You’re going to cause a scene, and somehow the Council is going to hear about it because they have eyes and ears everywhere like the creepy fucks they are. It’s going to give them more ammunition to use when they show up to try and take you from us. Both Quinton and Rain are going to want our heads for allowing this. We should have taken you straight home so there was no chance of you getting into any trouble. Fuck this shit.”

Fuck this shit indeed.

I was really starting to get pissed about the way every single person was treating me now because of the Council. They treated me like I was a baby, and it was like they all forgot why the Council had asked me to join them in the first damn place. And, because I had to be mad about more than just one thing, why did every single person think they answered to Quinton or Rain where I was concerned? I was my own damn person, thank you very much.

Now I was even a legal freaking adult. I needed to remember that and not stick out my tongue or stomp my foot the next time I got into an argument with Uncle Quint and told him to suck it.

“That’s right, bitch, I’m talking to you.”

I didn’t know why he chose to single me out, it wasn’t like I’d been driving the fucking car. Some men would rather confront someone with a vagina rather than one with a dick dangling between their legs.

Fucking coward.

“What the fuck did you just call her?” Simon whispered in a harsh voice that trembled with rage.

Oh boy.

Simon was down for a pissing contest if it came to that. And they were seriously worried about me causing a scene?

Boys, please.

Boys were so fucking overrated sometimes that it wasn’t even funny.

The man stopped right in front of me and didn’t hesitate to get right in my

face. The idiot was going to get himself beaten to a bloody pulp if he didn't take a step back.

“You think you're hot shit in your big, fancy, gas guzzling SUV, don't cha, you little bitch? You think it's okay to cut people off and act like you're better than everyone else. You think it's okay to cut someone off like they are nothing. I'm here to tell you—”

“Dude,” Simon snapped, finally out of patience. He put his hand on the man's chest and roughly shoved him back. “She wasn't even driving. How about you get the fuck out of her face and stay out of it, buddy, before I have to fuck you up.”

That was it, I was completely over this BS, and I still had my shopping to do, which wasn't exactly my favorite pastime.

“You're going to forget this ever happened,” I whispered as I looked him dead in the eye and pushed my will and my magic into him. “You're going to forget you ever met me, turn around, and walk back to your minivan. I want you to get inside and take a little nap. Okay?”

I smiled at him kindly, putting on the sweetest, fakest smile I had in me to bust out just for occasions like this. Sometimes it really was easier to catch flies with honey and all that garbage.

His head jerked to the side as he blinked slowly at me—right before he openly scoffed.

“You dumb, stupid ass girl. He told me you were going to try and boss me around. He said you tried that shit on everyone you meet who has a dick. Well, I'm here to tell you, princess, that shit is not going to work on me. You better get over yourself, and you better do it really fucking fast.”

I jerked back a step, taking Simon with me. I did not want to be that close to him.

*He?*

He who?

My stomach threatened to drop out and land at my feet. I had a horrible,

terrible feeling that I knew exactly who this *he* was.

Adrian.

The bane of my motherfucking existence.

Or someone else just like him, one of his brothers or coven members or whatever the fuck you wanted to call them.

It would explain why my magic had no effect on him whatsoever. Someone else had already done a number on him with their own magic. It was the only explanation I could come up with.

Ugh.

What a shit show.

Quinton was going to lock me up for good after this and likely throw away the key. Fuck my life.

I turned to Trenton and threw caution to the wind. “I think violence is going to be the only thing that works here. Do what you have to and then we’ll get the hell out of here. No more shopping.”

“Right,” he muttered irritably.

I thought he’d be happy about this, but he didn’t sound happy about anything anymore.

I stepped back a few more steps and continued to drag Simon along with me. He had no quarrel with leaving his brother to fend for himself. Someone had to stay with me at all times. I was the priority, but it made me sad because they were blood brothers and shared an incredible bond with each other. It would destroy them if something happened to the other.

They didn’t know it, but I took it as my job to keep them both safe. They’d be pissed if they knew, and maybe a little insulted because they were supposed to be badasses or witchy ninjas or whatever. They also had a whole lot of pride like every other damn man in my life.

I looked up and around, spotting all the cameras. Once I had a lock on all my targets, I ignored everything else, closed my eyes, and focused on that little flame that always burned bright inside my mind. It flickered brighter

upon my touch, coming to life and ready to be unleashed.

I sent it out into the store, straight toward every single camera in the area. My eyes snapped open, and I didn't have to see them to know they shone with an eerie light. People around me gasped as they surged backwards in an effort to get as far away from me and my freak show as possible. They didn't hurt my feelings in the slightest, I wasn't interested in being friends with them either.

Pussies.

Since I knew the cameras were down—unless Adrian had followed his little minion here and was sitting outside counteracting my magic, which I didn't think he was doing because the lazy fuck liked to have people to do his dirty work for him—I was comfortable doing what I had to do next, because fuck these people.

I sent my magic out in a massive wave, hitting every single person in the store, save for my bodyguards and the man in the minivan, of course. Though it would have been interesting to send it at my guards and test them.

I didn't have to visually see them all to know that every one of them who was not a witch or magically spelled against magic at the moment crumpled and dropped to the floor. Lights out. When they woke up later, they'd have no recollection of any of this. It'd be a great big mystery to all of them. After the police were phoned and the footage from the surveillance cameras showed absolutely nothing but varying shades of gray static, people would make up their own stories about what had happened.

I might even have to turn on the news, which I never watched, to see what kind of hilariousness they came up with to explain it.

My money was split between some type of government conspiracy cover-up bullshit or aliens. Aliens were making a comeback, so they'd probably win out. Then, the next day, everyone could place the blame and point their fingers at the government for trying to hide the fact there were aliens in the first place.

Finally, I was looking forward to watching the news for once. Usually it was far too depressing and horrific for me to stomach for longer than a few minutes.

Marcus Cole watched the news all the time.

If Rain Kimber did, I never witnessed it.

Uncle Quinton watched, but only when big, life-altering shit was going down in the world.

Dash watched it because he liked to have a heavy heart at all times. Romero probably watched right along with him with Binx chilling between them.

It was all fucking ridiculous, but at least I'd have someone to hold my hand and watch it with. That was something.

The man under the influence of either Adrian or the entire Council snarled as he stupidly lunged for Trenton.

I, for one, wasn't concerned in the slightest. Both my bodyguards might be serious bosses when it came to using their magic, but that wasn't the only thing they had trained in while growing up. Unlike most witches, they didn't need their magic to kick someone's ass. If you fucked with me, they could and would get physical in a way that would most likely make you bleed and cry.

It was fucking glorious every time they chose that route.

This time was no different.

I agreed with violence not always being the answer, but sometimes it truly was really freaking hot.

And there I went perving on my bodyguards. Again. I was getting out of control with this nonsense.

*Oh look, his bulging muscles looked great in that T-shirt.*

*Fuck off, Ariel Kimber.*

I wanted to roll my eyes at my damn self. Still, that wasn't enough to stop me from turning around and walking backwards so I could enjoy the show.



With Simon guiding the way, I knew he wouldn't let me trip and fall.

Trenton dodged to the side, and the man stumbled past him. At the last second, Trenton stuck out his boot, tripping the man who fell flat on his face in the middle of the aisle. His head bounced off the shiny, polished floor, and he groaned in agony as he rolled over onto his side and clutched his head.

If he had any sense in that head of his he would get up and run. He did no such thing.

Trenton rushed forward and kicked him in the stomach so hard that the man made a choking noise before throwing up all over the front of his polo shirt.

Now that I could have done without seeing. Gross.

Trenton didn't let up and kept kicking him over and over again. When the man rolled over and clutched his stomach in an attempt to protect himself, Trenton started to kick him in the back.

The man started crying and whimpering. He turned into a snotty, blubbering mess. "You're going to pay for this when Adrian hears about this. When he comes to rescue me, he's going to murder every last one of you."

Promises, promises. I snickered, though I probably shouldn't have. It was wrong to do so. This man was under the influence of magic and probably brainwashed by Adrian. Who knew what the fat little man had done to him?

I should have felt sorry for him.

I didn't.

I was long since past the point of caring when it came to the regular people the Council sucked into their shenanigans for nefarious purposes.

I couldn't care about all the Chuckys out there. I had my own family to worry about. Them and all the female witches who needed a savior, and all the other families who were bullied by the Council.

Those were the people who needed me to worry about them and look after them. Fuck everyone else.

I was learning from Quinton and Rain that sometimes it was necessary to

be ruthless. I'd like to think it was something they'd both be happy to learn I was picking up on from them, but I had no plans to tell them.

Trenton bent forward, crouched down, and leaned into the man's face. He grabbed a fistful of the man's hair and wrenched his head backwards. "You just said the wrong fucking thing. But what's worse is that you seem to believe the shit you're actually saying. I don't even feel sorry for you. If you believed the man who filled your head with that nonsense, then you're even stupider than you look. I'm doing you a favor, really. You should be thanking me for putting an end to this before I had the chance to really hurt you."

I hoped he didn't expect the man to say thank you, because his head was jerked back so far the only noise that came out of his throat was a strange gurgling sound that was filled with pain. There were tears streaming down his cheeks, and he looked like a mess.

Trenton's grip tightened on the man's hair as a look so terrifying crossed his face that it had me stepping closer to Simon and into his side. He slammed the man's head forward. There was a loud crunch as the man's nose broke and blood spurted everywhere.

Messy, messy. Blood always made such a mess.

I was happy to be standing far enough away so that there wasn't a chance of it getting on my clothes or boots. Trenton wasn't as lucky, and his boots and his shirt got hit. Good thing he always made a habit of wearing dark clothing.

Trenton pulled back on the man's head one more time and slammed it forward. This time the man's temple struck the floor with a heavy *thwack* that made me take that one last step into Simon's side so I was crowding him. He immediately wrapped his arms around my shoulders and his lips went to the top of my head as he whispered soft reassurances to me.

I wasn't reassured though, even though I knew neither of them would ever hurt me. Oh no, that wasn't what had left me a trembling mess at all.

I had been transported back to a different time. A time where I'd heard

that same noise when someone else's head bounced off of something. Only Vivian's head had bled a whole lot more. It'd also been the thing that had killed her.

*Jesus, fuck, Ariel Kimber, snap out of it.*

I could see her dead eyes fixed on me with that blank stare. It was one of the few times I'd seen her look at me without hatred or jealousy or absolute loathing, and she'd had to be dead to be able to look at me like that.

"Are you okay, sweetheart?" Simon whispered so quietly that I knew only I could hear it. "Would you like me to take you out to the SUV so that we can wait there for my brother? He won't mind."

I blinked at his words, slowly coming out of that wretched memory that had been the moment I'd been granted my freedom. I tried never to think of it or Vivian.

"N-No," I stammered out through chattering teeth. "I want to wait for Trenton. I don't want to leave him alone."

I also wasn't exactly in a hurry to go home at the moment either. Not where I had more memories of Vivian being buried in the basement in the dirt. It was something I hadn't thought about in a very long time, but should probably talk to someone about now so it wouldn't haunt me in my waking hours or whenever I fell asleep somewhere that wasn't my own bed.

"What's wrong with her?" Trenton asked softly as he appeared directly in front of me. His silver eyes raked over my face as concern filled his gaze. "Is she okay?"

I didn't bother trying to look around him so I could check out what he left of the man from the minivan. I didn't really want to see it and have it trigger another flashback of a horrible memory.

I didn't think I could handle it.

And I didn't want to be looked at as if I were fragile and something breakable. Although at this moment that might be exactly what I felt like on the inside, I didn't want anyone else to notice it.

“She’s fine,” Simon answered for me. “Now let’s get out of here.”

For once in my life, I didn’t mind having someone else answer for me. I thought that proved that I really was not feeling up to my normal self at all.

I allowed them to escort me out of the store and back into the SUV. I didn’t even protest as one of them buckled me up as if I were a child, and I absolutely did not miss the look the brothers shared between them at my lack of protest. They were concerned, and I couldn’t blame them.

I sat back in the seat and closed my eyes to the world around me.

Adrian had struck out with his first move in this war, and he’d been found wanting. That was not going to make him happy in the slightest, and I knew he’d strike again soon.

After today, I’d learned he could have just about anyone involved in it, and I needed to be extra careful around anyone who wasn’t my family.

I needed to be extra careful.

And I needed to actually take this threat seriously.

It was all easier said than done.

It didn't take long after we got to the big house for everyone to show up there. So I wouldn't have to listen to them as they went over every tiny little detail of what had gone down in the super store, I went up to my bedroom after telling them that I needed to check on my hairless babies.

I wasn't certain who believed me, but Quinton sure did look like some kind of proud, demented father.

I got the fuck out of there before he could get any more ideas about being a daddy that I absolutely did not want any part of. Sometimes he got these stupid ideas in his head, and he thought he could talk me around to them. They scared the shit out of me.

Binx was nowhere to be seen, and I assumed he'd been left at the shop because he refused to leave, was hiding in Dash's room because love and affection scared the shit out of *him*, or Romero had kidnapped him again.

I loved that cat something fierce, but he could be a serious asshole sometimes. Still, I wished he was around more because I missed him.

Binx was different now. He had been ever since Romero had taken his magic back from the poor cat.

It was another thing that I could blame myself for, because if I hadn't freed Romero, Binx would still be the same. But then we wouldn't have

Romero, so there really wasn't any desire to go back to change it. Just the thought alone made me a bad person.

But I missed my cat, and I wanted him to return to his horrible old self. That wasn't going to happen though, and I wondered if this Binx was the real Binx and what he was like before Romero had given him his magic to hold onto for safe keeping. Like with the color change to his fur—had he originally been white with little black splotches?

Only Romero would know these answers, and I had no desire to ask him. Bringing up the past for either Romero or his son was just bringing up painful reminders of the family that had horribly abused both of them.

So I left it alone, but I had a bad feeling about the whole thing. Like it left a bad taste in my mouth just thinking about it.

Romero had changed things for all of us, not just Dash and Binx. It was an adjustment having him in all our lives now.

As selfish as this was going to sound, I would have rather Romero remained without his magic than for Binx to have gone through his transformation.

And that was what really made me a terrible person, because I wouldn't give up my magic for just anything. Now that I had it, I never wanted to let it go. It was an important part of what made me, well... me. I'd be lost without it.

Yet I'd take it from Romero in a heartbeat if it meant Binx would return to normal.

Fuck my life, but I didn't need anything else to feel bad about.

"Meow."

I looked down at the precious little creature who'd made that seriously pathetic noise. My sweet little baby, Bone.

Ash was the one Quinton had claimed for himself, even though they were both mine. He could pretend all he wanted.

"Hey, baby girl," I cooed as I scooped her up off the floor. She snuggled

into my arms and immediately began purring.

“What the hell are you wearing, my sweet little girl?” I asked her in shock. “Has Daddy Quinton been in here messing with you again? And where the heck is your sister? Where has she gotten off to? Hopefully she’s not getting into trouble somewhere in this stupidly large house. Your daddy, the total psycho that he is, keeps taking down certain gates when I’m not home in hopes of luring you sweet girls to his room. He thinks that if he keeps buying you things and spoiling you rotten that you and your sister will pick his room over mine and you’ll want to move in there with him. He’s crazy.”

I knew he was crazy, but I now held proof in my arms. My poor little girl was all dressed up in some bizarre leopard print outfit that I did not understand, because I didn’t get why people felt the need to dress up their pets.

I was surprised my baby didn’t have on a matching hat and kitten mittens, for fuck’s sake. That had happened before.

At least he’d left on her pretty collar that Dash had given me as a gift for my birthday. I was surprised, because Quinton insisted on them being *his babies* and he didn’t want any of the other guys growing too attached to them or so close that my kitties had a chance to like someone more than him.

I lay down on the bed with my booted feet hanging off the end and curled up on my side. I placed Bone down on the bed beside me, and she wasted no time snuggling up to my chest.

It was nice but still weird to have something so sweet and innocent be so trusting and loving toward me. I had never, in my entire life, been as trusting toward another human being, and here was this cat giving it to me as if it were nothing.

It made me feel special, but it also kind of made me want to cry at the same time.

That insane man was lucky that I loved him so much, or I would have

immediately taken his ridiculous outfit off my cat the moment I found her wearing it. Not that this would stop him. The twins took it upon themselves to change the kittens' clothes all the time just to mess with Quinton. He never let on that it got under his skin, but I knew him well enough to know he had to be seething with rage every time he found one of them wearing a different outfit than what he had dressed them in that morning.

I imagined it was a lot like sending your kids to school wearing one thing, only to have them return home wearing something entirely different. I'd be mad too. And concerned.

Quinton handled it with grace and pretended like it wasn't happening. I was waiting for him to snap and kick their asses. I knew it was coming, we all did.

It was going to be glorious when he snapped. It always was when I wasn't the one in his crosshairs. I got enough of his wrath even when I didn't do anything wrong, so it was nice to see it aimed at someone else every now and then, and even though I loved Abel and Addison very much, I wasn't about to deny the fact that they probably deserved it.

"Meow." I heard it coming from the floor on the other side of the bed.

"Ash, baby girl, is that you? Come on up here with us so I can love on you. I missed you, sweet baby."

I heard her feet pad softly against the steps as she climbed them and up onto the bed. Instead of walking around me, she hopped up on my shoulder and climbed over me. Ash turned around in a circle before lying down beside her sister with her other side pressed into my chest.

They both closed their eyes and purred like happy little babies.

I had no idea kittens slept so much before these two. It made sense though, because Binx could sleep a lot too. I guessed it was a cat thing.

Perhaps it was their purring that did it, or maybe it was just how comfortable I was around them. It could have just been that I was tired. Whatever the reason, I fell asleep not long after my babies did.



**M**y hair was splayed all around me on the grass I was sprawled on. The bright rays of the sun beat down on me, heating me up and making my entire body warm in a wonderful way.

*I loved the feel of the sun on my face. It always felt like it was washing away all the dirt that clung onto me just by being in that home with my mother and whatever loser boyfriend she brought home with her that day. The sun washed away all the marks left behind by the bad men she brought into my life.*

*After school, I came to this park all the time after going home and finding people there, mostly men who wanted to have sex with my mother. I didn't like to stick around for that because things usually got rather loud. And messy. But the messy would certainly be there for me to clean up tomorrow or whenever they cleared out because Vivian had to go to work so she could pay for her booze and drugs. That shit always had to come first. Even before sex with strange men and especially before taking care of her child.*

*This park wasn't exactly the nicest one around because it was not like we lived in a great neighborhood or anything. But folks around here pitched in and put in the work to keep things clean so that their kids had a decent place to play while they were at work or doing whatever it was that they needed to do.*

*The play equipment sucked.*

*There was a decent swing set with only two swings, one was way shorter than the other, and a slide that was one of those tall metal numbers that would burn the skin off of your bare legs on a hot summer day if you were wearing shorts—don't even get me started on what would happen if you were to fall over the side. You'd break something, for sure.*

*We wouldn't even get into the damn wood chips you'd land on when you hit the ground. They could do some serious damage, possibly even take out your eye.*

*That had happened to a kid before. I thought his name was Timmy. All the kids thought he was a badass because his parents made him wear an eye patch. I just thought he looked stupid. Definitely not like a pirate. Could you imagine? Timmy the pirate.*

*Laughable.*

*There was a wooden merry-go-round that used to be missing some of the boards, but one of the kids' dads was pretty handy and had replaced the boards. He'd also painted the thing and spruced it up a good deal, so it no longer looked dangerous and like it belonged in a dump.*

*There was also a sandbox, but I figured stray cats pooped in there, so I stayed far, far away from it.*

*And that was it for the park.*

*Except for the flowers several of the moms had planted all over the place. They were beautiful and really made the place something special.*

*There were no little kids here today, and the park was bizarrely empty and quiet. I'd never been here when there weren't other people before. It was weird, but the quiet was also kind of nice.*

*I liked the quiet. It was peaceful and not something I was used to. I hadn't had much peace in my life, if any, that I could remember.*

*I knew that as soon as I went home the spell would break and my life would go back to being a train wreck of epic proportions.*

*I closed my eyes, soaked up the sun, and just enjoyed the moment. Bliss.*

*I wished I'd had a journal or something where I could write down all my thoughts and hopes and dreams like every other stupid teenager out there in the big, bad world. But alas, it wasn't safe to keep something like that in my house, not where Vivian could find it. And I really had no other place to keep something like that safe. Besides, how would I pay for it? Stealing wasn't really my thing, though sometimes it was sadly necessary.*

*I couldn't even have a notebook, forget about nice things.*

*Something gently brushed my cheek, and my eyes flew wide open. My*

*breath caught in my throat and a bright, happy smile spread across my face.*

*A beautiful, delicate yellow butterfly landed on my nose. Its wings fluttered softly, and I longed to reach up and run my finger along its thin wing but dared not to for fear of injuring it.*

*I looked up to see hundreds of them floating in the air above me, just gently coasting on the breeze.*

*I felt tears prick the backs of my eyes at the sight. I didn't think I'd ever seen a sight so beautiful before.*

*It was then I realized what this was—a dream. It was all just a dream. A beautiful, lovely dream but terrible all at the same time. It was terrible because it made me feel stupid and sad for having believed for one second that it could have been real.*

*My life didn't contain peace, even for a moment.*

*My life didn't contain this level of beauty, even for a second.*

*I closed my eyes, and when I opened them again, the butterflies were gone and the park was starting to get dark.*

*Darkness was creeping in at the edges of my vision, and it left me feeling slightly ill inside. Something was very, very wrong here, I just didn't know what.*

*For some reason, I knew my dreams were supposed to be a safe space for me, the only place I knew to be entirely safe these days. Someone important to me had gone out of their way to make it so.*

*Someone...*

*I saw dark, shoulder-length hair and beautiful, soulful dark eyes.*

*Tyson.*

*Yes, Tyson Alexander.*

*He was my best friend. My lover. Well, one of them. I had several.*

*That was right, I remembered. Vivian was dead and my life had drastically changed for the better. And Tyson, he'd made me something precious. My dreamcatcher was why this was supposed to now be my safe*

space.

*“Ariel...” My name was whispered urgently along the breeze.*

*The sky turned black and smoky fog filled the park, covering the play area and the wood chips.*

*Unease slithered down my spine. Something about this whole thing wasn't right. I just couldn't understand why. I couldn't hold onto my thoughts long enough to figure out what the hell was going on here.*

*It was almost as if the fog from the playground was creeping into my mind and muddling everything up.*

*“Ariel Kimber... let me in.”*

**I** sat up in my bed and sucked in a shuddering breath. “No, no, no.”

I wrapped my arms around myself and held on tightly.

This was not right, damn it. Nothing about this was right and it was making me feel sick.

I looked up at the dreamcatcher hanging down from the ceiling. It had protected me all this time and kept me safe, so it shouldn't be failing me now.

I understood what had been happening in my dream. I was what the guys had called a dream walker, and I had the ability to visit other people's dreams. It also left my own more open and susceptible for other dream walkers to invade my dreams.

I was told it was a rare gift that not many people had—told but not necessarily believed. I had no idea how truthful this information was because I felt like no one was honest with the Council these days since people were smart enough to know they couldn't be trusted, so everyone kept secrets from them. And who could blame them? We'd kept secrets too.

Normal people couldn't visit me in my dreams and, due to the magic Tyson had put into the dreamcatcher, nobody should be able to visit when I was sleeping under it.

Either the magic in the dreamcatcher was fading, or someone with some seriously powerful magic was trying to reach me in my sleep.

That scared the absolute shit out of me, because at this point, it really could be anybody. I wasn't stupid enough to blame all my troubles on Adrian and the Council.

From the moment I'd joined the Council, I'd put myself out there, and I didn't think there was a person in the entire community who didn't know who I, or my coven now because of me, was.

It painted a huge target on my back and terrified me.

What scared me even more was knowing that if I told the guys about this, they'd probably put me on house arrest or some other kind of bullshit, and I wasn't down with that.

Secrets didn't make friends, but maybe this one time, my freedom was worth it.

Just maybe.

I sat down on the floor in the middle of the mess I'd made and couldn't help but feel incredibly nervous. I had ordered roughly seven thousand, eight hundred and thirty-two packages off of Amazon, and they had all finally shown up.

Tyson had looked at me weird after he carried them up the stairs and dropped them off in my and Dash's living room. It had taken him several trips, and I completely understood why he'd looked at me like he thought I'd lost my damn mind.

Hell, maybe I had.

I hated shopping with a passion, and I loathed spending my money because I didn't think I needed to purchase a bunch of things that weren't a necessity for living. I already had everything a girl needed in life, so more just made me feel greedy. Nothing good ever came from greed.

I had been unhappy ever since that failed attempt at shopping at the super store, however, and once I'd started to add things to my cart online, I just couldn't seem to stop myself. For some stupid reason, the more my cart filled up, the more my anger and frustration at my situation just sort of melted away and the lighter I became.

The next thing I'd known, I'd spent an obscene amount of money and had a crap load of packages that boasted they'd be here in two days' time. They

lied. It had taken four. But that time had covered the weekend, so I didn't mind.

Now, as I looked at all the packages scattered around me, I had the sudden urge to send it all back.

But I couldn't do that because the salt and pepper twins deserved this. They deserved for me to make tonight special for them since I'd made them wait so long.

I hadn't been able to help myself. I'd spent so much of my time either nervous or scared, and sometimes even a good dose of both mixed together. It was a potent mix that had really messed with my head.

They'd been patient with me, but they didn't have to wait any longer.

Quinton had cured me of my fears—Quinton and Tyson together.

And, to be fair, the physical act of having sex with two people at the same time hadn't really been what had been holding me back. I thought it had been knowing they were the last two men standing, and to cross that bridge with them meant there would be no coming back for me.

But it had been a very long time since I'd wanted to look for an escape in case I needed it.

I'd let it go for too long.

It was on me to make it right, so I'd set about getting that done.

Now I felt like maybe I'd gone a little bit psycho and wished I'd let someone else in on the plan so they could check me before I could get even more out of control.

My cell phone rang, and I jumped up to get it, grateful for the distraction from my crazy.

Damien.

It had been a few days since I'd talked to him and even longer since I'd seen him. I missed him, so I happily answered the phone.

"Hey, mister. I miss you. Why have you been hiding from me?"

He chuckled, and a smile ghosted over my face. I wanted to see him in

person. I had the sudden urge to wrap my arms around him and put my tongue in his mouth. He was an incredible kisser, but his tongue was even better when his face was buried between my legs and he was kissing something other than my mouth. He was *really* good at that.

“My pretty girlfriend,” he murmured softly. “What do you think you’re doing without me? I heard word you went on a shopping bender without me. Way to hurt my feelings. Now I’m mad at you.”

Just freaking great.

That prick, Tyson, was responsible for this phone call and Damien’s hurt feelings. I bet my traitor BFF texted Damien as soon as he’d delivered that last package to my living room, likely on his way downstairs.

What an absolute dickhead.

And what kind of BFF did that to his girl? We were going to have words, that was for sure.

“Listen, sweetness,” I started in a voice so sugary sweet it even made me cringe.

Damien laughed, and this time the sound was loud and oddly full of joy. Someone sure liked the thought of me squirming and trying to cover my own ass.

Why were these boys all so damn rude? I was thinking about maybe smacking them all upside the head. They deserved it.

“How does it feel to know that your boy Tyson sold you out?” He tsked. “I think it’s time you got yourself a new best friend, don’t you, girlfriend? I’d like to volunteer myself for the position. I think I’m the best person for the job. What do you think about that, Ariel Kimber?”

What I thought was that he might actually have a point where Tyson was concerned. In this stirring the pot business, Tyson had surely gone too far this time.

I had to fire him immediately.

But no way was I just handing the position over to Damien. If he wanted



it, he'd have to work for it.

When I didn't respond, he laughed even harder. Yeah, he wasn't suitable for the job either.

"Tell me what's inside all those packages. I need to know these things, and it feels shitty when you keep me in the dark."

I was very much regretting having answered this phone call.

I sighed. "Damien, you do realize I'm allowed to buy things without your permission, right? I don't actually have to tell you anything."

"Ariel, don't make me come over there," he threatened.

That was it, I'd had enough of him.

"Don't you dare," I snapped before hanging up on him.

It immediately started ringing again, so I did what any sane girl would do and I powered down my phone.

I hoped like hell he wouldn't follow through on his threat, because I knew there was no way he'd come alone. He'd already proven to me in the past few weeks that he could do nothing without bringing Julian along for the ride, and I really did not need both of them showing up today to cause a scene. I'd never get my date night with the twins then.

There was a knock on my door, and before I called out a greeting, it pushed open and Dash stuck his head inside. I appreciated him not just barreling on in like a lot of the others would do.

He grinned at me as he held up his cell phone. "Causing trouble, are you?"

I groaned loudly. Damien didn't disappoint, that was for sure.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," I blatantly lied.

He shook his head, and I was happy to notice his smile remained in place. It did my soul good to see it. Apparently sex really could change a man's outlook on things. A fact I wouldn't forget anytime soon.

"Whatever you say, you little troublemaker. You'll get no judgment from me and you know it."

Yeah, I did know that. He never passed judgment on me. It was nice to have my beautiful broken ginger back where he belonged.

“I’m headed out for the night and wanted to let you know where I was going. I’m going to be spending the night at the cottage with my dad. Binx is already there with him. I honestly don’t know if the damn cat will be coming back anytime soon. It’s getting harder and harder to get the little guy to leave my dad and come back here with me. I’ve decided not to force him any longer. Just thought you should know.”

I squeezed my eyes shut tightly and forced the sudden tears back. It was stupid and I knew it. It wasn’t like the cat was being shipped off to the moon on some rocket. He was just going home where he belonged, and I could visit him anytime I wanted to.

Something about the whole thing wasn’t sitting right with me though.

Nothing seemed right to me anymore.

Up was down.

Down was up.

And who the fuck knew what was in between?

I cleared my throat and bravely asked, “He’s running out of time, isn’t he?”

I refused to look at him. I didn’t want to see the horrible truth in Dash’s eyes. For once in my life, I actually wanted a man to lie to me.

“I can’t know these things for certain, but I’d advise you to make sure you spend some time with him within the next few weeks. Just to be safe.”

I nodded, acknowledging that I understood him, but I refused to verbally recognize anything he was saying to me. I didn’t think I could actually speak around the lump forming in the center of my throat, threatening to choke me.

Dash walked into the room. He carefully sidestepped multiple packages to get to me, then he bent down, cupped my cheek, and kissed me on the forehead.

“Love you, beautiful,” he murmured, and then he was gone.

I wanted to fucking cry, but I didn't. I choked down my tears and swallowed back my emotions.

Then I hauled my ass up off the floor. I walked through the apartment and down the stairs where I stopped. I placed my palms flat against the door and closed my eyes so I could concentrate.

It took less than a minute to place the spell on the door, and then when I was done, I went back upstairs. Dash would be allowed entrance because he lived here. The only other people who'd be let in for the next twenty-four hours would be the salt and pepper twins.

Quinton was going to go bat shit, and Tyson was lucky he wasn't being barred for the rest of the month. Everybody else would just have to get the hell over it.

I hoped Rain didn't show up, because that could get a whole lot of messy. I wouldn't put it past Quinton to call my dad just to stick it to me. He was cool like that.

I decided to set everything up before I started cooking, that way I had nothing to worry about at the last minute. Dash leaving was really quite perfect for my evening plans for tonight. I had wondered what to do with him. It wasn't like I could ask him to leave his own apartment, and I hadn't been planning on asking him to join us. Thankfully he'd solved my problem for me without even knowing it.

I dug through the boxes until I found everything I needed for the table. I'd gone with black, white, and yellow for the theme for the night. Clearly, in a moment of what had been insanity, I'd thought it would be cute if I mixed all of our colors together. Now I thought it was super cheesy, and I hoped neither of my twins noticed just how ridiculous I had become in my need to be romantic.

The table runner I spread across the length of the table was gauzy, white, delicate, and very pretty. It was super freaking girly, and if the twins took notice, they were probably going to laugh their crazy asses off at my expense.

I set up several tall, glass cylinder vases on the table runner and placed black and yellow pillar candles inside them.

I placed a vase twice the size of the ones that held candles in the center of the table after filling half of it with water from the sink, and then I placed a matching vase on the kitchen counter after filling the bottom half with water as well.

I filled the vases with a mix of white and light purple roses I'd ordered online. I knew the guys wouldn't care about the roses either, but I thought they were beautiful, and once I found out I could buy them on the internet without leaving my house, I couldn't say no, and now I worried I'd be buying myself a bunch of flowers at least once a week. Unless some stupid boy got a clue and bought them for me. I'd much rather pick them out for myself, though, because then I'd get exactly what I wanted.

So far, the place looked great, if a little girly. I ignored that little fact and got back to work.

I set three places at the table with new china that had come today. I put out water glasses and wine glasses at each space. I filled my two fancy little ice buckets with ice and placed them on the table. I placed a bottle of wine inside one and a glass bottle of sparkling water inside the other.

I set cloth napkins beside the plates, which had taken me forever to fold just right, and I placed the silverware on top of them. The silverware was the only thing I hadn't bought brand new and decided to just use what we already had here in the apartment.

The table was pure perfection, and the only time I had ever eaten with a table so pretty before had been that insane dinner the Council hosted behind the motel.

If it didn't make the twins feel special, at least I knew I'd enjoy eating here.

I turned my phone on, hooked the Bluetooth up to the speakers in the living room, and hit shuffle on my *Nashville* playlist. It was the latest

television show I had become obsessed with, and the soundtrack for each season was incredible.

I heard shouting coming from the bottom of the stairs and turned the volume up even louder.

It surely hadn't taken those boys long to try and harass me.

I texted the twins in our group chat to tell them they had better still be here on time and set my phone down on the countertop. If it weren't for my music, I'd turn the damn thing back off again. As it was, I had to silence all incoming calls and text messages.

Because my nerves were shot, and I had recently discovered just how much I loved the taste, I popped open a bottle of champagne and poured myself a flute of the bubbly goodness.

I put the open bottle in the refrigerator and carried the glass back to my room with me. I could just hear the music in here, but thankfully I could no longer hear those assholes raging at me at the bottom of the stairs.

Perfection.

Sooner or later, those boys were going to realize just who they were messing with, and hopefully they'd get with the damn program because I'd had more than enough.

I located the box with all the fairy lights and dumped them out onto the bed. I tossed down several packs of batteries beside them. The lights were battery operated and came with these slim little silver remotes that allowed you to change the settings on the lights.

They were fantastic, and I planned to keep them up for much longer than just tonight. And, bonus, I wouldn't have to worry about tripping over a bunch of cords plugged into outlets along the wall and strewn all over the floor.

I loaded them up with batteries and got busy hanging them. I wrapped strands around my curtain rods and the posts on my bed. I hung them up artfully above my bed, along my nightstands, and on my dresser.

I turned the overhead lights off and powered up the fairy lights. They really set the mood in my bedroom. I had originally thought about doing candles in here too, but with two kittens, I didn't want to risk the chance of lighting the place on fire. I'd seen one house fire in my life and had no desire to witness another one.

My kittens were a potential problem that I probably should have thought about before magically locking Quinton out of the apartment. He would be overjoyed at being able to have a sleepover with them.

Even though I knew I was probably going to have to steal them away from him in order to get them back, I knew it was the right thing to do. I pulled out their little padded basket from my closet and placed it on the bed beside their sleeping bodies. I'd load them up when the twins got here so they could do the drop off for me downstairs.

I bet that would really get Quinton going, and I almost felt sorry for everyone else in the house with him because I knew he was going to take his shitty attitude out on them.

I caught sight of the time on my alarm clock and let out a little girly shriek that was a whole lot more than slightly embarrassing.

Shit!

I was running out of time, and I still had to do my hair and makeup, get dressed, and cook dinner—cook dinner without burning it.

I grabbed my now empty champagne flute and raced to the kitchen with it clutched in my hand. I refilled the bubbly and set the noodles to boil in a pot on the stove. I put the chicken in a skillet on the stove and set it to low so it wouldn't burn while I rushed around to get ready. I scooped some butter into the pan and seasoned the chicken breasts.

I preheated the oven, grabbed my glass, and raced back to my bedroom.

Thankfully I had already picked an outfit out earlier, so it was easy to strip down naked and get dressed in the clothes I'd laid out on the counter in my closet.

Perhaps I had gone slightly overboard with my outfit, but I didn't mind because I looked damn good in it, if I did say so myself.

My dress was a little black body-con number that clung to my frame like a second skin. It had a turtleneck and long sleeves, but the skirt stopped mid-thigh and left a whole lot of my long legs on display. Underneath, I wore a lacy white bra and matching thong. Black underwear just seemed far too predictable, so I went with white. It made me look pure and innocent, and the color looked great against my skin.

I thought about skipping panties entirely, but I didn't think it would be fair to rob the twins of having something to take off and missing out on the full experience. Perhaps I was overthinking it, but whatever, I told myself it just meant I cared.

I plugged the curling iron in and quickly put my shoes on while it heated up. The shoes were so not my usual thing, but they went perfectly with the outfit, which was why I'd decided to wear them in the first place.

Good ole Damien had bought them with hopes of seeing me wear them one day, and now here I was wearing them for someone else like an asshole.

Now I felt like a horrible girlfriend. To make up for it, I promised myself I'd take a picture of the full package when I was all done and text it to him. I hoped he thought it was kind and not cruel. I really didn't enjoy hurting him, or any of them for that matter.

My shoes were black with red bottoms, and they had an incredibly high, thinly spiked heel. I'd probably break something strutting around in them all night, but I was telling myself it'd be worth it because I looked so damn good.

I ran back out to the kitchen and flipped the chicken in the skillet before putting the bread sticks in the oven to bake. The noodles weren't quite ready to be strained just yet. They weren't soft enough.

I opened the refrigerator and pulled out the raw vegetables I'd cut up earlier. I dumped them into a pan and poured a little bit of water over them. I

covered the pot with a lid and turned the burner on low for them to steam.

There wasn't much else for me to do out here until everything was done cooking except for heating up the sauce, which I was going to do in the skillet the chicken was cooking in, but I was waiting until the chicken was done.

The salad was already made and in a bowl in the fridge. The cake I'd made earlier and frosted was in the fridge on a plate. All it needed was to be moved to the pretty cake stand already sitting on the counter beside the vase filled with roses.

I went back to my bathroom and the curling iron was ready for me. I stood in front of the mirror and stared at myself while I curled my hair and then applied my makeup—dark black eyeliner, fire engine red lipstick, and cheeks that shimmered with blush.

I filled all the holes in my ears with diamond studs that Rain had given me. They'd belonged to his mother, and he'd wanted me to have them. Family tradition to pass down the expensive jewelry and all that bullshit. I'd probably be buried with them.

I unplugged the curling iron and stepped back so I could take in my full appearance in the mirror. Yes, Damien definitely needed to see the final product, otherwise he'd never believe it. I grabbed my phone from the kitchen and snapped a picture of myself in the bathroom mirror.

I debated sending it to all of them but decided against it and only sent it to Damien, knowing full well he'd share the damn thing with our mutual boyfriend.

I checked the drawers on my nightstand to make sure I had everything in place for later and placed my kittens in their basket. I carried them out to the living room and sat their basket on the floor by the couch.

The noodles were finally ready to be strained, so I dumped the pan into the metal strainer in the sink and ran some cold water over the noodles so they didn't stick together.



I checked on the chicken, cutting into a piece to make sure it was cooked all the way through. It was, so I pulled out the cutting board from the cupboard and placed the chicken breasts on it. I dumped the sauce into the skillet and turned the heat down to low so the sauce wouldn't burn, and then I chopped up the chicken and dumped it into the skillet with the sauce.

I checked on the veggies and they were done, so I turned that burner off and poured the veggies into a serving bowl.

I opened the oven and checked on the breadsticks. Perfect timing. Another minute, and they would have been a little too brown. I pulled the tray out of the oven and placed it on the counter.

Everything went into serving dishes that I arranged around the table with a bowl of salad. I got the cake out of the fridge, uncovered it, and slid it onto the cake plate.

Everything was perfect, or as close to perfect as it could get in my book.

I wiped my hands nervously on a dishtowel before turning the volume on the music down until it was nothing more than a quiet, soft noise in the background.

Silence came up the stairs. I wasn't sure if it was a good thing or not. They were probably plotting against me.

I checked the time again and relaxed when I realized there was only another three minutes until they were supposed to be here. My anxiety and nerves wouldn't have been able to take even a minute more.

I hoped they weren't late. I'd likely rip open my palms with my fingernails if they were.

It was disturbing, really, my level of anxiety over this date. It wasn't like we were strangers and this was our first meeting alone. We'd been together for a very long time now as more than friends, as a couple. Or was it called a thuple? Not that being friends was something simple for me, because it wasn't.

I loved them, there was no doubt about that, and I had for a very long

time now.

I knew in my heart of hearts I had absolutely nothing to be nervous or anxious about. My stupid fucking brain just wouldn't seem to get with the program though, so I was left as a ridiculous mess.

Holy hell! I wasn't ready yet. I'd forgotten to light the candles. I couldn't believe I was standing around like a freaking moron acting like everything was perfect and ready when I hadn't done something as simple as light the stupid candles on the table.

I ran very slowly toward my bedroom in my heels but stopped and stood as still as a statue when I heard a commotion at the bottom of the stairs.

They were here, and they were a minute and a half early. Damn it all to hell. There was absolutely no time to go to my bedroom, grab my lighter, and run back out here to light my candles before the twins arrived.

I had wanted everything to be perfect, and now it was not.

I closed my eyes in frustration, and when I opened them again, the candles were lit, the flames flickering brightly.

Finally, I breathed easy, and a happy, relieved smile crossed my face.

Bless my magic, it never steered me wrong, and even if I didn't know I needed it, it was always there for me. If all else failed, magic had my back without doubts or questions.

I grabbed my cell and shot a quick text off to Quinton to tell him to meet one of the twins at the bottom of the stairs. I felt a little like I was getting them to do my dirty work for me. It made me feel a bit like a coward but not enough to do it myself.

He didn't text me back, but he didn't need to. I knew he'd be down there with an angry scowl on his face and a terrible attitude.

Addison came up the stairs first with Abel right behind him.

They were both dressed in dark jeans and black, long-sleeved button-up shirts. It was amusing to me that neither was wearing shoes or even had socks on their feet. I guessed we were at home, and I wanted them both to be

comfortable, but this was a date, after all.

That was not to say they didn't look nice, because they very much did. It was nice to see them not wearing T-shirts for once.

Maybe I was a little overdressed. I couldn't help myself. Damien would be so damn proud of me—his little girl, all grown up and wearing things he'd not only approve of but had bought for me.

"You're here." I smiled at them, big and bright. "Both of you."

I really wanted to smack myself upside the head for being such an idiot. Of course they were both here. Where the hell else would they be? I hoped my mouth didn't stay stupid on me for the rest of the night, because that would be rather embarrassing for me.

They both grinned at me without remorse. Neither of them was turned off in the slightest by my bumbling stupidity. They never were.

I cleared my throat. "Will one of you take my babies to the bottom of the stairs to hand over to Quinton? He should be down there waiting, and I don't want to face him because I know he's probably super pissed at me right now."

Abel smirked at me but thankfully kept his mouth shut as he picked up the basket with my cats. They hadn't even needed to discuss it between the two of them. Abel just stepped up to the plate, and Addison didn't question it.

They were such a team that they didn't even need to speak in order to know what the other was thinking.

I used to be incredibly jealous of the bond they shared because I'd always been so alone. I no longer had anything to be jealous of, however, because they'd included me in their bond with open arms.

Addison looked around the room with bright eyes and a slack jaw. "Did you do this all for my twin and me, beautiful girl? No one's ever done something so sweet for the two of us before."

I shrugged as if it were nothing, and I was so embarrassed right now.

"Come here."

I couldn't. My feet refused to move as if I were frozen in place. I didn't know what the hell was wrong with me, but I had a feeling my anxiety had finally gotten the better of me and maybe it was time for me to mentally check out and perhaps drink some more champagne. Time to run for the hills before I could open my mouth and say something stupid that ruined all my hard work and the mood I had been trying to set before they'd even got here.

"Fuck it. I'll come to you because you're obviously doing that thing again where you get in your head and lose your mind. Or you let your absurd doubt take over. I'm not putting up with that nonsense tonight, and you shouldn't even allow yourself to go back there in the first place. It's not healthy."

Stupid bossy boys that knew me far too well. It could really be annoying at times. Especially like right now when he knew exactly what I was thinking and had zero hesitation in calling me out on my bullshit.

Self-sabotage was a real thing, and I was sometimes my own worst nightmare.

He came right up to me and pulled me into his arms. I felt so small and precious pressed up against his chest. He was just so damn *big*.

They both were.

It made me feel tiny, and it was actually a feeling I enjoyed.

"There is no pressure here between the three of us. There never has been. Well, maybe that's wrong, because if anything, you actually put pressure on yourself when it comes to us. I don't understand why, but I honestly wish you'd stop. Let's just enjoy this beautiful night you put together for us and what will be will be. I'm okay with that, and I know my twin will be too. Now you just need to get with the program and live in the moment with us for the night."

This, right here, was just one of the many reasons why I loved him—loved them both.

And nothing he'd said was wrong. I was the only one of us who put pressure on our relationship, and I really needed to stop.

I melted into him and tilted my face up in an open invitation.

Never one to deny me anything, he leaned down and pressed his lips to mine. He made quick work of kissing me and maneuvered me toward the table.

Abel came back, and we sat down to eat.

I might have drunk way too much champagne as the last of my nerves got the best of me. Neither of them seemed to mind as they ate all their food and watched me ramble with clear amusement on their faces.

I couldn't even tell you if the food was good, because I might have eaten most of what was on my plate without tasting a single bite of it.

I fell asleep as soon as they convinced me to lie down on the couch between them so we could cuddle and watch a movie.

I blamed it on the champagne and the nerves.

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**I** woke up who knew how much later in my bed, wearing nothing but my underwear, smooshed between the two of them. They both had nothing on except for their boxers, and I had never been so disappointed in myself before *ever*.

Talk about a wasted opportunity. I had no one but myself to blame.

I crawled out from between them and padded silently into the bathroom. I needed to pee and brush my teeth.

I felt a little sad with myself because I put so much effort into our date night, and I hoped I hadn't ruined it by getting drunk off champagne and talking so much I didn't think I'd given them much of an opportunity to speak at all.

Good grief, but I was very embarrassed and should probably not drink any more on date night. Or maybe unless I was by myself, but that would be kind of... sad.

I peed, washed my hands, and brushed my teeth. For whatever reason, it felt like it took me twice as long to do these simple things as it normally did.

Ugh, maybe I should just take a shower and then go back to bed. Though then I would have to blow dry my hair afterwards, and I'd have to use a different bathroom because if I did it in here, it would most likely wake them up, and I didn't want to do that to them. They'd been sweet enough to take my dress off and put me to bed before getting into said bed with me. They deserved to sleep without being disturbed with my nonsense.

Still, fuck it, I was going to take a shower.

I was halfway to the shower when someone grabbed me from behind and picked me up. I was turned and tossed over a very broad shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

I had no idea which twin had a hold of me, and I didn't care. I was just happy they didn't seem to be mad at me. I felt like I needed to apologize to them. I knew if they behaved how I had, I wouldn't hold it against them or expect apologies, so I didn't quite understand why I felt such a need to do so myself.

I was also very thankful I was able to hold in the girly scream that lodged itself in my throat when he'd picked me up. Whenever one of those noises escaped me, I had something real to be embarrassed about.

I was carried out of the bathroom and unceremoniously tossed onto the bed.

It was no longer dark in my room, as all the lights I had strung up had been turned on while I'd been in the bathroom, and the TV had been turned off.

Oh boy.

How long had I been in the bathroom for?

Addison stood before me, grinning down at me, while Abel was... Oh shit.

"What do you think you're doing?" I squealed as I lunged for him. He

was digging through the drawer on my nightstand, where I had tucked away some of my recent online purchases.

Abel pulled out a bottle of lube and tossed it to his brother, who easily caught it out of the air. I immediately stopped in my tracks, frozen.

“It’s unopened, twin,” Addison gleefully shared with his brother. “Why do I get the feeling she had us come up here so she could wine and dine us in hopes of getting us into this very bed with her so she could seduce us?”

“Hmm...” Abel murmured thoughtfully. “Maybe she thinks we’re easy and maybe we... Whoa, brother. Check this out.”

Addison abandoned his place at the foot of my bed to join his brother in his new discovery of treasure.

And I wanted to die. Please, just let the ground open up and swallow me whole right now.

Fuck.

“There are butt plugs, cock rings, vibrators...” Addison’s voice trailed off in wonder.

They both turned to look at me with wide eyes.

Huh.

This was no good, and I knew my face was flaming red like a tomato.

Okay, so, admittedly I had no intention of actually using half that stuff, but I had been curious and couldn’t stop myself from buying them. I had stupidly thought that maybe if I could hold them in my hands and get a feel for them myself, then maybe they wouldn’t be so scary to me.

I should have hid them in a box under my bed or something. I had very stupidly not expected for the nosy boys in my life to go rifling through my things.

I should have known better.

Abel held up a pink, glow in the dark cock ring. “Is this for him or me?”

Jesus. “Maybe it isn’t for either of you. Did you think of that, hmm?”

Well, that shut them both up.

I wondered if I should feel badly about the wine and dine and wannabe seduction part of the night and decided against it. I knew they wanted to have sex with me too, so I refused to feel badly about it.

I slid my fingers under the waistband of my panties and tugged them down my thighs. They fell to the floor, and I stepped out of them. Reaching behind me, I unhooked my bra and pulled the straps down my arms. I threw it on the floor on top of my underwear and stood before them both in all my naked glory.

It was a struggle not to shift uneasily or fidget under their intense gaze, but I somehow managed it. The heat in their eyes told me they liked what they saw, and I had no reason to hide from them.

Abel was the first one to shove his boxers down his legs, and my eyes widened when I took in the rather impressive, frightening size of his cock. Every time I saw either of their identical dicks, I thought about running away screaming before checking myself into a mental institution for the insane. A girl would have to be insane to allow either of them to put those beasts anywhere near their pink parts.

Their dicks were bigger than any of the other guys' in length *and* in girth. It was the girth that gave me pause.

Okay, so maybe it was the length too.

Both were scary.

And here I thought I was over my fears, but just one glance at that cock had me shaking where I stood.

“We’ll be gentle with you,” Addison spoke softly as he discarded his boxers and kicked them aside. I did the smart thing this time and didn’t look down at his cock.

Abel snorted. “Speak for yourself, twin. I make no promises. She can take my cock like the good girl she is, and it won’t break her.”

Oh boy.

I didn’t think he had any idea what the fuck he was talking about, but I



didn't argue with him.

“Shut up,” Addison growled at his brother. “You’re going to scare her, and we’ve waited too long for this for you to screw it up for us now.”

We’d all been waiting too long for this.

Because I thought he was the safest bet out of the two after all that crap Abel had said, I went to Addison first.

He picked me up, and I wrapped my legs around his hips as my arms snaked their way around his neck. He kissed me hungrily as he turned us around and laid me down on the bed.

The way he kissed me, like he wanted to consume me, killed my fear entirely, and I relaxed beneath him.

I felt the bed dip beside me and knew Abel had joined us. I felt his fingers as he trailed them up my side as Addison cupped my cheek with one of his big hands.

He broke our kiss to trail his lips along my jaw and down my throat. I turned my head to the side, and Abel was there to meet me, pressing his lips against mine like I knew he would.

Their kisses were different yet so similar, but I could still kiss them with my eyes closed and tell the difference between them. I just knew.

Addison’s lips trailed along my collarbone and down my chest. He cupped my breasts and his thumbs swiped across my nipples.

I moaned into Abel’s mouth as I shifted my hips so I could feel Addison’s erection pressed between my legs. He shifted his hips closer, and his erection slid through my wet folds and brushed against my clit.

That felt nice, and I forgot all about the actual size of the monster between my legs and lost myself in what I was feeling in the moment.

Addison sat up suddenly, and I lost his mouth on my breasts and the feel of his cock against my pussy lips. He scooted down the bed until he was kneeling between my legs. His big hands slid beneath me, and he palmed both my ass cheeks, lifting my lower half off the bed with just his grip on my

ass.

This time I couldn't stop the surprised, embarrassingly girly noise that left my mouth. I was too shocked to care when he shoved his face between my spread thighs and buried his tongue in my pussy.

Abel laughed while he palmed my tits and placed his mouth around one of my erect nipples. He sucked it into his mouth, and his teeth scraped along my sensitive flesh. At the same time, Addison gently bit down on my clit, and I whimpered pathetically. Addison ate my cunt like a starved man, while his brother nibbled his way from one nipple to the other, sucking and biting my breasts. I knew he was marking my skin, and my breasts would be extra sensitive in the morning and likely for the next couple of days. I didn't care.

It didn't take long for my orgasm to rock through me, and I became a shuddering, sobbing mess.

Addison laid me back on the bed and moved out from between my legs. Abel wasted no time pulling me into his arms and then rolling over so I was on top of him.

He moved his hand between us, and I felt the tip of his cock press against my entrance.

I bit my lip as I remembered I had a reason to be alarmed, but I shouldn't have worried. Addison sat down on the bed beside us with the lube in his hands. He uncapped the bottle and squeezed some out onto his fingers. He reached between his brother and me, and I felt Abel jerk when Addison gripped his dick in his fist and smeared the lube all over it.

Abel looked at his brother with wide, shocked eyes as Addison gripped my hip and pushed me down on his brother's cock. The stretch burned a little bit as I took him in, and Addison was finally forced to move his hand away so I could sink all the way down on Abel's cock.

There was so much of him that I had to sit there for a moment and just breathe while I adjusted to the feel of him.

Abel gripped my hips as he shifted beneath me, and we both moaned

loudly.

“I need you to move, pretty girl,” he said in a rough, choked voice. “I’m not going to last long as it is, but fuck, I need you to move. I’m trying really hard to be good and let you do your thing, but damn, girl, this pussy is too tight, and I can’t... Fuck, please—”

It was the please that did it, and maybe the strained emotion in his voice. Or maybe it was the fact that he wasn’t moving, and he was trying to let me be in control.

Whatever the case was, I gave him what he wanted. I placed my hands on his chest and started to move. I rocked my hips forward and back as I found a rhythm that was likely to drive us both insane. I forced myself to go faster and faster as his grip on my hips tightened to the point where I knew there’d be marks there as well in the morning. I didn’t care, it felt good to me.

Fingers trailed down my spine in the gentlest of touches as Addison pressed a sweet kiss against my sweat covered shoulder.

“Are you ready?” he whispered close to my ear.

I wasn’t, and I likely never would be. “Yeah,” I croaked out of my suddenly dry throat.

I stopped moving against Abel as Addison pressed a cool, wet fingertip against my ass. I forced myself to relax as I leaned over Abel and kissed him, knowing I would need the distraction he could give me.

Addison slipped a finger inside, and then another, stretching me.

Abel’s hand slid down from my hip and between our bodies. He pressed his thumb to my clit and rubbed it as he sucked on my tongue.

Another shuddering orgasm worked its way through me as Addison worked his dick inside my ass. When he was all the way in, I had to tear my mouth away from Abel’s so I could suck in a sharp breath. I was stretched so full I could hardly breathe, and I didn’t think I’d ever be able to move again.

Abel sat up so we were chest to chest, and for the very first time in my life, I found myself in a salt and pepper twin sandwich.

Holy hell, it was delicious.

Addison kissed my throat as he started to move inside of me. Every thrust he made drove me down onto Abel's cock, making all three of us pant and moan obscenely. I wrapped one arm around Abel's neck and the other one behind me around Addison's neck.

I clung to them tightly as they fucked me. They moved like they'd done this dance a million times before and knew the other's moves as if they were their own.

We came together in a sweaty mess, and I was rolled onto my side on the bed still firmly between them.

They held me tight in their arms as they trailed kisses over my face and down the back of my neck.

I didn't know if I fell asleep or if I passed out, but I woke up when they carried me to the shower.

I didn't get much sleep that night, but when I did manage to drift off, I didn't give a shit that I did it with damp hair that'd look like a nightmare when I opened my eyes again.

“Can we talk?”

I looked up from the book in my lap to Quinton who was standing in the open doorway. I hadn't even heard him slide the door open. I'd been so lost in the words written down on the pages.

It'd been a book I'd found at Fortunes for the Unfortunate, and I hadn't bothered to pay for it either. The last time I'd attempted to pay for something at that place, both Alexander men had taken me aside—separately, so I'd gotten it not once, but twice—and lectured me on what being a family meant and how family did not pay at *the* family business.

“You're going to burn out here in the sun,” Quinton informed me, and I shrugged in response as I aimed my sunglasses back down at my book.

I didn't need Mr. Know It All pointing out the obvious. I wasn't stupid, and as much as it might pain him to know, I'd actually had a life before I'd met him and our coven. It might not have been much of a life, but I knew how sunblock worked, and I was smart enough to take my ass to some shade when my skin started to turn pink.

This was one of the many sides to Quinton that got on my damn nerves. He was my boyfriend, not my daddy, though sometimes it felt like he tried to be both.

Weirdly enough, my actual dad didn't seem to mind.

They were both psychos cut from the same cloth.

“What do you want to talk about, Quinton?” I asked while pretending to read. He was just so damn hard to ignore.

The chair directly across from me at the little round table scraped across the wooden deck as he pulled it out and sat down.

“I’ve been thinking...” He cleared his throat, and the hair on the back of my neck stood straight up and at attention.

His unease did not fill me with joy. Quinton hesitating was something we should all be worried about. He was the most confident and unapologetic person I’d ever met in my whole freaking life. He didn’t *do* hesitancy.

I had the sudden urge to bolt, but I did no such thing and kept my seat.

If there was something I’d learned from this man, it was that I had nothing to fear from him and never would. Things in our lives may be scary and unsafe, but he’d do everything to protect me. Always and forever.

“Just spit it out, Quinton. I’m not interested in playing games with you today.” Or any other day, but I kept that little tidbit to myself because I had a feeling he already knew it and it would fall on deaf ears.

I looked up at him and my mouth ran dry. His elbows were on the table, and his head rested in his hands. He looked utterly defeated. It was not a look I was used to seeing on cranky Uncle Quinton.

I snapped my book closed and tossed it on the table. “Alright, now you’re scaring me. Don’t leave me hanging. Just rip the band-aid off. It’s better to get it over with so we can figure out how to make whatever it is better.”

Brave words, but I’d give him nothing less. He’d earned that from me.

His hands fell away from his face and his conflicted eyes met mine. I braced for whatever horribleness that was about to come out of his mouth.

I’d learn really quickly that I hadn’t braced enough.

“Things with the Council are only going to get worse. You’re very well aware of this. I think you, better than most of our coven, know what they are capable of because you’ve seen pretty horrible shit firsthand. But it’s more.”

He looked down at his scarred hands, and I watched his Adam's apple bob as he swallowed thickly.

When he looked back up at me, his face was carefully blank, all emotion had been wiped clean. If I wasn't worried before, I sure as shit was now.

"They are going to try to take you away from us. In their eyes, you belong with them now. The only reason they haven't tried yet is because they are worried about how strong you are. They are worried because everyone who meets you is either intrigued by you or in love with you. The only witch who didn't like you decided to take your side before she died. They have good reason to fear you. But the day will come when they show up to take you away, and I think that day will be here sooner than we're ready for."

We were covering old news I didn't want to have yet another discussion about. I knew we were running on borrowed time, and time was quickly running out.

I wasn't stupid.

"You're not telling me something I don't already know, Quint," I bit out with annoyance.

He got up from his seat and rounded the small table. He crouched down beside my chair and took both of my hands in his. He looked at my hands and frowned. Probably at my scars. He never really enjoyed seeing those, even though they matched his own.

"I think we need to make this a little bit more permanent. I know you're not going anywhere, and so does the rest of our coven, but I want everyone else to know it too. I don't just want to call you my girlfriend or my coven member. I want to call you my wife."

He ran his thumb over where an engagement ring or wedding band would sit on my left hand and my eyes widened.

Holy shit, he was serious.

If this was his proposal, it was quite possibly the worst one ever.

"I have more than one boyfriend," I reminded him carefully as I watched

his face for his reaction to my words. It wasn't something I should have needed to say.

Now, if he wanted to talk about me having children, then I wanted no part of that. My own babies would never be in the cards for me. Just the thought scared the shit out of me. And besides, I had my kittens now.

But marriage?

I wasn't exactly opposed to the concept of marriage, but—and this was a big but—I would never ever choose between my men. I couldn't.

I absolutely could not.

Every relationship I had with them was different from the next, but they all were just as important to me, and I loved them all the same.

They all owned a piece of my heart, and no piece was bigger than the next.

“Do you know what a commitment ceremony is?” he asked me.

Jesus, he really was serious about this.

“So I don't actually have to get legally married to someone? We'd have a commitment ceremony for all of us?”

That didn't sound like a bad thing at all.

It'd be harder for them to escape me then. They'd all take that as a lifetime commitment, and they'd take it as seriously as it was, even without the legal paperwork.

“No, not exactly.”

There Quinton went, popping my happy little bubble.

I pulled my hands from his and shoved them under my thighs as I sat back, shifting slightly away from him. “What do you mean, not exactly?”

He had the good graces to look sheepish.

“I want you to actually, legally, bind yourself to one of us. That will hold more sway with the Council.”

Yeah, I didn't think so. Now he was just pissing me off with every word out of his mouth. It just got worse and worse.



“And which one of you do you think I should legally tie myself to in holy matrimony?” I asked carefully as I held myself very still. I was afraid to so much as twitch, because I was pretty sure if I did, I would continue moving in order to lunge forward so I could punch him in the eye. Maybe even both eyes.

“It’ll be your choice.”

“Finally,” I said sarcastically as I stood up and picked my book up off the table. “Something about this you’re giving me a choice in.”

Quinton stood up with me, and he held his hands up as if to ward me off like he thought there was a chance I might snap and attack him.

Anything was possible at this point.

He knew me well enough to be on guard. It proved he wasn’t as stupid as he’d just sounded all of two minutes ago.

“You just need some time to think about it,” he told me. “I’m not trying to be unreasonable here. I’m not trying to piss you off, I swear, Ariel. All I can think about is what’s the best way to keep us all safe. I think this will go a long way toward that.”

I didn’t want safety. I wanted some goddamn romance. Was that asking for too much?

These fucking men could all be stupid at times, it wasn’t just Quinton, and it wasn’t even only the people I was in a relationship with. Both Rain and Marcus proved they were dumb when it came to me all the time.

But I’d be damned if Quinton Alexander didn’t take the freaking cake.

I moved to walk around him without a word, and he grabbed hold of my elbow in an attempt to stop me.

Big mistake.

Big, big fucking mistake.

I whirled around and swung my book at his head.

“Fuck!” he hissed as he released my elbow and stumbled backwards.

Too late.

I nailed him in the side of his head, just above his ear, and seethed, “You son of a bitch. What the fuck is the matter with you? That’s the absolute *worst* fucking proposal you could have *ever* possibly made. It *sucked*.”

I only realized I was screaming when I heard Tyson mutter from the doorway, “Holy fuck. Whatever he’s done now, he’s pushed her too damn far and she’s finally snapped. If she pushes him over the railing, then we all know we should probably run away and hide from her until she calms down for our own safety.”

I didn’t care about who he was talking to. None of it mattered. I had my sights locked on my target, and as much as I wanted to get the hell away from him, I couldn’t let him off that easily.

I swung my book at his head again, and this time he ducked out of the way, just barely. His arms came up to fend me off, and I nailed him in the wrist.

“Fuck!” he hissed as he pulled his arms in closely to his chest. “Baby, I’m sorry, okay? I did this all wrong. I thought you’d want to keep this simple. I didn’t think you’d want to make a big deal out of it. I even got you a ring, but I wasn’t sure if now was the right time to give it to you because you don’t like gifts, and I wanted you to be able to get used to the idea of this being permanent before I gave you the ring. Shit, baby, I’m sorry, just please stop hitting me and we can talk about this rationally.”

Rationally?

How fucking dare he?

I screamed as I threw the book at him. It hit him in the shoulder and bounced off of him. My entire body shook with rage as I watched the book hit the deck at his feet. Why did he always have to do these things to make me feel so out of control?

He knew what he was doing, he always did, but that never stopped him from pushing me too far and seeing just how much of his bullshit I could really take.

Well, today I could take no more.

He'd crossed a fucking line. If he'd had a ring and some really pretty words for me, I would have handled this situation very differently. I probably would have said yes in a heartbeat, but instead here I was ready to cry and wanting to murder him at the same time.

"We're done here," I said in a voice that shook. I could feel the tears as they pricked the backs of my eyes and my emotions clogged my throat, attempting to choke me.

I would not cry in front of him. I would absolutely not cry in front of him.

I'd wait until I was safely locked away behind my door and all by myself before I allowed that first tear to make its way out of my eye.

In order to make sure that happened, I did something I hadn't done in a very long time, something I'd thought I'd broken myself of doing because the people in my life didn't enjoy me doing it—most especially the arrogant asshole standing in front of me.

I dug my fingernails into the palms of my hands so deeply I immediately felt my skin tear.

I didn't so much as flinch at the pain, we were old friends, but the tears definitely receded.

I felt like I could breathe steadily again without falling entirely apart.

Quinton's eyes dropped to my curled hands and they flared dangerously.

"Baby," he said as he carefully reached out for me. "Come here. I'll make this right, I swear."

I shook my head at him and a sad, hollow laugh escaped me. "Didn't you hear me? I said we're done here. And I meant it."

His eyes widened again for another reason, and I could practically feel the panic radiating off of him in waves. "What the fuck does that mean?" he rasped.

I shook my head helplessly as I backed away from him. I had no words left to give him. At least none that I knew he'd want to hear.

“Ariel.” He said my name as if it were a desperate plea.

I wasn’t having any of it. Maybe tomorrow he could get on his knees, apologize, and beg for forgiveness.

Today, I couldn’t even look at him anymore.

“Ariel!” he repeated frantically.

I backed into a hard body and whirled around. Dash stood there staring down at me with eyes that burned brightly.

I ignored him and searched for Tyson.

I pointed a shaky finger in Quinton’s general direction. “You keep your uncle the hell away from me before something unforgivable happens that we won’t be able to come back from. Do you hear me, Ty?”

He nodded his head seriously, his expression grave. “I hear you, girl. Don’t worry, I’ll take care of everything for you.”

I wanted to doubt him because the thought of anyone being able to take care of this bullshit was completely insane, but this was Tyson Alexander, my bestest bestie, and if he said he had it covered for me, then he had it covered for me.

He never let me down. He was the absolute perfect best friend a girl like me could ask for. I regretted wanting to fire him the other day. He could keep the job now.

I reached out and squeezed his hand before dropping it and walking away.

I pretended not to notice my entire coven plus Trenton and Simon crammed into the small family room attached to the kitchen. I didn’t even spare them a glance.

I also pretended not to notice the vicious words Quinton spat at his nephew when he refused to step aside so he could chase after me.

I also pretended not to notice when the vicious words stopped and turned to grunts, and I knew their verbal argument had escalated into something physical and they were about to brawl out on the back deck.

There was a small, insane part of me that wanted to turn around so I could

watch them in action.

The larger, saner part of me refused to slow down and look.

I didn't need to get roped into any more of Quinton's bullshit today. I'd had more than enough just today to last my ass years based on that one conversation alone.

Not once as I walked away did it cross my mind to feel guilty over the fact they were fighting.

There was a time when I would have blamed myself entirely and then let the guilt eat me alive.

I'd call that progress.

At least I would have until I locked myself behind my bedroom door and looked down at my bloody palms.

Only then did I let the tears start to fall.

They were loud and messy, and I had to lock myself in the bathroom with the shower on full blast so there was no chance of one of the guys hearing me.

I sat in the bathroom curled up in a tight ball on the floor for over an hour while I cried my stupid, girly heart out.

When it was over, and I'd cried all my tears, I took an actual shower—a shower that made me happy I lived with rich guys because the water was still hot and remained so the entire time.

When I got out, I dressed in comfy clothes and threw my hair up into a messy bun on top of my head.

And then I did what any smart girl would do.

I called my dad.

I was learning that dads were the cure for all their little girls' hurts, and Rain Kimber was eager to make up for all the time his horrid sister had stolen from us. So much so he'd be pissed if I *didn't* call him.

I couldn't wait to throw Quinton under the bus.

*R*ain came and picked me up in my own freaking Range Rover.  
I wanted to scream.

He had the money to buy his own damn Rover if he wanted one, but instead he'd claimed mine. Part of it was his way of sticking it to Marcus. The other part was that he had some weird bond with the thing after he'd run someone over with it.

The man was insane. Clearly.

He also argued with me that since I'd bought Simon and Trenton their SUV, they needed to use it to drive me around. The whole thing was insufferable and meant to smother me.

There was no point in arguing with him. He never listened, and I'd long since given up trying.

If Rain wanted to drive around in my Rover, then what the hell did I really care? Maybe I should just break down and finally buy myself my own vehicle. It felt too much like giving in, and I just knew the moment I got something else, Rain would lose interest and probably park the Rover in Marcus's driveway and hide the keys from me.

"What gives, baby girl?" Rain asked in a quiet, subdued voice. "Over the phone your voice was all kinds of messed up. Now you're quiet and you've shut down. I feel like I might need to turn the car around so I can go kick one

of those boys' asses, because clearly one of them needs an ass whooping. Stop scaring me and tell me what the fuck is going on."

I didn't want to tell him anymore. I wanted to keep my humiliation to myself.

I mean, really? Had Quinton actually told me he wanted to marry me because he thought it would keep me safe?

What in the actual fuck was that?

"Ariel?" Rain prompted in that same subdued voice, but now there was a sweet softness to it that he only ever used with me... and now Baxter, but I'd sent him away. "I need you to talk me off the ledge before I get past the point of no return. There isn't anything I wouldn't do for you, and you're starting to really freak me out."

Shit.

I watched in fascination as he strangled the steering wheel in his white-knuckled grip. His face had morphed into a dark, angry mask, and I knew he was closer to that ledge than he knew.

I sighed as I slumped back into my seat and looked out my window. "Quinton told me he wants me to have a commitment ceremony with the guys because he thinks it will make me safer from the Council, and then he told me he wants me to actually marry one of them legally, just to be safe. He acted like we were having a conversation about the damn weather, and I've never wanted to dick punch someone more in my whole freaking life. That's saying something, because the majority of my life has been filled with assholes. I'm not saying that to make you angry, it's just the truth of my life."

Before he could respond, I slapped the palm of my hand against the dash and exclaimed, "Oh! And *get this!* He was kind enough to tell me I could pick out who I actually legally tied myself to. Can you believe the nerve of that man?"

Now I was angry all over again.

"He's a good boy," Rain remarked, sounding far too calm for my liking.

“But sometimes he’s got shit for brains.”

Shit for brains.

He had that right.

The Rover was silent for several minutes after that. I didn’t want to break it because I had finally started to relax.

Most people would not be at ease in Rain’s company, but he was my dad. I loved him, and he always had a way of making me feel better about everything. I didn’t even want to get into how much I’d missed out on with him because it’d just break my heart all the more to even think about right now. I was a strong girl, but I couldn’t hack any more at the moment.

Maybe we were both standing side by side at that ledge, ready for that thing to come along and push us both over.

It was Rain who broke the silence.

“You don’t want to get married? I know you don’t want to have kids, and even though it pains me, I can understand that. If all I get is you, then that will be more than enough for me because you’re my everything. But marriage? That’s a whole other thing, baby girl. Marrying your mother was... *fuck*. She fulfilled all my hopes and dreams that day. Then she gave me you, and I knew true happiness in its purest form. I want that for you, and I know as much as he can come across as a dick that Quinton always means well when it comes to you. He’d do anything for you, it’s obvious to anyone who sees him with you. You know I don’t think you could do much better than him. I wouldn’t mind him being my son-in-law. Either him or his nephew, the one with the big set of balls hanging between his legs. They’d both make great sons-in-law. Not that creep Julian though. You could get rid of him, and I’d be happy for you.”

I groaned as I closed my eyes. Why my dad was talking about Tyson’s junk, I had no idea.

The men in my life were out of control, every single one of them.

“What’d the ring look like?” Rain asked when I didn’t respond to his



outrageous words.

This was a question that had an answer that I felt like he'd have a good response to.

“There was no damn ring,” I informed him smugly. “I’m telling you, Dad, it was almost like a business transaction. He told me after I got mad that he had a ring for me, but because I don’t like receiving gifts, he didn’t think it was smart to give it to me just then. Seriously. And I’m getting better about accepting gifts, so how dare he try to throw that in my face? Is it even a gift when it’s an engagement ring? I think not. I wanted a pretty ring, damn it.”

All my fire left me immediately, and I slumped back into my seat, utterly deflated.

Rain slammed on the brakes, and the Rover screeched to a stop in the middle of the road. Thank goodness I never got into a car without putting my seatbelt on or my face might have met with the windshield.

“What kind of bullshit is this?” Rain raged. “You’re my fucking daughter! Did he at least get down on one knee?”

My eyes widened, and I regretted calling Rain. Maybe I needed to find myself a girlfriend, because sharing with my dad looked like it was about to backfire and the men I loved were all about to die by his bare hands.

“Dad.” I didn’t say any more, because my voice was choked up and I knew I wouldn’t be able to get out more.

“No,” he said as he slowly shook his head. “I could hear it in your voice, see it in your eyes. You’re hurt over this because it’s something you actually did want, and he’s fucked it all up.”

Yeah.

That was it exactly.

I just hadn’t known it until it happened.

I wanted it.

I wanted it all.

And I wanted it badly.

Maybe even more than I had ever wanted anything before.

I looked down at my bare finger and felt like I maybe, sort of, needed to lock myself back in the bathroom again for about five hours so I could cry my heart out once again. I definitely couldn't do that with Rain around. He'd burn the house down in a fit of rage.

My father thus far was the only man in my life who never disappointed me.

"Do you think I'm being a stupid girl about this?" I asked.

He snorted. "I hate to break this to you, kid, but you *are* a girl."

He turned the Rover around, and we headed in a different direction. I thought we were supposed to be going to his cabin in the middle of nowhere, but this wasn't the right way.

"Uh, Rain?"

"Sucks for you, baby girl, but I'm all you've got. Don't you worry too much though, we'll get through it together."

Oh boy.

That didn't sound good at all.

I shut my mouth and stopped asking questions.

I should have kept my ass home.

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**B**ecause he was the wisest man I knew, the first stop we made was a drive-through window for coffee. Though I wasn't entirely sure the thing I ordered could be classified as a coffee.

I would never tell the guys this, but it might have actually been the very best thing I ever put in my mouth before. Boys with big dicks who loved their blowjobs wouldn't appreciate that at all.

After that, we drove for what felt like hours but probably wasn't. My phone kept ringing and ringing. I finally had to turn the volume off because I

couldn't take it anymore. Even Marcus's name flashed across the screen a time or two. I thought it was really low of them to use him like that.

I wouldn't be surprised if Baxter's name popped up next. Clearly they had sunk down to the next level of assholeism. I didn't think they could get much lower.

I knew it wasn't fair to paint them all with the same brush because they hadn't all done something wrong, but I was incapable of being rational in the state I was in. Besides, there was no way in hell Quinton hadn't talked to them about what he wanted at some point. They were all probably in on it, like one big joke I was to be the butt of.

Well, I wasn't laughing because I didn't find anything funny.

Rain pulled up to a small, cute house with a white picket fence surrounded by trees in a neighborhood where the houses weren't on top of each other and there was a decent amount of privacy. It looked like a great place to raise a family, unless, of course, your neighbor was a secret, psychotic witch who could burn your whole house down without so much as blinking.

"What is this place?" I was almost too afraid to ask.

"It's a safe house of a sort. Nobody knows about it but me, and now you. I bought it for your mother and me before we got married. We didn't live here, but we did spend a lot of time here, just the two of us."

My breath caught in my throat, and my chest ached at the sadness in his voice. If it wasn't for me, I don't think he'd ever speak about my mother again, it hurt him too much.

I reached across the console and took his hand in my own. I wanted to hug him, but we weren't exactly a hugging family. Maybe at one point we had been, but it had been stolen away from us too.

"You don't have to do this," I choked out around the bundle of emotion lodged in my throat.

He didn't have to, but I really, really wanted him to. We both knew just

how full of shit my words were, but I had to try for him.

“It looks so normal,” I whispered, and he laughed at me in an empty, hollow sound that I very much did not enjoy hearing coming from him. It made me even sadder.

What the fuck were we doing here? It was making us both feel like shit, but here we were all the same.

“Of course it looks normal. We’ve got to blend in as best as we can. It’s the safest way for us to live without hiding ourselves away like criminals or someone with something to be ashamed of.”

Hiding in plain sight and pretending to be normal. It made perfect sense to me. It was what we all tried to do, except maybe the Council. They always looked like serious creepers. Or perhaps they did try and they just sucked at it.

“I always knew we’d be living in the house I grew up in with my father. Covens try to stick together and live in the same place. It’s much easier to defend one home than it is three or four. Or even two, for that matter. Why do you think Quinton always wants all of you together in one place? I never once rebelled against it. I was always happy to do whatever was best for my family.”

Usually when he spoke about his past, he was able to keep his feelings out of his voice. Now he was breaking my heart all over again.

The stupid organ was always breaking on me. Sometimes I wished I could just rip the damn thing right out of my chest and flush it down the toilet. It was basically useless half of the week. The rest of the time it sort of worked okay.

“I know why Quinton does what he does. You don’t need to explain yourself to me, Dad.”

He cleared his throat, and his voice finally returned to the dead, gritty thing I was more used to. “Making your new, sweet wife live with your father and your sister came easily to me, but it was going to be an adjustment for

your mother, and I knew that going into it. I knew she didn't want it to always be a family thing. Sometimes she wanted to cook dinner for just the two of us, and she wanted to be able to do it in what she considered her own kitchen without Vivian looking over her shoulder or breathing down the back of her neck. I had never known anything else, but all I wanted was to make her happy. I knew your mother wouldn't want something big that she'd spend half the time having to clean while we were there. Honestly, I didn't want something like that either.

“I found this house for sale while I was out on a job with my father and came back the next week by myself to check it out. I walked around inside, and something just settled in my chest. It was perfect and everything I was looking for.”

I looked around the yard and at the house with new eyes. Had my father made my mother happy here? Did she make him a special meal in her very own kitchen for their anniversary that made him love her even more? And, most importantly, had I ever been here before today with the two of them, or had it simply been their own personal little love nest?

I wanted to ask all of this, but every time I went to open my mouth I choked on the words. I was lucky no gurgling sounds were coming out.

“I gave it to her as a wedding present, and we spent our honeymoon holed up here, which was ridiculous because there hadn't been any furniture at the time. She didn't give a shit, she loved it.” He blew out a heavy breath. “Let's go inside and get this over with.”

It took effort, but I got out of the Rover after my father and followed him up to the house. I did it knowing that after I walked inside, my life would likely never be the same again.

I was never more terrified in all of my life.

For a house no one lived in, and hadn't for a very long time, it sure was spotless inside. Not a speck of dust in sight.

Rain didn't dawdle or linger in front of the house. He practically ran and dragged me along behind him. I didn't mind the rush.

There were picture frames everywhere full of pictures of the happy family I'd once been a part of but didn't remember. It was like torture walking through this perfectly beautiful house that smelled like fresh roses even though there wasn't a flower in sight.

Was it her perfume? Had she smelled of roses?

Why wasn't Rain saying anything? Why bring me here to this place on today of all days? I thought he was going to try and make everything better. This was doing the opposite of that.

Rain opened a door at the end of the hallway and ushered me inside. I wanted to throw up the moment my feet crossed the threshold, but that would be an insult to the pristine white carpeted floor.

If I had thought I was being tortured before, I really had no idea of the meaning of the word torture, because clearly there were several different levels to it. I must have been in the waiting room before, because walking into this room was like walking straight into the bowels of hell.

"What the fuck is *this*?" I choked on my words. "Why would you bring

me here? A little heads-up would have been nice.” I felt like I’d just been punched straight in the gut.

“Wait here,” he muttered. “I’ll be right back.” And then the asshole just walked out and left me in this horrible fucking room all by myself.

I was going to kill him after I had a nervous breakdown or something close to it.

I wandered over to the twin-sized bed, and even though I didn’t want to touch anything in this stupid tomb, I sat down on the edge of the bed. I wanted to cry as I looked at the plain yellow comforter and matching pillows. Apparently I’d been a big fan of the color even before I could remember.

There was no doubt in my mind that this little girl’s room had belonged to me once upon a time. It certainly answered some of my unspoken questions.

Their little love nest for two had changed when their daughter had come along, and clearly they hadn’t minded bringing me with them.

There were picture frames on the walls in here too, and these ones I didn’t shy away from like they’d take a chunk out of me—even though I knew that was exactly what they were going to do to me.

There was no stopping this emotional train wreck, it was full steam ahead.

The largest picture on the wall was taken at the beach. Rain was sitting in the sand with my mother sitting between his open knees. He had his arms wrapped around her middle, and they were both smiling happily as they watched a little blonde girl as she ran into the water. The girl had on a white two-piece bathing suit that was covered in pretty pink flowers. A huge, black floppy sun hat sat atop her head.

It was a picture of a happy family spending the afternoon together at the beach.

It was me, I was that little girl, and I had absolutely no memory of it whatsoever.

I got up off the bed and moved closer to the picture until I was standing

right in front of it. I couldn't stop myself from reaching out and running my fingertips along the glass, tracing over the happy couple.

Every time I saw a picture of Rain from before, it really messed with my head. He rarely smiled now, and the only time he did, it was directed my way. There were a few occasions when he'd aimed a smile at Baxter, but only I'd been around to witness those, so I wasn't sure they even counted.

Our lives were so fucked up and had been filled with so much pain.

Rain once asked me if I wanted him to look into finding a spell or something that would help bring my memories from before back to me. I had said sure, but what I'd really wanted to say was a big fat no fucking thank you.

As horrible as this was going to sound, why did I want to remember a woman who was essentially a dead stranger? I might feel differently if there was still a chance to meet the woman one day in my future, but that was impossible, and the memories would cause more torture.

There was also no question in my mind, though, that come tomorrow, I might actually feel something entirely different about it. I couldn't make up my mind and I didn't want to be pressured into anything.

Still, I wanted to rip that photograph right off the wall so I could take it home with me. All these happy memories didn't belong here, hidden away in this tomb that still smelled like the perfume of our dead.

If Rain came here to visit on the regular, it would surprise the shit out of me. He seemed more the type to only see something once for it to be enough to fuel his psychotic nature.

"Come here, girl," Rain said from behind me, but I didn't turn around right away. It was almost physically painful to turn away from the photograph. "Ariel."

Now he had something to say? Jesus.

I blew out a heavy breath and finally turned to face him. I almost asked him if we could leave because this place was proving to be too much for me.



But I'd already had one semi-tantrum today, so I couldn't afford another one. Mentally, I didn't think I could hack it.

And if I freaked out, Rain would probably lose his mind and go on a killing spree. Lord only knew who his victims would be or how many of them would pile up. I didn't want to find out.

"Do I even want to know what's in that box?" I asked as Rain stood before me with a large white box in his hands. I knew it was going to be something that made me want to cry. Rain was really good at giving me things like that.

I really did not like the blank expression on Rain's face and the dead look in his eyes. He had his emotions locked down tight, and that spelled nothing but trouble for me.

I needed more trouble right now like I needed to be drowned in a bathtub.

"This was your mother's, and now it's yours."

Oh no, not another one of these kinds of gifts. I backed away from Rain and didn't stop until my back hit the wall and there was nowhere left for me to retreat to.

Rain laid the box down on the bed and lifted the top. The top was discarded to the side, and a bunch of white tissue paper was revealed—white tissue paper and a whole lot of something else that was white.

My mouth went dry, and my palms started to sweat.

I knew exactly where this was going, and I wanted no part of it.

First, I didn't get a ring.

Now, I was getting a dead woman's dress.

I was more than ready to go back home so I could lock myself in the bathroom and could cry for another fifty-eight years, because that was about all I had left in me to give.

Rain dug through the tissue paper, carefully moving it aside to get to the dress. With gentle care, he pulled the dress out of the box and held it up in front of me.

My breath left me in a rush, leaving me light-headed and frozen in place. I was too afraid that if I moved, my entire being would shatter into a million, broken, jagged pieces.

Whatever I had been expecting, this wasn't it.

Had you ever seen one of those romantic movies where the mother or the mother-in-law came out with their dress that they just couldn't wait to see the daughter in on her special day, and the damn thing was the ugliest beast you'd ever laid eyes on?

Yeah, well, this absolutely wasn't that.

This was a dress made for a princess. Long sleeves made with a delicate, see-through lace. A plunging neckline that would show a decent amount of cleavage. Long skirt that was poofy but pretty. The whole thing sparkled, which was what was so magical about it.

I wasn't that girly girl who loved sparkly, pretty things, but one look at this dress, and I swear I fell in love. It looked like a damn life-sized Barbie dress.

"Do you want to try it on?" he asked, and I shook my head.

"No. I want you to put it back in the box. I'll try it on when I'm all by myself and not on the verge of a mental breakdown... please."

He nodded and, without a word, very carefully placed the dress back in the box. When the lid was back in place, I felt like I could finally breathe again.

I was more than ready to get out of here, but I didn't want to tell Rain that. He might be emotionally shut down at the moment, but he'd really opened himself up to me by bringing me here. I didn't want to say the wrong thing, hurt his feelings, and then never have him share something personal with me again.

So I kept my mouth shut and sucked it up.

He walked right up to me and plucked the picture I'd been staring at off the wall. He placed it on top of the box and tucked both of them safely under

his arm. "I've got one more thing to show you, then we can get out of here." At my skeptical look, he barked out a harsh laugh. "You're going to like this one, I promise."

I wasn't so sure I believed him, but I followed him out of the room all the same. After one last look at what used to be my bedroom, I flicked the light switch off and closed the door. I refused to feel badly about the now empty space on the wall where the photo Rain carried used to be. This house belonged to keeping the memory of a dead woman alive, and I didn't have to remember her to know she wouldn't begrudge me one photo from the wall.

Thankfully Rain moved through the house and right out the front door. He made sure to turn the lights off before locking the door. I sighed in relief, knowing this meant I wouldn't be forced to go back in there again today.

I followed Rain up the driveway and to the garage where he turned on me and held out a key ring with several keys on it. I took them from him as I arched an eyebrow in silent question. He just grinned at me as he pulled another key ring out of his pocket, and I wasn't even surprised to see the one he'd kept for himself had the keys to my Rover on it. Not surprised but definitely annoyed.

He unlocked the garage and pushed the door open wide while talking to me over his shoulder. "You've got keys on that ring for both the front and back doors to the house and the garage. There are also keys to the 'Vette on there too, and she's all yours."

I frowned at him in confusion. "What the heck is a 'Vette?" I didn't bother asking why he thought I'd need keys to the house. We weren't going there.

He grinned at me with genuine happiness on his face, and it threatened to take my breath away. When he forgot to be scary, my dad was a really handsome guy. I wanted him to fall in love again and find true happiness. Just maybe not with Isobel. I mean, I'd even be happy if he decided to shack up with Romero, just so long as it made him happy. I wasn't so sure how

Dash would feel about it though. I had a feeling it wouldn't go over well. Asking him was probably out of the question.

I eyeballed Rain. Maybe I should ask him about what his feelings were first when it came to Dash's dad.

Then again, there were some things that just weren't a daughter's business no matter how much I knew that if the tables were turned, he'd be all up in my business.

There was a car parked in the garage covered with a tarp. Rain lifted the corner of the tarp by the front bumper and dragged it off the car.

She was sleek. She was black. And she was beautiful.

I instantly fell in love with her.

"This," Rain said as he pointed at the car, "is a 1963 Chevrolet Corvette."

His voice held a hushed reverence that was almost lustful. Looking at the car, I totally got it.

"She was my very first car. My dad bought her and gave her to me the day I got my license. Now she's all yours. I've recently had her serviced and detailed, so I know she's good to go."

I blinked stupidly as I gaped at him with my mouth hanging open and everything.

He was giving me a car?

*This car?*

The car he'd just told me his beloved father had given to him, making this all the more special?

Now I totally understood his obsession with hating Marcus for having bought me my Rover. He'd taken that shit personally, and it felt good to understand the reason behind it.

Still...

"Rain, I can't take this from you. If it means that much to you, and I know it does because I can hear it in your voice, you should keep it and be driving it yourself. I know you don't like seeing me drive the Rover, and I

think I get it now. If it means that much to you, I have no problems going and getting my own vehicle for myself and returning the Rover to Marcus. Or you can keep it since I know how much you seem to be attached to it.”

Rain had hardcore jealousy issues, and it was a wonder Marcus’s dead body hadn’t been found dismembered in the woods yet. Maybe someday soon. Never say never.

He glared at me, and if he’d been anyone else, I might have taken several steps back just to put space between the two of us. Since it was Rain, and I knew he’d never ever hurt me, I stood my ground. By some miracle, I refrained from glaring right back at him.

“Don’t argue with me, little girl,” he growled in a voice full of gravel. “You’re taking the car and that’s all there is to it. I stopped driving her a long time ago but could never bear to get rid of her because I had always planned on keeping her in pristine condition for you. You aren’t a normal girl, baby. You’re my daughter, and you were born to be incredible. Everything you do just proves it, and you don’t need to be driving around in some boring ass Range Rover. It doesn’t suit you in the slightest.”

I didn’t think my Rover was boring in the slightest, but it actually seemed a lot more reasonable of a car than this one.

When I didn’t say anything, Rain took my silence as agreement. “Great. Glad that’s settled, baby girl. You take the ‘Vette home, and I’ll follow behind you with your things from the house. Normally I would encourage you to take her out and get a feel for what she can do on the open road, but I can’t give you that right now. Once we put the Council fucks in the ground, then you can go cruisin’, just not today.”

I’d heard enough about the Council today and wanted to avoid another conversation about those “fucks” like the plague.

And joy riding really wasn’t my thing. Maybe I should take it up, live a little on the wild side for once. The guys were going to shit their pants when they got a load of this car. Marcus was probably going to cry, but that wasn’t

my problem.

Rain left me there as I stared down at my new car and wondered if I'd ever have control over my own life one day, or if the men in it were just going to boss me around for the rest of my days.

The car far from sucked, so right now I guessed I really couldn't complain.

And the dress didn't suck either.

I got in the car and fired her up. She purred to life immediately, and I ran my hand lovingly across the steering wheel in a caress.

The inside of the car was spotless. The leather seats were red with black stitching. I expected to find a cassette player on the dash, but was happy to find the stereo system had been updated at some point. Likely recently and for my benefit.

I messed around with it until I figured out how to sync my phone to it and pulled up my music app. "Desperado" by Love Shayla played over the speakers, and I cranked the volume up to deafening levels. It was one of those songs that I could listen to on repeat over and over again, but would probably get sick of it in about two months' time and then not be able to listen to it again for at least a solid three years.

The garage door in front of me slid open, rolling up smoothly, and I didn't hesitate. I shifted gears and flew out of the garage and down the driveway. The power when I pressed down on the gas pedal sent a happy little shiver through me, and for the first time today, a genuinely happy smile spread across my face. My smile was so huge it actually hurt my face.

I waited at the end of the driveway until I saw Rain pull up behind me in the Rover. He pointed to the right, and I was glad for it because I might have been looking out my window on the way here, but I had no freaking clue where I was going or how to get home.

I quickly pulled up Maps on my phone and punched in the address for home. Once I had that locked down, I didn't hesitate to floor it out of there.

Rain knew where to go, so I wasn't worried about leaving him behind.

I didn't listen to a single thing he'd said to me about not being able to open my new girl up on the road today and see what she could do.

I rolled the windows down and let the wind blow my hair around while I flew down the highway with my music blasting as I weaved between cars with Rain in the Rover in my rearview mirror the entire time. He had no problem keeping up with me, not that I was surprised. I thought he got off on speeding and doing things he wasn't supposed to do.

He clearly knew what the hell he was talking about, because it took me less than ten minutes behind the wheel for all of my troubles to melt away and to finally feel light again. I was no longer bogged down with bullshit, heartache, and rage.

I knew Rain would make it all better. Even if it was just a band-aid, it was better than where I'd been earlier, ready to murder a boyfriend or two. Maybe even three.

Those motherfuckers had it coming.

They were lucky my dad was the coolest dad ever and had a way of calming me down, or when I pulled into the driveway, I might have been set to burn that motherfucking house to the ground.

I woke up in a terrible mood and in a bed all by myself. Yes, it was my bed, but I wasn't used to sleeping in it all by my lonesome.

You'd think I would enjoy the time spent by myself, but I absolutely did not. Not even my damn cats were in bed with me, and those babies were little cuddle monsters. They were usually curled up together or sleeping on my body somewhere while wearing Quinton's ridiculous clothing he'd put them in for the day.

I bet that asshole Quinton had stolen my cats while I'd been sleeping.

That pissed me off and had me practically jumping out of bed with a small growl on my lips.

That complete and total control freak asshole did not get to come into my bedroom, my personal space in this monstrosity of a house that he'd forced me to live in, and take my goddamn cats like he had any right to them.

Yes, he'd bought them for me and then tried to claim them for himself. He'd still given them to me anyway because he was a sucker like that. I didn't do take backs, though, and as much as I loved him, I would fight him to the death over my babies if I had to.

Thankfully when I'd gotten home yesterday, I'd got dressed in my pajamas and had removed all the makeup I hadn't cried off earlier. I still needed a shower, because I always did in order to start my day off right, but I



was presentable enough in my skimpy tank top and short sleep shorts to walk around the house.

I didn't know why I cared, they'd all seen the goods I had on offer, and they'd all played with them far more than once, or even twice. I thought it was the possibility of either Rain or Marcus being here that made me want to be fully dressed at all times.

For reasons I wasn't interested in looking into, I didn't feel the same way when it came to Trenton and Simon.

My feelings toward them scared the shit out of me. I really needed to talk to someone else about this, but I knew my best option was Quinton, and I had been putting that off for obvious reasons. And now certainly wasn't the time for me to bring it up with me wanting to kill him and all that.

I didn't know if they could feel my bad energy and were smart enough to not want any part of it, but they were all wise enough to stay hidden in their bedrooms while I stormed through the house. Fucking cowards, the whole lot of them.

I burst into Quinton's room without knocking just like Tyson usually did. I did it knowing it would piss him off. It was petty and exactly why I did it. It was not a good way to start things off, but I was too angry to care. I could go back to working on being an adult again tomorrow.

The room was empty, and Quinton and my cats were nowhere to be seen. Motherfucker.

I slammed the door shut in frustration and went on the hunt for them. He was probably hiding from me on purpose because he knew his bedroom would be the first place I'd look for him.

I hadn't seen him or anyone else when I'd gotten home yesterday. Not even Trenton or Simon had popped out of their rooms to see me. I figured after my epic meltdown yesterday, they were all probably terrified of me. I honestly couldn't blame them because I'd lost my damn mind and was slightly embarrassed about my behavior. Not enough to apologize for it, but

whatever.

I found him in the front living/sitting room that was rarely ever used. The furniture in here was kind of uptight and fancy and there was no television. I never really understood the reason for the room until I found out the furniture had once belonged to Quinton's mother.

He had loved her very much, and whenever he talked about her, he did it with a heavy dose of sadness that broke my heart. He was the only one who ever really used this room. He didn't care much for television and preferred to read one of his many books instead, and he usually did that in here or in his office where everyone was smart enough to leave him the hell alone.

Everyone who wasn't me. I never gave a shit about giving him his space because that was how he acted toward me. I figured I'd give him space when he gave me space, and since he never did, I assumed he liked it.

He was sprawled out on his back on the loveseat with his book open and face down on his chest. His eyes were closed, and his mouth was slightly parted. He was snoring softly, and there were dark smudges underneath his eyes.

I immediately lost the rage burning within me. He looked like he hadn't slept in days, and I knew the stress he always carried around on his shoulders. I'd made it worse for him with this bullshit I'd brought down on all of us with the Council. It was clearly taking its toll on him, and my freak-out yesterday couldn't have made it any better for him.

There were cat toys scattered all over the floor, and in the center of the room sat a multi-level cat tree. There were stairs at the bottom, and it had a hammock. The thing was intense. I had never seen it before, but I knew the man sleeping on the dainty little couch was responsible for it.

At the rate he was going, he was going to find himself in the poor house because he couldn't stop buying shit for my cats. They were spoiled, and it was getting out of control.

I couldn't even imagine the levels he'd sink to if we had children. The

thought alone was terrifying and sent a shiver of revulsion down my spine.

Ash was perched at the very top of the tree. My poor baby was wearing what appeared to be a white turtleneck. She watched me without blinking, but I thought maybe she was judging me for my treatment of Daddy Quinton. Bone was curled up in the hammock, sleeping like a precious baby. Her turtleneck was black. They were matching but in different colors. Quinton was completely ridiculous.

I couldn't wake him up to yell at him now. Even the damn cats would judge me for it.

What the fuck was that about? Whatever happened to loyalty?

I left the three of them in Quinton's sitting room and wandered to the kitchen. I was frustrated by the fact that everyone was still hiding and no one had made coffee yet.

Okay, so admittedly I might have been just a little spoiled too.

Dash usually made coffee every day and a fresh cup was typically waiting for me on my nightstand every morning. Well, not today.

It was total bullshit.

As much as I wanted to slam around in the kitchen to get my frustrations out, I was as quiet as I possibly could be. Those dark smudges under Quinton's eyes were going to haunt me until they went away, and I didn't want to wake him up.

I cleaned the kitchen and put the dishes in the sink into the dishwasher while I waited for the coffee to brew. Usually the boys were better about cleaning up after themselves, but I didn't mind doing it on occasion. Most of the time Dash refused to allow me to do any cleaning in our apartment, so I never minded doing it when I was down here.

Dash made a damn fine housewife, but sometimes I liked to be able to help out too.

I poured myself a cup of coffee in a giant mug that said "Boo, bitch!" and had a bunch of sad-looking ghosts on it. Dash's cup collection and love for

all things orange and Halloween was adorable. Not everyone else thought so.

I took my coffee out the backdoor. Normally I would sit at the little table on the deck, but after my big blowout with Quinton, I didn't want to sit there today. I thought it would further sour my mood.

I walked down the steps and headed over to the side of the pool. I sat down at the edge and stuck my legs into the water. I didn't have to enjoy having the giant thing taking up a good deal of the backyard to appreciate the fact that it was heated and felt freaking awesome.

If I was being honest, I didn't actually hate having the pool. I just didn't want to show that I liked it and then have to eat my words that I'd been wrong about it. And that was never fun.

I sipped my coffee while thinking about the dress now hanging up in my closet and the picture on the wall beside my bed. Both meant everything to me, yet I hoped like hell no one else noticed them, because I wasn't ready to talk about them and maybe never would be. Sometimes having to share a closet with another person wasn't always a good thing. Thankfully it was Dash, and he was good at keeping his mouth shut when I needed him to. Not all of them were capable of that. Some boys had really big mouths.

Like always, I felt him before I saw him. He had a magnetic pull that I was never capable of resisting. Not that I ever wanted to, even when I wanted to kill him. He owned a part of my soul, they all did. There was no denying it.

Quinton sat down beside me, rolled his pant legs up to his knees, and stuck his legs in the pool. I bit down on my tongue to stop myself from snapping at him when he reached across my body, picked up my coffee cup, and brought it to his lips. He drained the rest of my coffee before leaning over me and placing my mug back exactly where he'd gotten it from.

What a fucking dick.

I was not impressed in the slightest. Any sympathy I had for him after seeing him sleeping on that couch had completely vanished.

“You do realize that now you need to get up off your ass and go get me

another cup of coffee, right?" I questioned Quinton.

He just looked at me and quirked an eyebrow like the arrogant prick he absolutely was most of the time.

"Don't worry about that. I'm sure one of the guys will be out here with a refill soon once they notice you're out here."

I scowled at him and crossed my arms over my chest. "I think you need to get me a new one since you were the one who very rudely stole all my coffee like a complete and total asshole."

Now it was him who looked totally unimpressed by me, and that had me annoyed with him to the extreme all over again. I should have woken him up earlier and let all my rage out on his ass like I had originally planned.

"This is what you're choosing to fight with me about right now?" he asked incredulously. "I figured there were more important things to talk about after yesterday."

He had that right.

Like, where the fuck was my ring?

You would think that would be the first thing he'd have given me the moment his bitch ass sat down beside me, but no, not Uncle Quinton. He wanted to squabble over petty shit and steal my coffee.

"Where did you take off to yesterday? You do realize we are all under a serious threat right now, and it's not okay to take off like that all on your own. It's not safe, and you had every single one of us worried sick about you. Not to mention what you put Simon and Trenton through by leaving without them. I know I upset you, but you really need to work on thinking about the rest of us before you do something so rash again."

I wanted to scream and maybe find something to throw at him again. I briefly thought about bashing him upside the head with my mug, but since it was Dash's, I didn't want to chance breaking it. Quinton was lucky, and he didn't even seem to realize it.

I sighed. "I was with Rain, Quint. There was absolutely nothing to be

worried about. I wouldn't have run out of here in the first place if you hadn't shit all over my heart. And please don't even talk to me about Trenton and Simon. You're smart enough to know that neither of us are quite ready to have that conversation just yet."

His face pinched in pain when I mentioned him shitting on my heart, but he was downright pissed when I said what I did about Simon and Trenton. I knew when the time was right, I needed Quinton on my side about the brothers, but it was obvious from his expression he wasn't ready to open that door yet.

That was okay, I could be patient. And to be honest, I wasn't sure I was quite ready yet myself. But the time was coming, I could feel it. Simon and Trenton weren't going to be nearly as patient as me, I could feel that too.

He gritted his teeth and ground out, "Okay, I'll admit that I handled the entire situation poorly. I apologize for that. You deserve better and we both know it. I'm an asshole. I've now apologized. What more do you want me to say?"

As far as apologies went, it wasn't a very good one. It wasn't too much pride that was Quinton's problem, not that he didn't have an overabundance of pride because he did. The problem was he shut down and turned into an asshole when he was disappointed in himself and hurt the people he loved. That was unbearable to him, and he never dealt with it very well.

I noticed the bruise high on his cheekbone and winced. I hoped Tyson didn't have bruises to match, because it would make me feel like a terrible person since I was essentially to blame for it. Quinton's bruise didn't exactly make me feel bad. It did, however, make me wish I'd stuck around long enough to have watched them brawl. It was probably a panty soaking show that I had missed out on.

"Do you want me to go and get your ring?"

I sure did, but I also wanted to find something for him to choke on. It was times like these when I couldn't help but wonder what it would be like to

have a penis. It would really come in handy right about now.

I gave him a sweet, innocent look as I leaned into his side, which should have been warning enough for him, but he clearly missed it. I pushed all my body weight into him as I shoved him into the pool.

He landed on his side with a giant splash as he sank beneath the water. The look of surprise on his face before he went under was absolutely priceless.

I felt better about the whole thing already, but I wasn't stupid enough to stick around and enjoy my victory. I got up, abandoned my coffee cup, and ran.

I didn't make it far, and I honestly should have known better.

I heard the water move as he got out and then his wet footsteps as they slapped against the cement while he chased me. I made it to the first stair with my hand on the rail when his arms wrapped around me and I was lifted into the air. I squealed when his sopping wet front met my back.

I didn't bother putting up a fight as he carried me toward the deep end of the pool. I wrapped my arms around his and held on tightly. If I was going in, you'd better believe his ass was coming in with me.

He stopped at the edge of the pool and attempted to toss me in. He failed because I clung to his arms even tighter, refusing to let go. He grunted as my fingernails dug into his arms, tearing at the skin.

"Fuck it," he muttered as he stepped off the cement and into the pool.

I screamed even though I knew it was coming, but I managed to close my mouth and my eyes before my head went under water. Quinton let me go, and I swam away from him, swimming until I couldn't hold my breath anymore and had to go up for air.

I popped up out of the water on the other side of the pool and whipped around while swiping my wet hair out of my face. Surprisingly I found Quinton on the other side of the pool where I'd left him, he hadn't followed me.

“You’re a dick,” I grumbled sullenly.

He threw his head back and laughed outrageously at me. What he didn’t do was disagree with me.

Deciding that I was more than over this shit and didn’t want to stick around just so he could laugh at me, I turned around and slogged my way toward the stairs. One thing to be happy about was that I hadn’t wasted my time earlier with a shower, because I’d just have to do it all over again when I made it back up to the safety of my bedroom.

Again, I made it to the first step and got no farther. Arms covered in flames wrapped around me from behind, but this time I was not lifted, he simply held me in place against his chest.

I should have figured he wouldn’t let me escape him that easily, he never did. He was like a goddamn spider with me being constantly caught in his web.

“What do you want from me, Quinton?” I asked in a tired voice. “I need you to let me go so I can get out of these wet clothes.”

“No,” he growled in my ear. “You do not need me to let you go, you just think you do. No, I think not. What I think you need, something that’ll make you feel so much better about this whole thing, is for you to fuck your anger and rage out on me. Use me to get it all out of your system. We’ll both feel so much better about it afterwards, I promise.”

My mouth dropped open and, if it was even possible, I got even angrier than I had originally been to start out with.

I mean, had he really just suggested that a hate fuck would fix everything in our relationship and make it all better?

Honestly, what a fucking dick.

Sex absolutely was not the answer to everything, but maybe he was simply too male to understand that. I hated to think it was because he was too stupid, because that would just be plain sad.

“You cannot be serious!” I snapped at him as I jammed my elbow back



into his ribs. “Now let me the fuck go.”

He chuckled into my ear, probably at the use of the F-word coming out of my mouth, and he held on even tighter. “That’s right, baby, get rough with me. Give me everything I asked for. You know I like it when you fall in line and give me what I want. It’s rare, and I fucking love it.”

He was unbelievable, and I wanted to drown him in his own stupid damn pool while I walked away from him without bothering to look back.

I rammed my elbow into his gut on the other side of his body which I hadn’t already assaulted. He grunted as he shuffled me to the side of the pool. I struggled the entire way, but as much as I put up a fight, I kind of sucked at it because the last thing I actually *really* wanted to do was physically hurt him beyond a little elbow to the ribs action.

He pressed my stomach up against the wall of the pool and quickly ripped my sleep shorts and panties down my legs. I growled angrily at him as he manhandled my legs, lifting my feet up and using his own feet to kick my clothing free. I was completely naked from the waist down, and if someone came out and saw us like this, I’d never be able to live it down.

“Quinton,” I said in warning, hoping he actually heard me and got with the program and maybe backed the fuck off.

I’d never had a hate fuck before or even an angry one. I wasn’t so sure I wanted to start now.

It would be nice to see him on his knees before me though. On his knees and begging for me, whether for forgiveness or for a taste of my pussy, it didn’t matter. Both would work. He wouldn’t beg though. That wasn’t Quinton’s style. He had a way about him that I could never refuse, and it would usually end up with me begging like the weak bitch that I could be around this man.

It wasn’t just magic that he had, he had some serious dick magic working in his favor, and I was slightly embarrassed to admit that it completely muddled my mind and made my pussy wet.

“Spread your feet apart and keep your legs open for me. Do what you’re told and be a good girl for me for once in your life.”

I would never admit it out loud, but I liked it when he took control and bossed me around. I’m sure I gave myself away when I didn’t hesitate to comply with his demands and spread my legs wide like the good girl he wanted me to be.

I wasn’t stupid enough to say it didn’t turn me on because the evidence was there for him to find between my legs. And find out he did when his dick slid between my ass cheeks, rubbed up against my asshole, and slipped between my pussy lips.

“Fuck,” he gritted out between clenched teeth. “Of course you’re wet for me. You’re always fucking wet for me, and no matter how much you think I’m an asshole, you can’t hide how much you want me when your pussy is practically weeping for my touch. Don’t try to deny it, we both know it’ll only make you into a damn liar.”

We both knew how much I didn’t like to be called a liar, so I kept my mouth shut, wishing like hell his words hadn’t turned me on further. He’d probably been going for just that, the prick.

“Just shut up and fuck me already,” I snapped at him as I braced my hands on the cement outside the pool, more than ready for him. I’d had more than enough of him talking, and I was starting to feel more needy and empty the longer he teased me by rubbing his hard cock through my wet folds, bumping his piercing against my clit.

Quinton chuckled darkly. “Someone is greedy and has definitely changed her tune. You’re going to have to ask me nicely, though, if you want me to put my dick inside this sweet pussy. Come on, say please.”

I really was going to kill him if he kept this shit up.

*Please my ass.*

I kept one hand pressed flat against the cement as I slid the other one slowly down the front of my body, stopping when I reached the hem of my

tank top and whipping it up and off. I chucked it to the side without a care as to where it landed and went back to trailing my fingers down the front of my body. If he wasn't going to give me what I wanted, then I was just going to have to take it for myself, and we'd see what he had to say about that. I slipped my fingers between my legs and pushed his cock out of the way.

He growled and nipped at my neck as I circled my clit with my fingers. I thrust my ass back onto his cock, grinding onto him as I played with my clit.

I moaned loudly, obscenely, for being outside, and picked up my pace. My legs started to shake as my orgasm started to wash through me. My pussy clenched down on nothing, and a strangled cry left my lips as I shuddered out my release.

"Fuck," he groaned. "You give off the most delicious heat every time you come. I didn't think my dick could get any harder, but once again you've proven me wrong with that cunt of yours."

He roughly pushed my hand away and nudged my entrance with his cock. He slammed inside in one thrust, and my mouth dropped open in a wordless, silent scream.

Yes.

*Finally.*

He set a brutal pace, fucking me like it was the last time he thought he'd get the chance to stick his dick in me. My palms scraped against the cement as I tried to hold myself in place so I didn't get slammed into the hard side of the pool.

"Please, Quinton," I implored, wanting more, wanting everything he had to give me. I wanted him to consume me and swallow me whole until I didn't know where I ended and he began.

I wanted to get lost in all things Quinton Alexander.

His hand slid up the center of my back, up the back of my neck, and around to the front of my throat. He palmed my neck, his fingers gently digging in. It was not enough to hurt but enough for me to know who owned

my body in that moment. Then again, he owned a whole lot more than just my body and always would.

He pulled back on my throat, and I tilted my head to the side, looking over my shoulder at him. He leaned over me and pressed his forehead against mine sweetly. Our breaths mingled together, and I closed my eyes. He was too close for me to properly see him anyways.

“I need you to come for me, baby. Strangle my dick with your hot cunt. I’m not going to be able to come until you do, and I don’t feel like waiting much longer. I still want to eat you out, and then I’m going to take this pussy again in the shower. Don’t even tell me you don’t want all of that.”

He was so goddamn bossy, and I couldn’t help but love it.

He tilted his hips and his cock hit me in that perfect spot, rubbing against my G-spot. I whimpered, and he pressed his lips to mine, stealing the noise from my mouth in a searing kiss.

My pussy clamped down on him, squeezing his cock as I came apart, my orgasm rushing through me. My entire body shook with the force of it.

Quinton gripped my throat tighter as his hips stuttered and he lost his rhythm before they pressed up tight to my ass and stayed there. He groaned into my mouth as he kissed me deeply. His cock jerked inside me as he came in spurts.

Both of our chests heaved as he continued to kiss me. The kiss slowly turned from hungry to sweet before he ended it and our mouths broke apart.

Was that what he considered a hate fuck? It didn’t seem violent enough to be considered one to me. In fact, there was no violence at all, just a rough pounding from behind.

I did feel better about everything though, so I guessed he’d been right about that.

Quinton ran his nose up along my jaw and across my cheek before he kissed my nose sweetly. “I’m sorry if I fucked everything up, baby. I love you more than anything else in this whole world, and I fucking hate that I did

that to you. I'll make it up to you and make it right, I promise.”

I reached up and pressed my hand over his on my throat, and he held it there as I thought about everything that had been going on in our lives, and not just what had gone down between the two of us in the last two days.

Did I really think he had to make things up to me in order to make things right? I wasn't so sure, but I almost wanted to say no he didn't need to. My anger could burn hot and fast, and it could burn out just as quickly. I was no longer angry about what had happened the day before, and honestly, perhaps I shouldn't have been so angry about it in the first place.

I thought I'd been more hurt and disappointed than anything else, and unfortunately it had come out as anger.

Part of me actually understood why he'd done things how he had. I could be a very difficult person at times, and he likely had no idea how I would react and probably thought his safest bet had been playing it off as no big deal.

I understood all of that.

And because of that, I had to let it go and let Quinton off the hook so he didn't spend the rest of his life beating himself up about it.

Quinton and I shared a love for one another that was oftentimes very prickly and antagonistic, but I wouldn't trade it for anything. Tyson Alexander might have been my best friend in the whole world, but his uncle was very much my person.

I opened my eyes, looked up, and sucked in a sharp breath. “Quinton,” I choked out in a tortured whisper.

Marcus Cole was standing on his balcony. He had a cup of coffee in his hands, and he wasn't even pretending not to be watching Quinton and me.

How long had he been standing there? Did he just watch Quinton and me have pool sex for the first time like some creepy perverted Peeping Tom?

“I'll kill him,” Quinton muttered under his breath.

I made a noise of agreement. If Marcus had just watched the show we'd

put on, then I wouldn't try to stop Quinton for once.

"We need a fence." Why was he still watching us like that?

"No, Ariel, what we need is to have no neighbors. Marcus has got to go. His time has run out."

Well now, I didn't like the sound of that at all. It wasn't like we could simply ask the man to move and expect him to go along with it. That was crazy.

"You stay here. Whatever you do, do not get out of this pool until that motherfucker is gone and isn't going to get an eyeful of you. Thankfully I don't think he's been able to see all of you from that angle."

No, just the top half of my body.

Marcus Cole had clearly seen my tits.

I wanted to cry.

Quinton kissed my shoulder sweetly, and I felt him move away from me. I wanted to ask him to come back as soon as he was gone. I didn't want Marcus to look at Quinton naked either and see what was mine.

And why the fuck was he still staring? Obviously we'd seen him, so why wouldn't he look away?

A shadow blocked my view, and a hand appeared before me. When I didn't grab hold of the hand, someone grabbed my biceps, and I was plucked right out of the water. I didn't fight. The silver swirl of tattoos on the arms told me one of my loyal bodyguards had once again come to my rescue.

A big, fluffy towel was wrapped around me, covering me from my shoulders all the way down to my knees. I felt like a child whose parent had just declared bath time was over. I half expected him to carry me up the stairs, put me into my pajamas, and tuck me into bed.

I looked up into the beautiful eyes of Trenton. There was no judgment there, only concern for me. Yeah, I definitely had feelings for the man, and he had feelings for me.

"Come on, let's get you inside."

I noticed there was no towel for Quinton, but I kept my mouth shut as I allowed Trenton to usher me up the deck stairs.

Simon was standing on the deck, but he didn't look at me. His sole focus was on Marcus Cole who *still* had not taken his eyes off of me.

I had a feeling things were about to get far more complicated than they already were.

Out of all the people in my life, I had never expected Marcus to be someone who'd turn on me. Not that he had yet, but it certainly felt like that was the way the wind was blowing.

And now I wanted to cry again. I should have known better. All the men who'd picked Vivian as a lover never turned out to be good people.

Had Marcus just been pretending this whole time?

The first tear slid silently down my cheek. It was the first of many that I ignored while Trenton escorted me safely up to my room. He didn't come inside with me, but I had a feeling he didn't go far either.

I thought I was in shock. I was definitely numb.

I went through the motions of washing my hair and scrubbing my body as if I were a robot. It was strictly mechanical, and I wouldn't be surprised if I'd conditioned my hair before shampooing it.

After getting clean, it was almost as if my legs refused to do their job and hold me up any longer. I ended up on my knees in the shower under the spray of water with my wet hair clinging to my neck and back like a second skin.

Thankfully I'd stopped crying. Small mercies.

I couldn't stop seeing Marcus's face in my mind. I tried to blink him away, but every time I closed my eyes, there he was staring at me unashamedly with something I couldn't comprehend burning in his eyes. He'd looked at me in a way I had never in my wildest dreams imagined coming from Marcus.

There had been a time when I'd viewed the man as my father figure, and I had even wanted him to fill that role for me when I'd never gotten a choice on who filled it before.

Then I'd met Rain, and everything had changed. But there was no denying that Marcus still meant a lot to me and played an important role in my life.

Now everything was changing for the worst again, and I didn't want any



part of it.

I had accepted the fact that my life would never be normal because I wouldn't ever be normal. But that didn't mean I wanted to be derailed at every turn. This hurt way worse than anything else had before, and I wasn't even really aware of what was going on. I just knew that whatever it turned out to be, it was likely going to kill something vital inside of me, and I was really tired of getting shit on by people who were supposed to love me or just by people in general.

I was tired of crying.

I was tired of the heartache.

I was tired of feeling like everyone else was in control of my life and I was a child sitting at the adults' table.

Things needed to change around here, or I was going to open my mouth, start screaming, and never be able to close my mouth again in order to make it stop.

“Baby, what the fuck? What the hell are you doing on the floor in here? Are you crying again? I swear, when I get a hold of that son of a bitch, I'm going to take my time beating the life out of him for making you cry again and violating you the way he did. Please, baby, stop crying.”

Quinton crouched down in front of me and cupped my face. He swiped the pads of his thumbs across my cheeks, wiping away my tears.

“Do you feel like he violated you too?” I asked in a quiet voice, completely stuck on that word he'd used. That was exactly what it'd felt like—a violation.

“No.” He shook his head. “He wasn't looking at me, he was all about you.”

Well, that didn't make me feel any better. Call me selfish, but now I almost wished Marcus had checked out Quinton's cock too, just to make us sort of even.

“Where is he right now?” I asked. I left so many things unasked but

wasn't brave enough to voice. Sometimes you really were better off not knowing. Some truths hurt way too much.

He shook his head again and this time refused to meet my eyes. "It pisses me off that I have to say this to you, but I have no fucking idea. By the time Simon and I got over there, he'd already retreated into the house. He spelled the door, so we had to find another way in, and while we were doing that, he was driving out of his garage and speeding away to who the fuck knows where. I called everybody home for a meeting, and I've asked Julian and Damien to stay here until we figure out what the fuck is going on, just to be safe."

Just to be safe. There were those fucking words again. I just bet Julian and Damien loved hearing them as much as I did.

"Baby?"

I closed my eyes. He wanted to hear that I was okay after what he'd just told me about Marcus. I absolutely was not okay, and I didn't feel like lying to him so I could tell him what he wanted to hear. My throat didn't seem to work, and I couldn't get any words out anyway.

"We're going to find him, Ariel, and we're going to figure out what the hell he thinks he's doing. But right now what I need is for you to tell me you believe me. I need to hear the words from you, otherwise I'm going to freak the fuck out. I'm tired of seeing you cry and putting on a brave face so we'll think you're not scared. You're not fooling anyone, and we're all ready to do what we have to in order to make it stop. Now, I need to hear some words out of your mouth, baby."

Fucking Quinton. He always had to right all the wrongs and take every problem on himself. I'd bet this shit over the last few months was slowly eating him alive from the inside. He thought he was everyone's protector and took it personally when he thought any of us were threatened or even had our feelings slightly hurt. It was one of the many traits about him that I found to be highly attractive but very frustrating all at the same time.

“I’m not okay, Quint,” I said honestly. “I don’t want to talk about Marcus anymore right now though. I have no idea what’s going on with him, and there’s no excuse for him creeping on us the way he did. It hurts too much to even try to think about right now, so fuck him and fuck this whole thing.”

I brushed his hands away from my face and shifted away from him. My knees were starting to ache from kneeling on the floor for so long. The numbness was clearly starting to wear off, and I had no idea if that was a good thing or a bad thing, but it was definitely happening.

His eyes took on a wicked gleam, and I knew I was in trouble with him.

“I think what you need is a distraction, and I do believe I made some promises to you out in the pool earlier. You know how I feel about broken promises. Get on your feet and push that pussy up in my face.”

For fuck’s sake. Not this again. Did he really think sex solved everything? And why did he think he had to be the boss every damn time? That shit didn’t always fly with me.

Right now, I could really use some control over my own goddamn life. This seemed like the perfect time to start taking it back for myself.

I decided not to be a good girl this time. He’d gotten enough of that from me earlier. I did not stand up and present him with my pussy, and I did not do as I was told.

Instead, I put my hands on his shoulders and shoved him back. Surprise flashed across his face before his entire expression softened and he lay flat against the tiles on the shower floor with his hands behind his head to act as a cushion.

If he wanted me to put my pussy in his face, then I’d do just that and give him what he wanted, just not how he’d asked for it to be delivered.

I shuffled up beside him and climbed over, throwing my thigh over the side of his head and straddling his face.

“Jesus, it’s like I’ve died and gone to heaven,” he muttered under his breath as he reached up and palmed both my ass cheeks in a firm grip. His

fingers bit into my ass as he dragged me closer to his face until my exposed pussy hovered directly above his mouth.

His dark, soulful eyes met mine briefly before dropping down to my sex. “I fucking love you, Ariel Kimber. You’re the absolute perfect woman for me. Now give me that pussy and make me even happier than you already do.”

Well, when he put it like that, who was I to tell him no and deny him?

I dropped down those last few inches, and he groaned hungrily as his mouth finally made contact with my pussy. He slid his tongue from my clit to my hole and dipped it inside. I felt his groan straight through to my clit and couldn’t stop myself from grinding down and riding his face.

He squeezed my ass and encouraged me to move my hips against him. I rode him as I reached up and cupped my own breasts, pinching my nipples as he sucked on my clit.

“Yes, yes!” I moaned loudly. “Just like that. Fuck yes, Quinton. I’m going to come.”

And I did just that, detonating and shattering into a million messy wet pieces all over his tongue and face.

His hands shifted from my ass to my hips. He gripped me tightly as he shoved me back down his body. I cried out in surprise as I slammed my hands down on his chest, palms flat, to steady myself and keep from falling to the side. I landed crotch to crotch with his hard cock slipping between my soaked pussy lips.

I pressed my knees into the tile, shifted up, and reached for his cock. I moved him to my entrance and slowly sank down onto him while my gaze locked with his. Love and fierce possession burned brightly in his eyes, and there was no doubt in my mind that not only did he love me, but he was completely and totally obsessed with me in a very unhealthy way that just screamed psychotic stalker.

I fucking loved every single ounce of his crazy. I just soaked it all up and

my pussy clamped down on him like a damn vise.

I lifted up until only the tip remained inside and slammed back down onto him. The sound of our skin slapping together was drowned out by the water pouring down on us from above.

I slid one hand over to the center of his chest while I moved the other onto my overly sensitive clit. I circled it with my fingers, and I found a rhythm I liked that hit me just right.

Quinton sat up in a rush, and I slid my arm up his chest to circle his shoulders and held onto him. Our chests pressed together as he slanted his mouth down over mine and kissed me. He stole the breath from my lungs as he kissed me like a man starving for the taste of my mouth.

Quinton cupped the side of my throat as he pushed my hand aside and pinched my clit. I whimpered into his mouth as my pussy clenched down on him, and I came again. This release was long and hard, and my movements on top of him became rushed and erratic.

He moved his hand away from my clit and clamped down on my hips as he started to thrust up into me from below, taking over fucking me.

I broke the kiss and shoved my face into his neck, holding onto him and panting while he fucked me. I stuck my tongue out and licked across his salty, sweaty skin before sinking my teeth into his flesh and biting down.

“Fuck!” he snarled as his hips jerked and his fingers dug into my skin, likely leaving bruises.

I felt his cock jerk inside me as he held me in place on his lap and came with a delicious sounding moan that left me squirming on top of him.

I pressed my lips to the angry red imprints of my teeth in his skin at the base of his throat. Given the fact he liked to mark my skin at every opportunity he got, I knew he’d get off on me doing the same thing to him.

“You haven’t told me yet today that you love me,” he murmured in a sweet voice while he swept my hair back from my face and forced me to look at him. “You definitely didn’t tell me you loved me yesterday, and I’m really

starting to miss hearing the words.”

I rolled my eyes at him but gave him what he wanted anyway. “I love you, Quinton Alexander. I always have, and I always will. There. Are you happy now that I’ve given you exactly what you wanted? You should be.”

I couldn’t believe he needed to hear the words when I thought it was more than obvious that I loved his crazy ass, even when I hated him.

He was really needy all the time, and maybe I just didn’t notice until right now.

I thought most of my boyfriends were.

His eyes searched my face, for what I wasn’t sure, but he must have found it because his entire face softened and his lips turned up in a sweet little smile. I melted against him and pressed my lips to his in a gentle, slow, lingering kiss.

When we broke apart, he released me and reached to the side, retrieving a small black jewelry box I hadn’t noticed before.

My breath caught in my throat, and I was pretty sure my lungs just stopped working entirely. I knew it was coming, but in the shower, while we were naked and his semi-hard cock was still inside of me, wasn’t exactly when I’d expected it to happen.

Had he lost his damn mind?

Did he not remember what had happened yesterday *at all*?

“Quinton... I really am going to need you to think this one through before you say or do anything. We do not need a repeat of yesterday, and I’ve honestly reached my limit this week for the amount of bullshit that I’m willing to put up with. I think we should table this and come back to it next week... or maybe like next year.”

Even though I’d given what I thought had been a compelling speech, he ignored everything I said and opened the box. I stared down at the enormous diamond surrounded by smaller diamonds with a mixture of horror and awe.

Did he want my finger to fall off under the weight of that thing? I

couldn't realistically wear that, no one could. Though, maybe a trophy wife could rock it, but I'd never be one of those.

He took hold of my hand and slid the ring onto my finger without permission. My throat clogged, and I wasn't sure if I felt trapped or if I was having a heart attack, but the thought of passing out sounded very appealing at the moment.

"Listen, we both know you're not about to say no to me or you wouldn't have gotten so upset before. So we're not going to make a big deal out of it. You've got your ring, I don't ever want to see you take it off, and that's that. Also, the boys and I talked, and we decided you're getting legally tied to me because that's what I want and they were all more than okay with that. We're also going to have the ceremony sooner rather than later, and you're just going to have to come to terms with that."

The audacity of this man never ceased to amaze me.

"Now, let's talk about what I want to talk about, and you can tell me where the hell you got that sweet fucking corvette in my garage from."

Bossy.

Fucking.

*Dick.*

There were too many people in this house, which sounded absurd because the house itself was huge and there was plenty of room for everyone to have their own separate space.

The problem was nobody was using their own space, and everyone was constantly on top of each other. Or, more to the point, smothering and hovering over me as if they were afraid I would disappear and never be seen again if they blinked.

I understood why, but it was so obnoxious.

Going stir crazy was definitely a real thing, and it was becoming a reality inside of this house. I absolutely was not the only person to be feeling it.

We'd now gone almost a week of being locked inside this house. We hadn't been allowed to leave the house to go to Fortunes for the Unfortunate, and Quinton had ordered all of our groceries online and they were delivered to the house.

The only person who'd been smart enough to tell Quinton no had been Rain, and I hadn't seen him since the day he'd taken me to that tomb of a house. He'd barely texted me since then, and when he did respond, his responses were always cryptic and non-answers. I had a feeling he was up to no good and probably hunting down Marcus Cole. Not that I could blame him.



Three days into the week, Romero had disappeared and ghosted the whole lot of us. Dash was not concerned in the slightest, so I figured his dad had filled him in on his whereabouts, so I wasn't worried either. Quinton, however, was absolutely livid, and after questioning Dash several times and getting nothing out of the ginger, he'd stopped speaking to him altogether.

Damien and Julian had taken to hiding out in their bedroom, either watching movies one of them enjoyed while the other one hated or fucking each other's brains out. I thought they were the two smartest people in the house, and if Quinton would have allowed it, I would have been locked away in there with them.

Tyson had me a little worried because he'd spent the week either shadowing myself or his uncle. He was on high alert at all times, and just being around him was giving me a serious case of anxiety. The more I tried to avoid him, the more he attempted to cling to me.

Both Alexander men were attempting to drive me insane.

My salt and pepper twins spent the week acting as if they were on vacation. They spent hours every single day either out on lounge chairs working on their tans or floating around in the pool on oversized unicorn floats. Quinton had given up trying to force them back into the house on day one after they'd sprayed him with the hose.

They spent their evenings drinking beer and playing video games.

I envied them. I was also very proud of them. Every time they got into the pool without shadows in their eyes or frowns on their faces, it impressed me. I knew they had issues with water due to how their parents had died, and obviously a pool was nothing like the ocean, but I figured water was water. If it were my ass out on one of those pool floats, I would have been triggered six ways to Sunday. They were stronger than anyone gave them credit for.

Dash was living the dream in domestic bliss. He picked up after everyone and was constantly in the kitchen cooking and baking. His happiness was almost as obnoxious as the Alexanders' hovering.

Trenton and Simon were the two who surprised me the most. They actually *didn't* hover over me or even really bother me at all. They did their own thing together and separate from the rest of us, and I loved them for it. I had too much going on already, I didn't need the two of them making my problems bigger by inserting their feelings for me into my life when we were all on lockdown and forced to be together.

Jules and Damien were currently in their bedroom—no surprise there. Trenton and Simon were in the basement, and they'd somehow managed to drag Quinton down there with them. The salt and pepper twins were taking a nap and likely sleeping off their lingering hangovers from the night before. And Dash was up in our apartment, baking who the hell knew what.

Personally, I was well over sugar and frosting, but alas, I was the only one. The guys were like garbage disposals, and they ate everything like they were worried starvation was right around the corner. I didn't get it, and if I ate like that, I'd wind up in a coma.

I stood before the back sliding door with my palm pressed flat against the glass. I hadn't stepped out of the house since that day Quinton and I'd had sex in the pool.

Something at the edge of the yard, right where the tree line started, moved and caught my attention. There wasn't supposed to be anything or anyone out there. I knew the house was protected and anyone unwelcome or unsavory wouldn't make it past the barrier, and that included the pool, or the twins wouldn't have been able to use it.

But the yard beyond the pool? The forest beyond that?

I wasn't so sure, because I didn't know exactly how far out the barrier of protection extended. I hadn't been invited to take part in any of that stuff, and no one had volunteered to inform me of how it all worked.

Which was just plain old stupid if you asked me. But that was the problem, no one ever asked me.

I moved closer to the glass, almost pressing my nose up against it. It

wouldn't help me see any better, but I did it all the same like a crazy fool.

There, I saw it again. There was definitely something out there, moving through the trees. It was moving slowly, almost like it was weaving around drunkenly. I should stop calling it an it, because it was becoming more obvious by the second that it was a person out there creeping around and that was what had first caught my attention.

Someone was in our backyard, creeping through the trees. The only reason someone would stay hidden out there in the darkness was because they didn't want to be seen. Like a stalker.

There were several people it could be at this point, and I didn't think any of them were good.

I felt like I was locked in here like a bird in a cage, and I'd about had enough of that nonsense.

The person moved, their cape floating around them, and they stepped out of the shadows. They revealed themselves to me, and they did it by staring right up at me where I stood pressed against the glass.

Then he stepped back into the shadows, once again hidden by the trees.

Fuck, Finn.

His pale blond hair looked dirty, messy, and in desperate need of a wash. His black clothing had been torn and shredded.

From what I remembered of him, he was a short, skinny man, but he'd never been quite this skinny before.

Hmm...

If Finn looked this much like shit from afar, I wondered just how pretty he'd look up close. I bet he smelled bad.

Quinton had never said it to me, but I knew he'd been really upset when Finn had disappeared on us after Rebel died. I didn't get it, but I guessed they had bonded over being strapped down to a table and fucked with by a psychotic killer.

Then again, Dash and I had really bonded over what that A-hole Chucky

had done to us, so who was I to judge?

Fuck it, I knew it was stupid, but I was going to do it anyway. If he didn't want to come up to the house for whatever reason, then I'd go down there to him.

Finn wasn't my favorite person. He was weird and had questionable morals, but he meant something to Quinton and that meant he now meant something to me.

Huh. By that way of thinking, if this little adventure got me into trouble, then I could really place the blame for the whole thing right on Quinton where it would rightfully belong. I liked this idea, not that I was looking for trouble, but trouble had a way of finding me.

I didn't have shoes on, but that didn't matter to me as I slid the glass door open and stepped out onto the deck in nothing more than short shorts, a skimpy tank top, and my bare feet. There wasn't time to put on shoes, someone might question me and put a stop to my actions.

I slid the door shut behind me as silently as I could. I hated sneaking around as if I were a naughty teenager sneaking out of the house to go to a party without my parents finding out. It was ridiculous, but I did what I had to do.

I ran down the stairs so fast I almost tripped and fell. I caught myself on the handrail at the last second. That was probably going to leave a bruise for me to find later. I raced around the pool and ran straight where I'd seen Finn standing in the woods.

He was still there, waiting for me.

His blue eyes were just as vacant as they had been before, but that was honestly the only thing about him that looked the same as the last time I'd seen him.

Finn looked like absolute dog shit.

His skin was so pale he resembled a ghost. And his hair wasn't just dirty, it was greasy, and there were things in it that I didn't want to pay too much

attention to for my own sanity. And his clothes weren't just torn or ripped. In some places they looked like they had been sliced with a knife or some other sharp object.

He had dark bruises on his face. One across his jawline covered almost one whole cheek.

Someone had beaten the shit out of Finn.

I had to wonder why.

He wasn't Mr. Personality, but this was a bit much, even for him.

"Finn?" I called out softly so as not to frighten him off. He didn't look scared, but I couldn't read him on a good day, and I didn't want to push my luck with him today. "What are you doing here? Perhaps you should come inside, and we can have Julian take a look at you so he can hopefully heal some of those wounds. Come on, let's head on up to the house."

He looked up at the house and grimaced. "I'm not going in there," he hissed at me angrily. "Rebel's body was buried in there. I'll never set foot inside that house again."

Well now, wasn't that quite the dilemma to have? Honestly, I had completely forgotten about that weirdo Rebel who Quinton had essentially stolen my precious babies from. The guy had been drinking bags of blood that had been spelled by Finn. They'd had a weird sexual relationship that made zero sense to me, but to be fair, I hadn't exactly put much time into attempting to figure it out.

What Finn had said was true. Rebel was dead, and he'd been buried in the basement. That dirt sure saw a lot of action, and I was sure there was plenty that I did not know nor did I want to know about. Rebel's body had fertilized the dirt down there, and I suspected Finn was the only person saddened by the man's death.

I rubbed at my chest and the phantom ache there. Finn wasn't the only person who had someone in the dirt inside that house. I couldn't exactly blame him for not wanting to step foot inside there.

But it wasn't like he could hang out here by the woods having a little chat forever.

Ugh.

I had regrets about leaving the house and coming out here to see what the hell was up with him. I had enough of my own bullshit problems to deal with. Why was I out here again?

Quinton, that was why.

Damn that man all to hell. I looked down at the shiny, heavy ring on my finger. Okay, so maybe not damn him all the way to hell, but somewhere foul for a week or so and then he could come back.

I held up my hands placatingly as I took a step closer to him and into the woods. "Okay, Finn, you don't have to go inside if you don't want to." Total lie, but he didn't need to know that. "Let's just go sit on the deck or even at the table by the pool if you don't want to get that close. I just need you to sit down, calm down, and tell me what happened to you while Julian looks after you. Can you do that for me, Finn?"

If he didn't, I might have to use my magic on him to knock him out, and then I'd have to drag his ass back to the house. And that really did not sound like a fun time to me at all.

Finn took a tentative step toward me, and I almost sighed in relief. I did not want to stand out here with him in open view of Marcus's house. I didn't think I even wanted Marcus Cole to look at me again. I knew the guys had assured me that he had not returned to his house since that day, but I wasn't so sure that was something they could assure me of. He'd been acting shady for a while now, so who the hell knew what he was capable of?

"Ariel. I—"

"What the fuck are you doing out here, Ariel? Get back in the house before my uncle sees you and has a damn stroke."

I closed my eyes in frustration. Ah, Tyson Alexander. I'd momentarily forgotten about him hovering over me like my damn shadow. Of course he'd

seen me leave the house and had decided to follow me like the nosy best friend he was.

He must not have seen Finn before, because he swore harshly under his breath and called out in confusion. “Finn? What the hell are you doing out here in the woods behind our house? Why wouldn’t you just come to the front door like a normal person? And why do you look like shit? What the hell is going on out here?”

So it wasn’t just me who thought Finn looked like shit. Good to know.

“I’m not here to talk to you, asshole,” Finn snarled at Tyson like a rabid dog. I was surprised when foam didn’t start dribbling out of his mouth. “I’m here to speak with Ariel Kimber, not you. Why don’t you go back inside and wait for her to tell you when she has need of you like the good little boy that you are. And send your uncle out when you get in there.”

Tyson threw his head back and laughed like he’d just heard the funniest joke known to man.

Now they were both getting on my nerves. I did not come out here to witness a pissing contest or even to be involved in one.

Tyson stopped laughing and gave Finn a look so hostile even I had the desire to shrink back from him. I remembered that look from the beginning, and I didn’t much care seeing it out in play now.

“Oh, so you think you’re a funny little creep, do you now? That’s okay, you can be funny all you want. Me, I’d rather be smart, but it’s becoming obvious you’re definitely not, because if you had half a brain inside that head of yours, you’d get the fuck out of here on your own and never come back before I make you.”

Clearly Tyson didn’t have the same qualms about Finn as I did. Quinton would be so mad if he could hear the things his nephew was saying.

“Fuck you!” Finn spat out before turning around and running away. Though, that being said, he didn’t run very fast, and it was more like an awkward shuffle than it was an actual run.

“Damn it, Ty. Would it kill you to just not be an asshole sometimes?” I kicked him in the shin before I took off running after Finn.

“Ow! Why the hell did you do that? Ariel, get your ass back here right now!”

Someone was sounding an awful lot like his uncle, and I really didn't want to hear it anymore. I also didn't bother listening to him.

My feet ached as they scraped against rocks and twigs. I instantly regretted not having taken the time to put shoes on before leaving the house. I'd run through the woods without wearing shoes before, and it had messed my feet up so badly it'd taken weeks for them to heal properly, and I had scars on them that would never go away.

I didn't want to have to go through that mess again, but here I was, barefoot and in the woods once again. Thankfully Finn still wasn't moving fast, so I could take better care with where I stepped while following him.

I heard Tyson crashing through the woods right behind me, and I was sure even Finn heard his crude cursing. The idiot probably hadn't taken the time to put shoes on either. I almost felt sorry for him. Almost, but not quite. If he wasn't so nosy then he wouldn't be out here in the first place. He only had himself to blame.

It didn't take long for Finn to burst out into the clearing on the Alexander property. There was a fire pit out here where the guys always did their moon rituals. There was also a fancy tent out here that had a comfy bed in it and a whole lot of pillows and blankets. Dash had put the whole thing together for me, and it had never been taken down. We had slept in it a time or two after we had a fire in the pit. I hoped it was never taken down.

What I did not like was seeing Finn head right for my beautiful, fancy tent. He was going to sully the space, and I didn't want to think about him lying down on that bed or even touching one of the pillows. Right now, he was dirty and messy, and I didn't want him in my private space. Especially not a space that held such special memories for me.



He did not belong here. It felt wrong, like he was trespassing on our personal coven space, and I wanted to scream at him to get out. It was one thing to invite him into the house, but this was different. I felt like this crossed a line I did not think any of my men would appreciate.

“What the fuck?” Tyson growled as he grabbed for my shoulder. I shrugged him off and stepped out into the clearing. “Ariel, this is stupid. I want you to go back to the house and get the others. I’ll stay here with Finn until you get back. I promise I won’t even be mean to him.”

Yeah, I wasn’t going to be doing any of that, thank you very much. There was no way they’d let me out of the house after this, and Tyson and I both knew he was lying—he wasn’t going to be nice to Finn. At this point, I didn’t think he’d be capable of being nice to anyone but me, and even that was sketchy.

“You go back and get the others,” I snapped at him. It looked like neither of us were capable of being nice at the moment, and that was just fine with me.

I resented him following me, and I thought he deserved to know it.

He sighed, finally being smart enough to give up arguing with me. “Do you at least have your phone on you so I can call someone at the house and get them out here?”

That meant he didn’t have his phone on him, or there’d be no reason for him to need mine.

I thought of my phone, which was still plugged into its charger and sitting on my nightstand in my bedroom. I didn’t even have pockets. Where did he think I had my phone hidden on me? Besides, I was supposed to have stayed locked up in the house all day, so I hadn’t needed my phone for anything.

He swore harshly under his breath when I didn’t answer him and stalked toward the tent. He was really getting quite colorful with his swearing today. It was almost impressive. If I hadn’t grown up with Vivian and her revolving door of repulsive men, I might have even blushed at hearing the words

coming out of his mouth. But alas, those days had long since passed.

I brushed the tent flap aside and stuck my head in.

Goddamn him. Finn was not alone in there.

This... This was not what I had imagined finding when I caught up to Finn.

Not at all.

“Who the hell are these people?” Tyson demanded as he pushed me aside and stormed into the tent.

Not to be outdone, I followed him inside.

His question held merit though, because Finn was not alone, and I had never seen these people before. Clearly Ty hadn’t seen them before either.

Quinton always claimed the witch community was a tight one, and therefore they should have known most of them. I begged to differ. Just look at myself and Finn.

I thought there were more witches in hiding from the Council than they could ever dream of. With good reason. But still, I didn’t think we’d ever find out about even half of them. It made me sad because I didn’t think we should have to hide from each other in order to be safe.

There were two teenage boys curled up on the bed together. They held hands, and they didn’t take their eyes off of each other, not even when Tyson spoke.

Finn stood at the foot of the bed with his back to us, his entire focus on the bed and the boys in it.

Just who were these boys to Finn? Was this another obsession of his, like Rebel had been? If so, then I felt sorry for them, because Rebel had been used by Finn for his sexual needs, and I didn’t think Rebel had enjoyed it all that

much. Or so I'd been told.

I had never met Rebel, but I'd heard quite a bit about him. None of it had been good.

"I rescued them," Finn spoke quietly with a touch of sadness. He turned to look at me, and it took everything in me not to take a step back at the sight of his blue eyes.

They were vacant. At the same time, they seemed ageless in a way that they were ancient. There was something truly terrifying about his eyes, almost like the vacantness and agelessness meant he was capable of anything because he had no soul.

Yes, that was it exactly. They made the man look as if he were soulless, and I thought a soulless man was capable of just about anything.

I wondered if he'd think me rude if I were to ask him how old he was. A woman would find it rude, at least a woman past a certain age would. Finn was a wild card.

I kept my mouth shut and my questions that really meant nothing to myself.

Tyson had no such problem.

"Rescued them, you say? From whom? And are you sure you rescued them and didn't kidnap them? They don't exactly look as if they are happy to be here with you."

Tyson made good points, I had to give him that. They were all questions I should have focused on instead of being curious about Finn's age.

I focused on the two boys in the bed and took in every little detail that I had missed the first time I'd looked at them. One of them had dark brown, wavy hair that hung in his eyes and looked rather messy. The other one had gold hair buzzed down tight to his scalp.

I couldn't tell their heights because they were lying down and curled up, but they both appeared to be rather underfed and malnourished.

Their clothes were practically worn rags that hung off their bodies, and I

realized as the scent hit me that they reeked of filth and shit.

I was never going to be able to have sex on that bed again. Hell, maybe we'd have to burn the whole tent down just to be rid of that smell. What a damn shame. Dash was going to be so disappointed.

There were visible bruises on both of them. On their necks. Around their wrists. Along the edge of one's jaw. One had a swollen, black eye. I wondered how many bruises the rags they wore as clothing were hiding and figured maybe I didn't really want to know. Sometimes ignorance was bliss, and I really did not need one more person to want to take up for.

I wanted them to get out of there. I wanted Finn to take them back to wherever it was that he'd gotten them from. Didn't he have his own home to take them back to? They could go there.

It wasn't like me to be so heartless, and I regretted the thoughts almost immediately after having them. I'd been covered in bruises for a good portion of my life, and I hadn't deserved to be on the receiving end of a single one of them.

"Finn?" Tyson called out hesitantly.

Why had neither of the boys spoken yet? Why hadn't they so much as twitched or blinked? I knew they were breathing because I could see the gentle rise and fall of their chests.

Something was very wrong here, and I was finally starting to feel very uneasy about this whole thing.

Something bad was going to happen, I could feel it in my bones. It was like something I couldn't quite touch or feel had fallen over me, and the air was almost harder to breathe.

Finn's presence was a bad omen.

I turned on Tyson and snapped my fingers at him, cutting off whatever he was about to say. He could chastise me for my rudeness later when I didn't feel like maybe we were both standing at death's door, two seconds away from knocking just to say hello.

“Go back to the house now. Get the others. Tell them something horrible is about to go down. Have someone phone Rain and Romero and get them back here, because I have a heavy feeling we’re going to need all of them here for this.”

He gaped at me, and I fought against the urge to yell at him. “Go,” I urged. “Go now, dammit.”

“Ariel—”

Finn turned his back on the bed. He cocked his head eerily to the side and his eyes became unfocused. “She’s right. Can’t you feel that? So heavy, so foreboding. Best to get help before it’s too late. For all of us.”

I most certainly did not like the way any of that sounded. It came off way worse when someone else said what I was feeling.

By the look on Tyson’s face, he didn’t much like it either. He eyed me up and down before nodding briefly and running out of the tent.

I knew I’d told him to leave, but I couldn’t honestly believe that he’d actually left me here with Finn, two strangers, and a really bad feeling in my gut. There’d been a time where he would have argued with me and never done what he was told.

Boy, were times changing around here or what?

“What’s going on, Finn?” I asked in a rush. I was getting tired of having to ask him a version of that question. I felt like time was not on our side, and I needed to know what was coming our way. I felt like Finn was the reason for it. “Why are you here and what have you brought with you?”

His silence was really starting to wear on my nerves, and my skin was starting to itch with anticipation. I should have been afraid, but I was not. I was ready to accept my fate and go down fighting if need be.

“I’m afraid, Ariel Kimber, that I might have brought the Council to your doorstep. Not on purpose, I swear, but I’m a fool and have never been able to help myself.”

If the Council showed up here, I would not place the blame for that on

Finn's too thin shoulders. My time holding them off had been running short, and I knew they'd make their move on me sooner rather than later. If today was that day, then so be it. I was tired of waiting for them to show up and try to kidnap me all the time.

Fuck it.

Fuck them.

Bring it on.

I'd either win or I'd die trying.

Still, I crossed my arms and glared at Finn. I might not have blamed him at the moment, but that didn't mean I wanted him to think I liked him. I certainly did not.

Finn sighed as he sat down on the edge of the bed, not touching either of the boys. "After Rebel died, I think I went a little bit... mad. I don't know, I don't remember everything. Things got a bit hazy for a few days or weeks. I have no idea how much time has passed since then."

Sounded to me like he was a psycho who'd lost his damn mind. Maybe I should be scared of him. I still wasn't. I didn't think he'd purposely hurt me. Not in a physical way anyway. I didn't think he had that in him.

"I started stalking the fat man, Adrian, and watching the motel. They have all these boys there. I didn't understand it. Where were they coming from? Why were they there? I had to know. You see, Ariel Kimber, I was once a boy, and unfortunately, I had my very own interactions with the Council. Adrian specifically."

His words left a sour taste in my mouth and a sickness in my gut. Nothing good ever came with the mention of meeting Adrian.

Then again, Finn was an absolute mystery to all of us and everything he said could be a lie. I would reserve judgment until it was over.

"He likes girls, boys, anything innocent and with magic."

I swallowed thickly. He liked them not so innocent as well. He liked a lot of things that were very distasteful.

“When I was little, I had three sisters. It was very unheard of for a coven, because each and every single one of them showed signs of having magic before they were even close to becoming teenagers. The Council became intrigued because my parents were stupid enough not to try and hide them. But when they came for my sisters, they didn’t want to leave home, and my parents weren’t ready to let them go just yet. They fought, and the Council killed everyone but the children. You don’t even want to know the horrors that were forced upon us when they brought us back to the place they were calling home at the time.”

I didn’t want to hear any more of this, and I really didn’t think we had the time for him to share all his family history with me.

I got it, I really did. He’d been beaten, abused, and probably raped by the Council. As had all of his sisters. All this after watching their entire coven and members of their family being slaughtered.

I even understood why he’d taken the boys with him now. They were probably being beaten, abused, and raped by the Council. But they weren’t alone in their misery, because the Council had a whole bunch of orphaned boys they were supposed to be parenting.

What made these two special, I did not know.

Finn had stolen Council property. For that was what these boys were to them—property. They would not stand for this. Not after Isobel and then Romero.

They kept losing people, and it made them look weak.

I heard something outside of the tent, the snapping of a twig and the crunching of shoes as someone approached. Finn was too lost in telling me all the horrors of his memories to have noticed. He kept prattling on as if he didn’t have any sense whatsoever.

The boys on the bed had closed their eyes, and I had no idea if they were sleeping or if they were simply trying to shut Finn and his bullshit out. I honestly couldn’t find fault in either strategy.



I didn't want to tell Finn to shut his mouth because I didn't want to alert whoever was outside that I was aware of their presence. I figured if it were any of my men, they would have let me know so as not to frighten me.

The two boys on the bed looked peaceful with their eyes closed and their bruises on display.

I did not know them, obviously, but at that moment, I felt oddly protective of them. Not Finn though, not even with the wretched words still spilling past his lips.

I left the tent where it absolutely was not safe and stepped out to face the unknown in an attempt to keep the three of them out of harm's way.

I was all kinds of a sucker.

I rounded the tent and came up short.

Marcus Cole stood before me. He was a handsome older man who always dressed nicely and took great care of his body in order to stay fit. I thought he worked out so much before to help balance him out because he had kept himself and his magic separated for so long.

This was a man I had respected, possibly even loved at one point in time, and he still meant a great deal to me even though I was so upset with him.

He'd changed though, but I couldn't quite pinpoint exactly when that change had taken place.

Had it been when Vivian had died?

Had it been when I'd moved out or when his brother died?

Had it been Rain permanently coming back into my life that set something off in him?

The list went on and on, and it could have been a great many things that started the change. Whatever it was, I was fairly certain it didn't even really matter at this point, because there was no taking it back.

He'd gotten shady, and then with that thing in the pool, he'd finally turned creepy.

Out of the two of us, he was the one who really seemed to be fitting into

his role as a Council member far better than I ever could, that was for damn sure.

“Ariel, I need you to come with me. It’s too dangerous for you here now.”

Was it too dangerous here for me now because he was here, standing so close to me?

“Why are you here, Marcus? Quinton has been looking for you for a while now, but you’ve been hiding. Why is that?” I asked suspiciously.

I failed to mention it was more than just Quinton who’d been looking for him. He was a smart man, so I was sure I didn’t need to tell him any of that. I was certain he had a way of watching us. Maybe he even had cameras set up around the outside of his house. At this point, I would put nothing past him.

When you stopped believing in the best of someone, you opened your eyes to the worst of what they were capable of. It made me feel like I should just go into every relationship thinking there was nothing good in any person, and then I’d never find myself disappointed when they proved me right.

It felt like Tyson had been gone for far too long. He should have been back by now. Or someone should have shown up. Something had to be wrong at the house, and that thought made me want to say *fuck this* and run right back there to make sure they were all alright, but I refused to run away from this man.

If I ran away from him, would I ever have a chance to confront him again? Would I ever get another chance to look him in the face and ask him why?

“You don’t belong here anymore,” he said as he reached out to grab my arm. I shook off his hold and sidestepped out of his reach.

What the hell did that mean? If I didn’t belong here, then where else was I supposed to go?

“Do not touch me,” I hissed at him. “What makes you think you have the right to put your hands on me in any way whatsoever? You’ve changed, Marcus, and I don’t much care for the difference in you.”

He sneered at me, and something inside my chest shattered and broke. He'd never looked at me in such a horrible way before, and I hated it. What had I ever done to him to make him look at me in such a way?

"You don't like my behavior?" He laughed humorlessly. "How about the difference in you? You went from being this sweet, innocent girl to this wild whore who's now fucking that brat, Quinton, out in the open for anyone and everyone to see. It's like you've lost all shame and become exactly like your mother. And don't even get me started on your behavior toward your bodyguards. How long have you been fucking them too?"

Wow, I couldn't believe he'd really gone there.

I hadn't worried about being slut shamed due to my relationships in a very long time, and I'd never once expected it to come from him of all people.

Though, stupidly, the only words I could get out were, "Vivian was not my mother. You know this."

It felt so wrong to allow anyone to get away with calling her my mother. It was disrespectful to my actual mother. I wasn't even comfortable calling Vivian my aunt, which, by blood, she actually was.

"Could have fooled me. You two turned out to be one and the same. For someone who claims Vivian wasn't their mother, you sure act just like her. Like mother like daughter."

How could he say these horrible, hateful words to me? Did he not know me at all?

I thought I was going to be sick, but somehow I managed to choke down the bile rising up my throat.

I absolutely refused to shed even one single tear, though I wanted to cry an entire river. I would not. I had cried far too many tears as of late. I refused to shed any more. Certainly not in front of this man who was speaking such vile words about me and saying them right to my face.

"What's happened to you, Marcus?" I whispered in a choked voice. I

pressed my palm flat over my chest, my heart attempting to race right out of it. “You used to be such a nice, kind man. I miss that man. I want him back.”

Maybe that last part was a lie, maybe I didn’t want that man back. There were a lot of things you couldn’t come back from, and I felt like he was very close to crossing over that line, if he hadn’t already.

But I really did miss him. Rain would hate it if he ever heard me say that.

Marcus, however, didn’t seem to care either way. He was entirely unaffected by my words. It was like he hadn’t even heard me speak in the first place. He was so lost in his head and the bullshit filling it up that I didn’t even know if he really saw me standing in front of him anymore.

What the hell was the matter with him? I was getting tired of asking myself that question and coming up empty handed.

He shook his head. “None of this matters. Adrian was right. You’re better than acting like the common whore with that coven that thought they could claim you before you even had the chance to meet anyone else and really choose for yourself. Adrian is convinced you need a cleansing of your mind to make this better. Once your mind has been cleansed and you’re free of the filth clogging you up, he said that as a Council member, you will be free to pick and choose your very own harem.”

If he kept talking, I was for sure going to puke. Since when did Marcus believe anything that came out of Adrian’s mouth? Had he forgotten what had happened to his own damn beloved sister? She might have killed herself, but it was essentially the Council’s doing. They were responsible.

Marcus believed that in the very depth of his soul, and he didn’t trust the Council and hated Adrian. Or at least he used to.

I wondered what this cleansing was that he spoke of and thought maybe whatever it was, Adrian had done it to Marcus.

There had to be an explanation behind his change in behavior. I refused to believe he’d been an asshole all this time and I had somehow been oblivious to it. I had better instincts than that.

“You’ll have the pick of the litter. People will come out from every coven without a female to line up for the chance to be a consort to you. I believe that, given who you are, some of them with females already will come for you as well. It’s a fresh start. One you very much need, I think.”

Had he lost his damn mind? That sounded terrible to me. And, more importantly, who wanted the type of man who’d leave his coven and his woman when they were supposed to be precious just for the chance to be with the only female on the Council?

Not me. No fucking thank you.

None of my men would ever do anything of the like to me. Never. Not fucking ever.

I was done speaking to Marcus Cole. I was done with this whole fucking thing, and I’d already wasted far too much time on it tonight.

Where the fuck were my men and my bodyguards?

And what the hell kind of coward was Finn to still be hiding out in the tent instead of out here, having my back?

He was really starting to piss me off too. When he did finally manage to drag his pathetic self out of my tent, I was going to kick his pasty ass. And if those two boys tried to stop me, I’d hand them their asses as well, their ages be damned.

“You should go, Marcus,” I informed him. “My coven will be here soon. They already have a problem with you because you’ve been lying and creeping around. If they catch you out here spouting the horrendous bullshit coming out of your mouth, then there will be nothing I can do to save you. Go. Run far away. Don’t look back, and whatever you do, don’t you ever come back here. I won’t be able to save you, and after a while, I’m not sure I’ll even want to.”

I was being generous when I had no right to be. After today and the things he’d said, the things he’d basically promised me, there was no way Rain would ever stop looking for him. Rain wouldn’t stop hunting the

madman until the day one of them died. And he probably would not be the only one. They'd all likely take turns.

Marcus smirked at me, looking cold and smug all at the same time. A sense of dread trickled down my spine.

"No one's coming for you. They are a little busy at the moment. And, if you're waiting on that loner freak in the tent to come out, I wouldn't hold my breath if I were you. The tent's been spelled, and he hasn't even noticed you've left him yet. It'll wear off in about an hour, and by then, it won't matter, because you and I will be far away from this place by then."

My mouth dropped open, and I gaped at him like a moron. When I first met him, he didn't touch his magic. Now I knew he was a witch, but it was almost like I forgot sometimes that he was powerful and capable of doing oh so much with his magic.

I could be so stupid at times, this being one of them for sure.

At least he hadn't said something bad was going to happen to Finn. Now that I knew why he hadn't left the tent, I didn't want any harm to come to him. Or those boys.

As much as I wanted to panic over what he'd said about my coven, I was trying very hard not to think about it. Now was not the time to break down, and they were more than capable of taking care of themselves. I couldn't let myself forget that. They weren't going to just roll over and take it. They'd be fighting to get to me, and they would never stop until we were safely together again.

"I'm not going anywhere with you," I spat at him. "You've got to be fucking delusional if you think I'm going to want to be anywhere near you ever again. And you better get on your damn knees and pray to whatever you hold holy that nothing happens to a single member of my coven, or I will personally destroy you myself. I swear I will."

I wasn't a violent person, and I certainly didn't go around threatening people on the fly, but I'd make an exception for this man.

At this point, any love or affection I'd once had for him had died a quick death tonight. He could call me a whore all he wanted to, I could get over that, but to fuck with my family?

That shit was the ultimate kiss of death.

We were done, and there would never be any coming back from this.

He laughed like he thought I'd just said something hilarious. I hated being laughed at. Especially when I wasn't trying to be funny.

"You think you're so darn smart, little girl. I'm here to tell you you're not, and I'm not giving you a choice. You'll do as you're told, or you'll be punished."

He had to be joking, because if he was serious, then he'd more than completely lost his mind. A man who'd lost his mind could be a scary thing, because they were unpredictable and capable of anything.

Marcus lunged toward me with his arms outstretched, ready to grab me. I sidestepped him and tried to run. I shot past him with no destination in mind, just the desire and need to get as far away from him as possible.

I didn't make it far before there was a horrible pain in my scalp and I was wrenched backwards by my hair. I screamed as I reached back to try and pry his fingers from my hair, but his grip was unyielding and he refused to let go.

I could run no more, or my hair would be ripped right out of my scalp.

Even with my fingers attempting to pry his grip off of me, and my fingernails biting and tearing into his skin, he did not let go.

I had a flashback to my early teenage years, when one of Vivian's visitors got a little too handsy with me and didn't much care for the word no. His name had been Mitch. He'd worn glasses, had a gold tooth, and had been very obese. He'd had thick, fat fingers that had easily weaved their way through my strands of hair.

I'd had to lock myself in the bathroom to escape him, and because he'd had a hold of my hair, a huge chunk of it had been on the other side of the door, and I hadn't been able to move away from the door until he'd gotten

bored with me and left. I thought maybe that time had been worse because every time he'd yank my hair, my head had been slammed into the door.

I blinked away the past and came back into myself. I was no longer a child, and I was absolutely no longer defenseless.

Marcus Cole was just like every other asshole Vivian had ever brought home before. The only difference was we'd moved into his home with him instead of the other way around.

Vivian's assholes didn't get to scare me anymore. And they certainly didn't get to threaten and abuse me.

Not anymore.

Not while I was still breathing.

Not ever again.

Fuck Vivian Kimber and her shitty taste in men.

And fuck Marcus Cole for finally fitting in with the rest of the men in that category.

"Get your hands *the fuck* off of me," I snarled as I dug my heels into the dirt and grass to keep him from dragging me any farther.

In my panic, I reached out with my magic for anything I could find. It blew out of me, searching, seeking, not stopping until it found something useful to me.

Roots and weeds exploded up out of the grass and dirt at our feet. They kept growing taller and thicker as they wrapped around Marcus's body, starting with his ankles and winding their way upwards.

"You stupid little girl," he hissed as he finally let go of my hair. "I didn't want to have to hurt you, but now you've forced me into this. Remember that when you wake up later with blame on you and you've only got yourself to blame." His voice was strained, and at the end of his stupid little speech, he was wheezing.

How dare he try to blame me for this situation.

Fingers wrapped around my throat from behind. Just a touch, barely



there, and not with enough pressure to actually harm me or block my airway, but my airway was suddenly blocked and I couldn't breathe.

I opened my mouth to suck in as much oxygen as I could possibly get inside me, but my throat was closed and the air turned to ash on my tongue.

I clawed at his hands on my throat as I tried to twist away from him with no use. Except for my hands, my body refused to move. Black spots danced in my vision as my lungs burned, and my head felt like it was going to explode.

I lost hold of my magic. The weeds and roots receded back into the ground, leaving the dirt and grass a shredded mess. Marcus was no longer restrained by my magic. He was now able to move freely while I was the one no longer able to move.

He wrapped his arms around me, one around my chest and one around my middle, finally releasing his touch on the front of my throat. He pulled my body back into him until my back was pressed up against his chest. Even though hands were no longer anywhere near my throat, I still could not breathe.

The motherfucker was killing me with his magic, and I'd let my panic take over and rob me of the ability to put my magic to good use.

It had never failed me before now, and honestly, I wasn't going to see it as having failed me. Oh no, that wasn't my magic, that was all on me.

"Just remember," he whispered with his lips brushing the shell of my ear, "when you wake up next, this is all on you. We could have gone easy, but you refused to do things the easy way."

He reached up and petted some of my sweaty hair out of my face. "Don't you worry, sweetheart, I'm going to get you cleansed and get you back to your old self in no time. You'll be just like that shy, sweet girl that you were when you first arrived here. You'll be right as rain in no time."

Rain...

I really wished he wouldn't have said that.

Rain would be devastated by this. And enraged.

“Close your eyes, my sweet girl, and sleep,” he crooned softly in my ear, sounding like a lover.

It disgusted me.

It also scared the shit out of me.

Against my will, my eyelids grew heavy and began to slowly slide closed. One last burst of magic blew out of me, and I felt the heat scorch my toes.

My mouth was already open, but no sound came out as I screamed. The smell of my burning flesh and smoke immediately assaulted my nose, and I forced my eyes to open fully for a second before they closed and were too heavy to open again.

I might have passed out, but I did it with the image of the grass in the clearing on fire, the whole thing ablaze, in my mind. Including my poor little toes.

I just hoped in my panic and rage I didn't set the tent on fire. Poor Finn's hour was nowhere near being up, and I really didn't want to be the reason he and those boys burned to death.

Fuck the tent, that could be replaced.

Finn and those boys could not.

My head was absolutely killing me. It throbbed with a pain so great it felt as if I had been bashed in the head with a baseball bat. Either that or this was the worst hangover known to man.

Since I wasn't a regular drinker, I only knew this because I'd seen it firsthand by watching that cow Vivian and her many men the day after they partied half the night.

Fucking Vivian again. There she went, trying to invade my thoughts when I never wanted anything to do with her ever again. I didn't even want to think about her anymore. It made me feel guilty, as if I were betraying Rain just by thinking her name.

No, not Rain.

My mother.

Fuck, I was a horrible person because I didn't want to think about her either. I didn't ever want to think about her.

My eyes snapped open, my vision blurry and nothing like what I was used to seeing when I first opened my eyes in the morning.

I wasn't in my room, and there was no dreamcatcher hanging above my head. I wasn't in the Alexander big house at all.

I wasn't in any house.

The rich dirt of the earth surrounded me.

What in the actual fuck?

How had I gotten here? Wherever here was...

Had I taken up sleep walking and never noticed it before now, because I'd somehow always managed to find my way back into my bed? That seemed insane.

Was I going crazy? I sure felt like it.

So where the hell was I, and how the hell did I get here? I didn't remember falling asleep. I didn't remember much of anything happening. I thought I'd talked to Finn, but that seemed impossible because none of us had seen him since he'd disappeared after Rebel had been murdered. He'd ghosted us and fucked with Quinton's head.

Finn had no reason to be anywhere near the house. We'd been on lockdown for a while now, and it'd felt like forever since I'd left the house. So what the hell had happened to me?

Why couldn't I remember?

Just what the fuck was wrong with me? Did I have a head injury?

I refused to allow panic to set in. Panic would help nothing, certainly not me. When I panicked, my magic went a little crazy and I lost control of it, almost as if it had a mind of its own.

The bare mattress I lay on was covered in dark stains and didn't smell very inviting. It was actually rather repugnant and made my nose twitch in disgust. There were holes in the fabric, and the blue color had long since worn and faded to a blue so light it appeared to be streaked white in places. I'd bet it was the sun that had bleached out the color.

The mattress was in the center of a very deep, very wide hole in the ground—a hole that was the size of a very large swimming pool.

There wasn't anything else in the hole except for me, the mattress, and chains that were hooked to all four of my limbs and somehow connected to the ground by stakes that were buried deep in the ground at each corner of the mattress.

And there were strange markings in the dirt that I had never seen before, but I knew they each had a significant meaning.

Honestly, I was still wondering why the Council had asked me to join them when I didn't know half the shit I would have if I had grown up like a normal witch and been able to learn the same things the rest of the other young little witches did.

Rain had been teaching me. Quinton had been teaching me. Still, I had no idea what these symbols and markings meant. I had a feeling that did not bode well for me or my future.

It also made me happy that Dash and I had kept our link private. The Council did not know about it.

It wasn't like a GPS tracker, and it wasn't like he'd just automatically know my whereabouts. But he could follow the link, and it would lead him directly to me. He had to be the person to do it, and I had to make sure the link was open for him to be able to follow it.

Marcus's face flashed in my memory, and I reached up to touch the back of my head. My scalp hurt and felt tender to the touch.

He'd pulled my hair like a damn crazy man.

He had attacked me.

Now I remembered everything.

At least he'd left me with my clothes on. Small mercies, but I'd take anything at this point.

But, seriously, where the hell was I? And how long had I been out of it for? Probably a good while for someone to move me, dump me here, and chain my ass up.

And Finn.

Jesus, Finn and those boys. I'd set the whole clearing on fire. I'd never forgive myself if I had accidentally hurt the three of them.

I wanted to cry, but I refused to allow myself the luxury. Feeling sorry for myself wasn't going to get me anywhere right now. I needed to get my head

on straight if I wanted to get out of here in one piece.

But first I had to figure out how to get out of these chains.

I grabbed hold of the one attached to my left wrist and yanked as hard as I could on it. It rattled loudly and was heavier than it looked like it should be. I yanked and yanked on that sucker, putting all my strength into it.

The stake remained in the ground, unmoving, and all the chain did was rattle. I dropped the chain and stared down at my hands. They were covered in scars from bleeding myself, but they weren't strong enough to break these chains.

I closed my eyes and focused on the flames in my mind. Or, at least, I tried to. Every time I tried to touch it, it went out.

My hands began to shake, and sweat beaded on my forehead as I struggled to harness my magic. It never came to me. Every time I touched it, it faded away to nothing but a little puff of smoke.

True fear began to set in and take over.

This could not be happening to me. No, I refused to accept that this was happening to me.

I had always banked on the fact that my magic would be there with me no matter what, that it'd never fail me. And now here I sat, chained up on a dirty mattress, with my magic abandoning me and leaving me high and dry.

Was I going to die here in a hole in the ground chained up like a rabid dog?

No, I refused to believe that.

The pretty ring on my finger glittered in the moonlight. I wasn't just a sad little girl anymore, all alone in the world. I had loved ones now, people whose hearts would break if I were to die. I couldn't let that happen.

Why the hell was I even here?

What had Marcus said I'd needed? My head was still a bit fuzzy.

A cleansing.

How the hell was I supposed to get clean in a dirt hole in the ground

when I hadn't even been dirty in the first place?

"Trouble, dear?" a voice I knew all too well called out, and a thrill of fear shot down my spine.

I looked up and was glad I hadn't allowed myself to cry earlier, because I did not want this man to see the trail of tears on my face. Adrian wasn't the kind of man you wanted to show weakness in front of. He'd use whatever he could as a means to destroy me.

I didn't want to give him any more ammunition, he already had plenty to use against me.

His bald head was shiny, and I couldn't tell if he was simply sweaty or if he greased that sucker up for some insane reason. He had so many gold hoops hanging from his ears, he put my many studs to shame. His wrists were covered heavily in gold bangles, and some of them glittered as if they had diamonds set in them.

Someone put on all his good jewelry just to come out here and see little ole me. If he was any other man, I might even be flattered.

He had on black, floaty pants that looked like silk, and a silk kimono-like top that was pure white and entirely open in the front, exposing his big, rounded belly.

He had gold hoops through both his nipples, and there was a wicked-looking scar close to his belly button, just slightly to the right and below it. I wasn't surprised to see it. When you lived your life acting like a complete and total motherfucker, sometimes people treated you like one.

He looked down on me with a happy, childlike smile on his face, like I'd just made all of his dreams come true.

Fuck my life.

I didn't want to play this game with him.

Marcus Cole wasn't just an asshole of epic proportions, he was also a fucking traitor. A traitor who knew a whole lot about my life that I didn't want the Council to know about. I had to assume Adrian now knew about

everything.

About Rain.

Isobel.

Baxter.

Romero Flynn.

Though that one he'd learned about all on his own. I was sure if Marcus told him about the rest, there was really no reason to leave Romero's name out of things.

Goddamn it.

No one was safe. All because I placed trust in the wrong man. A man who my father loathed and had never once trusted.

Marcus was right, I was a stupid little girl.

Adrian cocked his head to the side as he studied me like I was a bird in a cage he found absolutely fascinating. Appropriate, given I was in chains.

I smiled my sweet, fake as fuck smile at him. "Why don't you be a friend, Adrian, and come on down here and unchain me?" I suggested as I raised my hands in front of me and shook them.

If he came down here right now, I'd strangle him to death with these chains. And I'd do it without remorse.

He tsked at me as he crouched down at the edge of the hole. "Do not worry, my dear. You will be unchained. In time. That's the problem with you children these days, you're all far too impatient. You're only interested in instant gratification. Slow down, child. All good things come to those who wait."

I laughed humorlessly. Whatever he had planned, it was going to be very painful for me, I just knew it. That was why I was chained up and stripped of my magic. Adrian didn't like a woman who could fight back. Now I thought I understood those markings all around me—they blocked me from using my magic and who knew what else.

I always joked about how pain was my old friend, and now I felt stupid



for it. We weren't friends, but I was fairly certain I was about to be reacquainted with a great dose of it.

"Why don't you come on down here, Adrian? We can talk about this like the old friends that we are. Having to look up at you like this is going to give me a kink in my neck. Come on now." I patted a stain on the mattress and inwardly cringed. "You know you've missed me and want to give me a hug."

My skin crawled at the thought of him touching me, but if it got him close enough for me to nail him in the face with one of these chains, then I'd risk it.

Adrian was smarter than he looked, and he was having none of it.

"Now, child, I may be getting old, but I'm definitely not stupid."

What did being old have to do with anything? And I didn't actually think he was that old, but I never once thought of him as stupid. He was the opposite of stupid.

Shadows moved around him, more people arriving. They were dressed in black robes with their hoods pulled up. Their identities were hidden from me, probably on purpose. There were eight of them in total, and my gut told me one of them was Marcus Cole. He started this. If he didn't stick around to watch how things played out, then he truly was the coward I now thought him to be.

"Boys," Adrian called out while attempting to stare me down with that stupid fucking childlike smile on his face. "Bring over the hoses and lower them down like the good boys you are. Yes, that's right, just like that. Now back up and turn the water on. Yes, very good."

Water?

Hoses?

I watched with wide eyes and a heart that threatened to beat right out of my chest as several young boys who weren't dressed in dark robes approached the hole all around me. Some of them were as young as nine. The oldest looked to be about sixteen.

Adrian was definitely a total motherfucker for using these young boys

like this. I bet if I were to ask them, each and every single one of them would tell me they were now orphans and their families had died in a really horrible way. Then, in swooped the Council, ready to take care of them whether they liked it or not.

I didn't want to think it because it was one more horrific act I didn't want them to be capable of, but I was starting to believe that maybe even the Council had something to do with those families' deaths in the first place. They were likely behind the whole thing.

If I made it out of this alive, I was going to have Rain do some digging. I was also willing to bet that at least one member of the family or coven had taken issue with the Council or the other way around before they'd been slaughtered. One child had been left alive because the Council needed soldiers, and angry young boys with no one in this world who loved them were easy to mold into whatever the Council needed them to be.

They lowered hoses down into the hole, six of them in total. They weren't normal hoses though. They were about four times larger in width and would most certainly fill the hole up with water much faster than a normal-sized hose.

Holy fuck. I was going to drown down here in this hole, chained up just like Isobel had been in hers when it was flooded with water.

Rain was going to be so devastated.

They were all dead men, they just didn't know it yet.

That thought didn't bring me as much comfort as I thought it would when the water turned on and the hoses started spewing it out.

I really wanted to ask Adrian why he was doing this, but my pride won out and my mouth refused to ask him any questions. Pride was a goddamn stupid thing. I should have been asking questions. I should have been begging for Adrian to turn the water off.

It was almost like my voice had been robbed from me right along with my magic.

I wanted to kill Adrian, and I now hated Marcus Cole. The person I hated the most was myself, though, because at the end of the day, this was a situation of my own making. If I had never tangled with the Council to begin with, then I wouldn't have found myself in this unfortunate situation.

Then Dash wouldn't have his father back, and there was no undoing that for me. I couldn't even think of it. Rain meant the world to me, and I'd been robbed of him for so long I hadn't even remembered who he was when I first saw him again. Dash had also been robbed of his father. It was something we had in common even though our situations were very different.

I didn't regret bringing Romero back into Dash's life, and I never would.

I eyed the water level rising in my dirt hole.

Consequences be damned.

At least someone I loved got some form of happiness out of the choices I'd made.

"I'm impressed with you, child," Adrian called down to me. "You haven't once cried or even asked me to turn the water off. Everyone always begs. Given enough time and a few more feet of water, I'm sure you'll be begging too. The sound will be so sweet to my ears. I can't wait."

Yeah, that wasn't going to happen. I decided right then and there I wouldn't beg that man for anything, even if my lungs were filling up with water.

Fuck that and fuck him.

I tried to stand up. My chains rattled, and I was only able to rise up to my knees. I eyed the hole I was in and knew if I were able to stand, it would still be a good four feet taller than me.

The water rose quicker than I thought it would. It didn't take long for the dirty mattress to be submerged and for the ice-cold water to touch my knees. It was so cold it burned my skin everywhere it touched.

I shivered uncontrollably as the water continued to rise up to mid-thigh. Oh Jesus, it was so cold. Freezing really.

There was a really big part of me that had thought they wanted me to survive this, and now, as the water rose even higher, I wasn't so sure. If the water had been warm, maybe. No one could survive this dirt filled ice bath.

Julian had forced me to watch *Titanic* with him so many times I knew what it looked like when people went into the frozen water. I'd end up just like one of those human bobsers if I spent enough time in this stupid fucking hole.

No one above me spoke. They all just watched me in silence, likely waiting for me to open my mouth and start begging for this to end.

They'd be waiting until I died and then way longer. That longer being forever.

The water was up just past my hips, and still no one had spoken. They all stood there with their hoods hiding their true identities while they watched me shake uncontrollably in silence.

I might have even peed in the water and hoped nobody else noticed it. It wasn't like I could ask them to unchain me so I could make a trip to the bathroom. Thank goodness I didn't have to poop. That would have been a whole new horror show to contend with. One I didn't want.

My teeth chattered. My body shook. My feet and most of my legs stung as if I'd been prodded with sharp needles. I hoped they'd go entirely numb soon so I would no longer have to feel any kind of pain. Still, I refused to meet Adrian's sharp gaze, but I held my head up proudly, refusing to back down even though I didn't have a leg to stand on.

"I'm going to need you to tell us all about your sins, dear," Adrian said as he leaned over the edge of the hole, almost dangerously so. "Tell us about all the horrible things you've done so that we can help you wash them away. Come now, Ariel Kimber, tell us about your first real sin in this life. We're all dying to hear about it."

Fuck him.

I wasn't going to tell him anything about the horrors of my life or the

things I had once done. I found him demanding that I do so to be quite laughable. Did this fat, bald man really think I'd do what he told me to without putting up a fight? He didn't know me very well if that was what he thought was going to happen here.

If I had sins, which I didn't think I had all that many, they weren't worth sharing, and they certainly weren't worthy of all this. Adrian should be the one down here in chains confessing his sins. I'd bet he had a great many sins to confess to, far more than I had.

"Speak, child," Adrian commanded, and I still kept my mouth shut.

He didn't really want me to speak anyway, he just didn't know it. He wouldn't like the things that would come pouring out of my mouth if I were to open it.

"You think you're better than the rest of us, but you're not. I'd be willing to bet everything that you've got questionable morals hiding under all that do-gooding bullshit you put on for the rest of the world to see. Show us. We're dying for you to finally remove the mask and show us the *real* Ariel Kimber."

If I did not die in this hole tonight, I was going to murder him with my bare hands, I swore it so.

Finally, I unhinged my jaw and spoke. "How about I make a deal with you? I'll tell you about the real Ariel when you tell me about the real Adrian. We can compare notes, but we both know yours are way worse than mine. I don't think I'm better than you, Adrian. I know it. We both do. Hell, everyone standing up there with you knows it's the truth. You're just too stupid and full of yourself to see the truth right before your eyes."

That might have been pushing it, but I didn't care. What did I really have to lose at this point?

I would more than likely die here tonight. I wasn't afraid. I was simply sad for my loved ones who would be caused so much pain by this night.

"Brave words for a naughty girl. You'll learn your lesson, and then we'll

talk again.”

I shook my head as I looked at the water in despair. Conversing with him got me nowhere, I needed to remember that and not speak to him again in a moment of weakness.

I felt a tug on the bond I shared with Dash, seeking, questioning. It took a lot for me not to cry out in relief. Dash was okay, and he was coming for me. I just hoped the rest of them were the same.

The fact that Marcus still hadn't revealed himself to be present to bear witness to this shit show he created was really starting to bother me. Not only was he a coward, but he had no balls. If you were going to start something, then you damn sure ought to be able to see it finished. How dare he start this then not stand up there with the rest of these assholes and watch me go through this torture?

More shadows appeared around the opening of the hole. More young, impressionable boys here to watch the show, and still no Marcus Cole.

Was this supposed to be Adrian's way of teaching them how to deal with the female witches of the world? Whatever the hell happened to being precious and something to covet and protect?

The Council was a goddamn joke and full of hypocrites. I hated every single one of them, but I hated Adrian the most. He seemed to get the most joy out of everyone else's heartache.

I looked from one shadowed face to the next, taking in the smaller forms and focusing on them.

“How many of you boys has he raped so far?” I called out to them, but my raspy voice came out barely above a whisper. There was a stillness to them that let me know they were listening. They'd heard me.

“How many of you had their families slaughtered before being brought to this place? Do you ever wonder why that happened to them, to you? Has it ever crossed your mind, just a shadow of a doubt, that perhaps the oh so powerful Council might have had something to do with their deaths? Ask

yourselves who benefited from their deaths, because it certainly wasn't you. Now the Council has control over you, and they basically own your lives. Do you really want to spend the rest of your lives being someone else's bitch and taking Adrian's cock whenever he wants to feed it to you? There's a better life out there waiting for you to seize it, I promise you. You just have to be brave enough to fight for it."

"Turn up the water," Adrian snarled. "I've grown tired of her mouth, and this is no longer amusing me."

I was shocked when no one immediately jumped forward to do his bidding. By the look on his face, so was he.

I'd laugh at him, but I didn't think my body was capable of it at the moment. My little speech had sucked what was left of my waning energy away.

The water was up to my chin now and still filling up fast.

Death by drowning. I did not want to die this way. The first tear slipped free, and I was unable to stop it as it trailed down my cheek. The warmth of it felt incredible against my skin, and another tear slipped out. Then another. Then another.

I hated crying in front of Adrian, but he was too preoccupied to notice my tears. He kept whirling around in a circle, his kimono flying out behind him like a cape.

"Now, you boys better do as you're told, or you'll all be punished for this. We took you all in, fed you, and have given you everything you need to thrive in life, and this is how you choose to repay us? With disobedience? I will not stand for this," the bald man blustered as his face turned an alarming shade of red.

Despite his threats, no one stepped forward.

He waved his pointer finger around, his bracelets jingling loudly with each jerky movement. "See here, you—"

One of the smaller figures darted forward with incredible speed that took

both me and Adrian by surprise. Small, pale hands went into the bald man's chest, and he was shoved backwards.

The Council member stumbled back, but unfortunately for him, he was already standing on the edge of the hole and there was nowhere left for him to retreat to.

His feet kicked back into the air.

He squealed like a pig.

And he dropped like a fucking rock.

His body hit the water with a splash and sent water spraying up. I couldn't raise my arms high enough to shield my face, and I let out a surprised yelp when it hit the unprotected side of my face.

Adrian splashed around in the water right in front of me. He was so short that, standing up, the water came up to his chin.

He whirled around in the water, his eyes wild and outraged. "Get me out!" he screamed. "Get me out of here right the fuck now or you're all going to pay for this later."

"He can't use his magic down there either," a small male voice whispered down to me.

I'd been right about those markings etched into the dirt.

What a relief to know my magic was only temporarily taken from me. I'd get it back the moment I got out of this damn hole.

Adrian whirled around in a circle again, and the water shifted around me. I didn't think he realized every time he moved, he got just a little bit closer to me.

"I can't swim! Someone turn off the water."

Turn on the water.

Turn up the water.

Now it was turn off the water.

I couldn't keep up with him, he was making my head spin.

Screaming came from outside of the hole, lots of it. I couldn't take my



eyes off the devil in front of me to check it out, because the moment I took my eyes off of him, he'd strike out at me.

Something made a huge splash in the water behind me, making me flinch. Just what I didn't need, an unknown in the water with me. The water wasn't dirty, but since it was dark out and we were deep in a hole in the ground, I couldn't see anything in the water. That terrified me. At least I knew how to swim now, but that wouldn't matter when I was chained up and wouldn't be able to see where I was going because of the darkness.

Adrian stumbled, likely tripping over the edge of the mattress because he couldn't see underwater in the dark either. His shiny bald head dipped under the water, and I realized something very important.

Adrian was finally within touching distance. I could reach out and punch him in the face if my chains would allow me that much reach.

I felt the water shift in front of me and knew it was now or never. I wouldn't get another chance like this again, and I wasn't about to waste this one.

I pulled on my chains, stretching as far as I could. My legs met with something heavy, a body. I wrapped my legs around what I could of his robust frame and tightened, pulling him into me.

I fell to my ass on the mattress with Adrian's back pressed tightly to my front, hip to hip, and completely submerged under water. Stupidly, I hadn't prepared myself properly, and my mouth was wide open. I sucked in a mouthful of water before I pressed my lips shut, but the damage was already done. I was trapped underwater with a lungful of water and an angry, chubby genie in my arms.

My eyes were wide open and burning, but for some reason I couldn't explain, they refused to close.

My lungs burned.

My entire body was numb.

And I felt more alive now than I had since waking up in this shitty hole. I

wasn't so sure that said anything good about me, but I didn't care.

Adrian flailed around, rolling to his side and taking me with him since I was latched on and going absolutely nowhere. My head bounced off the mattress, and for the first time, I was glad it was there—the ground could be very unforgiving.

Adrian's body bucked against mine in an attempt to get away from me. I might not be able to see the chains, but since they were attached to my limbs, they were easy enough to find.

He grabbed at my hands as I wrapped the chain around his neck, his fingernails clawing and ripping my skin open. My skin stung, but that was the least of my worries. I wrapped that chain tight and lay back flat against the mattress.

I pressed my thighs tighter to his sides and lifted my feet from his stomach. I slammed my heels down into his big, rounded belly and felt what little air he had in his lungs leave his body in a rush.

I tightened my grip on the chain wrapped around his throat, forced my eyes closed, and held on for dear life. If I was going to drown here in this fucking hole, then I was taking this total son of a bitch with me.

We'd die together.

Drowning wasn't something I'd ever recommend. Especially not while clinging onto a man over three times your body weight and almost a whole foot shorter than you.

I never let him go as I died, as we both died. It was the one thing I'd done this entire night that I could be proud of.

Adrian, for as much shit as he talked and for as big of a bully as he was, didn't put up much of a fight. It was pathetic really. I put up a better fight than him when I'd been a young girl growing up with Vivian.

Adrian ought to be ashamed of himself.

After spasming violently in my arms, his body went limp, and I still did not let him go when my own body convulsed and my lungs filled with water. When it felt like my lungs were going to burst and my head might explode, I still didn't let him go.

My life didn't flash before my eyes.

There was no light at the end of the tunnel. There was only darkness waiting for me and a nothingness that was vast and empty.

I didn't know where I'd gone wrong in my life, but there'd been no pearly gates in sight for me. It'd been terrifying, but at the same time, oddly liberating.

I coughed, rolled over onto my side, and promptly threw up a whole lot of

water. My body racked with each hacking, violent cough that spilled the remaining water out of my lungs.

My lungs burned and my entire body ached like it never had before. But I was alive, and that was all that really mattered to me, all that should have mattered to me.

The sound of someone coughing beside me drew my attention away from my own miserable condition, and I rolled over onto my other side to see what was going on. My cheek brushed against grass, and I finally realized I wasn't in the hole anymore.

What in the hell was going on around here?

And, really, how was I not dead? Not that I wanted to be dead, but it'd be really nice if things started to make sense for me.

Adrian was on his back not five feet away from me, and the coughing had come from him. He had angry, purple marks around his neck, and the skin on his face looked thin, almost like a layer had been peeled off.

We were both outside of the hole, and we were both alive. I didn't get it.

Adrian saw the look on my face and choked out a laugh. "You didn't honestly think it'd be that easy to get rid of me, did you, child? Those markings down there might have stripped you of your magic while down there, but they also did so much more. What did you think cleansing meant? You were always supposed to drown down there, but it was never supposed to be permanent. Nothing ever really dies down there. It's just the way it is."

No.

That was entirely unacceptable to me. Adrian did not get to live. I would never be safe. My family would never be safe. There was too much at stake here to just let this man get up and walk away.

My hand slid through the grass, my fingers searching for anything that might be able to help me. My fingers encountered a rock the size of my palm. I curled my fingers around it, and I picked it up. I didn't want to hear anything else Adrian had to say. We were done talking, and I honestly didn't

even understand how he could be so calm after what I'd done to him. The man was crazier than I'd given him credit for, and that was saying something.

My limbs didn't want to work, and my movements were jerky and awkward as I lunged forward and swung that rock at his head. He was too smug and too stupid to see the move coming, even though he was looking right at me.

I cracked him across the temple, and he made a sad, whiny noise. Before he could strike back, I dragged my sorry, exhausted body over to him and climbed on top of him, straddling his beach ball of a belly.

I gripped the rock with both hands as if I had plans of never, even letting it go. I raised the rock above my head and brought it down, my aim swift and true. The blow landed right above his eye and across his brow. He made a strangled noise as the rock split his skin open and blood began gushing.

"Fuck you, Adrian," I growled as I swung the rock back down on his face again. "Fuck you and fuck your stupid, bullshit Council."

I brought the rock down again, smashing him in the eye. There was a disgusting popping noise I decided to ignore.

"Fuck your sick and twisted creepy ways, and fuck the way you treat people, you pig."

I hit him again.

And again.

And again.

He stopped moving and stopped making noises as I bashed his skull in with my rock. His face was a messy, bloody pulp as I raised the rock again. My chest heaved and my arms shook. I thought I might have been crying, but I couldn't tell for sure, I was so out of it.

I grunted words between each strike.

"For Annabell.

"For Quinton, whose father tortured him as you watched.

"For Marcus's sister. I didn't have to know her, and I don't have to like

him to know she didn't deserve anything you dealt her.

“For Dash and Romero.

“For those dirty boys Finn brought around.”

For... myself?

I was losing it and making noises that were more animalistic than they were human. Somewhere in the back of my head I knew I needed to stop, but something had snapped inside of me and was left unhinged, wild, and very much out of my mind.

“Um, Ariel,” a small, hesitant voice said from my side, breaking through the fog my mental breakdown had sucked me into. “He looks pretty dead to me. I think you can stop hitting him with that rock now.”

I looked down at Adrian's face and had to swallow several times to keep my stomach from revolting. Not that I had anything left inside of me to throw up, because I did not.

I let go of the rock. It landed on Adrian's face with a solid but wet thud that made me flinch.

Again, he hadn't put up much of a fight for his life. I didn't think he'd ever really had to fight for much of anything before. With the Council's backing, he'd just bulldozed his way through whatever he wanted, and he'd always had others to do his dirty work for him.

“Ariel?”

“How do you know my name?” I asked without taking my eyes off of the mess I'd made of Adrian's face.

I didn't have it in me to feel sorry for what I'd done. I'd killed a person twice, and I didn't care. I wasn't so sure I liked what that said about me, but it wasn't like I could change it now. Not that I would if I could, because I wouldn't. Some people deserved to die, and Adrian had been one of them.

I'd have to keep telling myself that.

I climbed off of him and sat my ass on the grass. I pulled my knees up to my chest and wrapped my arms around them. I was so cold, but I didn't

understand why it was only hitting me right now. I shivered and held onto my legs just a little bit tighter in hopes of possibly containing the emotional despair that was inside of me. I could feel it ready to burst right out of me, splitting me at the seams.

“I think you might be in shock, but I’m going to need you to get it under control because I need your help, and I’m not the only one.”

Those words snapped me out of the weird trance I’d fallen into. Just who was this kid and what did he want from me?

And where the hell had everyone else run off to? They’d all just left me here to die.

I turned my head to the side in order to take in my new buddy and rested my scarred cheek on top of my bare knee.

The dark chocolate, soulful brown eyes had my breath catching in my throat. I’d seen those exact eyes before on two different people besides this boy. His hair was dark brown, and I didn’t know shit about kids, but he seemed awfully thin, even in his face.

I curled my hands into fists to keep myself from reaching out so I could brush the hair back from his forehead.

“How old are you?” I wheezed out in a shaky voice before pressing my lips firmly shut. If I was able to unclench my fists, I’d cover my mouth with my fingers to stop any more questions from coming out.

It wasn’t my place to question this boy, but I wasn’t willing to let it go. That ring on my finger gave me a reason, since my gut told me this boy and I would be family after I got married. Family in more than one way.

“I’m eleven,” he told me, sounding annoyed but superior to me in every way. “And before you ask, I know exactly who my brother and my nephew are. I just wasn’t allowed to be raised with them.”

My mouth ran dry, and my stomach cramped up. I had never been more uncomfortable in my entire life.

“And who would that be?” I knew, but I had to ask just for confirmation.

I'd gotten it right but wrong at the same time.

“Quinton Alexander is my brother and his nephew, Tyson Alexander, is my nephew.” He cocked his head to the side and studied me shrewdly. “Aren't those two of your men? I mean, I know they don't know about me, but I've seen them before, and I know I look like them. Not to be mean, but maybe you're blind.”

I wasn't blind. Just momentarily struck stupid. Maybe someday I'd go blind when some asshole tried to thumb out my eyeballs. Maybe I'd have a spell blow up in my face. Shit happened, and that was just life.

But I wasn't blind yet.

And I had no idea what to do with any of this.

“I'm not blind, kid, I'm just... I just feel like I've been *blindsided*.” Yeah, that was it.

“We don't have time for this,” he said as he got up and shuffled away from me. I wanted to get up and follow him, but my body didn't want to work properly for me.

This kid had a bit of an attitude problem, and it made me want to smile. I knew two other Alexander men who had some serious attitude problems. They were going to adore him once they got over the shock of his existence.

He ran back to me and shoved a dark bundle into my arms. I didn't know where he found this black hooded robe, but I was very grateful for it. I was sopping wet and absolutely freezing.

“Thank you,” I murmured with feeling. Then, because I had to know and it was killing me, I asked a very important question. “What's your name, baby Alexander?”

“Brighton,” he grumbled as he frowned deeply at me.

I didn't think he liked me calling him a baby. I meant no insult.

“Brighton is a cool name.” Albeit a weird one. But I wasn't about to tell him that.

“So is Ariel.”



I grinned at him with chattering teeth. “I know.”

He shook his head and sighed like I was trying his patience. “We really don’t have time for this. After I pushed Adrian down into the hole with you, things got a little crazy out here. Some of the boys took off running, and some of the others decided it was the perfect time to attack the Council and finally fight back. They got beat down and dragged back to the motel. We have to save them.”

I didn’t want to be responsible for saving the lives of a bunch of boys I didn’t know. I wanted to grab this boy and get him as far away from this place as we could possibly get. And then I wanted to spend the rest of my life making sure he was safe and that nothing bad ever happened to him again. I didn’t know for sure if something bad had happened to him, but if he was living with the Council, then I was just going to assume that his life hadn’t been all hearts and rainbows.

I forced my aching limbs to move and stood up. It felt like pins and needles were shooting through my limbs as I slipped my arms through the wide sleeves of the robe. I pulled it closed in the front and slipped the hood up over my head. It felt better being covered up, almost as if I could hide from all the bad shit I knew could still happen to me tonight.

“Why did you push Adrian in the hole?” I asked curiously, really needing to know the answer to the question for some reason. It seemed like an odd thing for a kid to do.

He looked away from me and began fidgeting with the sleeves of his robe. He looked uncomfortable, embarrassed even. “Adrian’s a bad man, and that’s all I’m going to say about it.” He clamped his mouth shut and still refused to look at me.

As I watched him, a sick feeling took root in my belly. Adrian had done something to this beautiful boy, and whatever it was had marked him in a way it would stick with him for a really long time, maybe even the rest of his life.

Yeah, he'd been through something bad, it was obvious.

Adrian was lucky he was already dead, because when Quinton heard about this, there was going to be hell to pay, and he'd need a target to take it out on.

If this boy was anything like his brother and his nephew, then loyalty was a really big deal to him. If these other kids meant something to him, then I knew there was no way I could ask him to just leave without trying to get them out of here with us.

"Do you know the way back to the motel?" I asked him.

"Course I do."

Well alright then. He was a cocky little shit. I waved my arm out in front of us and grandly suggested, "Lead the way."

He smiled at me, just the corner of his mouth tilted up, and I almost cheered at my victory. I was going to have to work for every smile I got from this kid and that was okay. I just hoped he was worth the effort I put into the endeavor.

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**T**he boy hadn't lied, he knew his way through the woods like he had a damn map ingrained in his mind.

I wanted to take his hand and hold it in mine, but he was dodgy, and I didn't think he'd appreciate me touching him, so I kept my greedy little hands to myself.

And since he apparently had nothing more to say to me, I kept my mouth shut as well. It felt like one of the hardest things I'd ever had to do in my life, because I had so many questions, I burned with the need to ask him.

The closer we got to the motel, the more I recognized my surroundings. We actually weren't far from where Romero had been held captive, and a couple of miles in the other direction was where Isobel had been found in the

ground.

Every inch of this property needed to be searched. Who knew what and who else the Council had hiding out here? That was a scary thought.

The motel was in sight when a tall figure in a dark robe came storming toward us. I was glad I had pulled the hood of my robe up so he couldn't see who I was right away.

"Shit," Brighton whispered urgently. "He's spotted us. This is not going to be good for us. You should probably leave me here and run, save yourself. Just don't forget me."

Like hell I was going to leave him here. This kid had no idea, but with time, he'd learn family stuck together, and that was all there was to it.

"You," the man growled. "What do you think you two are doing out here? We're going on lockdown, and you need to be in your rooms or you'll be punished. And you don't want me to punish you. I'll like it, but I promise you won't."

Didn't that sound like a fun time? Not.

"They lock us in our rooms at night," Brighton whispered to me.

"Do you know this man?"

"Yes."

"Is he a bad man like Adrian?" I had to know. What I really wanted to ask him was if this man had hurt him too.

"Yes," he whispered so quietly I had to strain to hear him.

That was all I needed to know.

I raised my arm and flicked my hand in the man's direction. I wasn't fucking around with these people anymore. I was done, I'd had enough, and this shit ended tonight.

Flames licked their way up the front of the man's robe, catching and taking hold. The man screamed as he frantically slapped at them in a fruitless effort to put the fire out.

He dropped down to his knees and screamed as he tried to rip the robe

away from his body, but it was too late for him. He was going to burn to death because I willed it.

“Holy...” Brighton breathed in awe.

“Shit?” I finished for him, not in a whisper. “Yeah, I didn’t say anything with the first one to leave your mouth, but I’m saying something now. You really shouldn’t be swearing, you’re just a boy.”

He looked up at me with those big brown eyes of his that were so large, they looked in danger of popping right out of his head.

The man stopped screaming and his body fell forward. He landed on his face in the dirt. His entire body was now one controlled ball of fire that would eventually put itself out.

I placed my hand on Brighton’s shoulder and gently shoved him forward. “Let’s get a move on. That screaming wasn’t exactly quiet. I’m surprised someone hasn’t come running out here yet.”

His eyes were still too large on his face, but he took direction well, and we started walking again. Honestly, I was very surprised no one had come to check and make sure Adrian was okay. That seemed strange to me, and I hadn’t worried about it earlier because I was so relieved to be out of there, but I still had no idea how we’d gotten out of that hole in the first place.

Now I really wanted to know.

We skirted around the man on fire and kept right on walking, neither of us speaking. I no longer needed his guidance to get to the motel since it was directly in front of us, and I took the lead, moving so I walked in front of Brighton. If something came at us, I wanted it to hit me first. I didn’t want Brighton to be a target at all.

“It’s too quiet.”

I couldn’t agree more. Then again, nothing was ever right at this place. Every time I’d come here, it felt like either something weird happened or I learned something I never wanted to know in the first place.

“Perhaps you should wait out here. Hide somewhere and keep yourself

out of trouble. My coven will be here soon. Tell Quinton I'm inside and I said for him to look after you."

He snorted. "Like you left me when I told you to? Not likely."

Stubborn. I should have known better.

The torches were lit in front of every door.

I didn't try to hide as I strolled right around the building and into the backyard. There was an entrance back here that led to the other part of the motel where the members of the Council actually lived. I thought I could get to it through one of the rooms out front, but I wasn't in the mood to go from door to door until I found it.

The backyard was empty of people, but there were plenty of picnic tables and outdoor furniture scattered all over the place in little clusters. There was enough space between the groupings to give them all a little bit of privacy, and there were fairy lights strewn about everywhere. It was my favorite part of this whole place, but I had no desire to spend any time out here.

I had tainted memories of this whole place.

No one tried to stop us as we walked right up to the backdoor and slipped inside because there was no one around to stop us. The place was eerily deserted.

The backdoor opened up to a mudroom/laundry room that was just a weird placement to me. Maybe it was where the original motel had kept their laundry space for the people staying here. I wouldn't have wanted to walk all the way around to the back of the building to do my laundry if I were staying here though. Not that I would ever stay at some creepy motel out in the middle of the woods, because that was just asking to be slaughtered by some backwoods type of people.

No thank you.

There was a long hallway to the left with a bunch of closed doors along it. It ran the opposite direction of where the motel rooms were, almost as if this part of the building had been an add on to the building and wasn't actually an

original part of the motel.

We went that way down the hall and stopped directly outside the first closed door. I put my hand on the knob and twisted it. Locked. Go figure.

I placed my palm on the door, just above the lock, and closed my eyes. I could see the lock turning in my mind, and I heard the click of it unlocking.

I turned the knob again, this time getting no resistance, and pushed the door open.

The walls were lined with shelves full of glass jars. Some of them had pickles in them and various other vegetables and things that looked to have been grown in a garden and canned with love.

They were all labeled, and there were a bunch of them that looked like they just had different plants in them.

Brighton shoved inside behind me. He pointed toward the corner of the room. “We go around the shelf. Then we go down.”

Down? Oh no, I didn’t think we needed to be going down anywhere. Nothing good ever happened when you went down to the basement levels. That was where all the really, really bad shit happened.

I didn’t have balls, but if ever there was a time to man the fuck up, this was it.

I felt the tug on my bond, and somehow I knew Dash was close. I just hoped he wasn’t alone, because I really needed to see them all.

I moved around the shelf and, sure enough, there was an opening in the floor with a set of stairs leading down.

This place just got creepier and creepier. If an eleven-year-old wasn’t afraid to go down there, then I wasn’t going to show him just how afraid I really was.

I must have hesitated for too long, because he tried to push me aside. “Don’t worry, Ariel. I’ve been down there before, like every single day. I’ll go first because obviously you don’t know the way.”

I glared at him. Like hell.

Still... “The way to where, exactly? Just what are we going down there for?”

I was pretty sure I sounded like a pussy. Thankfully Brighton didn’t point it out and rub it in my face.

He pointed a skinny finger down into the darkness. “Our bedrooms are down there. That way we can be out of sight when they get tired or bored of us.” He swallowed visibly. “There are also other things that go on down there, but you don’t want to know about those.”

I regretted having asked.

Before he could offer to go down first again, I bit the bullet and stepped down onto that first wooden step. I kept going down, down, all the way down. At least there were backs to these stairs and they weren’t open. Those were what I liked to call horror movie or nightmare stairs, and nobody liked to walk down them for fear of someone reaching out from behind and grabbing hold of your ankles on the way down.

My bare feet made no noise on the stairs, and I was glad when no sound came from Brighton behind me. I stepped off the last smooth wooden step onto the dirt floor and shivered. It was freezing down here, and I didn’t think it had anything to do with the fact my hair was still a wet mess.

I couldn’t imagine having to sleep down here every night. I’d get sick in no time.

There were torches along the walls, lit with fire, and the only source of light down here as far as I could see.

And they made little boys and teenagers live down here? I thought I’d had it bad while growing up, but this was so much worse, and I hadn’t even seen the rooms yet.

How dreadful.

Crying could be heard coming from the right, down a long, narrow hallway. It sounded like a little boy sobbing. I immediately headed in that direction.

“Ariel,” Brighton said urgently as he tugged on the sleeve of my robe. “I’ve changed my mind. You shouldn’t be down here. You shouldn’t have to see any of this. You’ve gone through enough tonight. I’m sorry, let’s just go back upstairs and wait for your coven members to get here.”

What this brave little boy was so terrified of me seeing, I did not want to know, but we’d come this far, and I had no intentions of turning back now.

“If you want to, you can go wait for them. They are close, but I’m not waiting, and I’m not turning back.”

He was making me nervous all of a sudden, and I almost begged him to go up and wait.

“Shit,” he mumbled dejectedly. “This is bad. Why did I think it was okay to bring you down here? I’m usually not so stupid.”

“Mouth,” I chastised him. There was a bar of soap at home I was going to write his name on, and every time a swear word came out of his mouth, I was going to shove that sucker right in his pie hole.

Parenting like a boss for the win.

And I would be parenting this kid, because he was most definitely coming home with me when I left this place for hopefully the very last time ever. My boys would never leave him behind, and that meant I was going to be playing a motherly role in his life. I might not have wanted to have kids of my own, but that didn’t mean I had any issues taking on other people’s kids.

The first room we came upon had no real door, but there was a dark curtain hung up across the opening. The sobbing was coming from behind the curtain. From this close, the sound tore at my heartstrings. It was so gut wrenching and wretched.

I pushed the curtain aside and stepped into a dimly lit room with dirt walls and a dirt floor. The light came from two tall candlesticks that stood up on the bare floor. A metal, antique bed frame with a twin mattress on it was pushed up against the wall. The bedding had been stripped from it and lay in a heap in the corner.



A very naked boy lay curled up in a ball on top of the bedding. His knees were pulled up to his chest, and his too thin arms were wrapped around his legs. His entire body was covered in dark black and blue bruises, and he was sobbing his little heart out.

I ran over to him, dropped to my knees just outside the pile of bedding, and pushed the hood back from my face.

“Hey,” I murmured softly as I reached out for him but did not touch him. “Are you okay?”

Stupid question. Of course he wasn’t okay. People didn’t cry like that because they were filled with joy.

He whimpered as he flinched away from me. “Don’t touch me.” He hiccupped on the next sob.

I dropped my hands to my sides and crawled backwards on my knees.

“It’s okay, Liam,” Brighton spoke from beside me. I hadn’t even noticed he followed me into the room. “This is Ariel. She’s my new sister, and she’s here to help us. She killed Adrian.”

I wasn’t his sister yet, but when I got married, I would be, and then I’d be his aunt too, but I didn’t mention that. This was why you didn’t sleep with members from the same family. Shit got weird and too complicated.

I smiled my fake smile I’d long since perfected and hoped he thought it looked friendly and not fake. His eyes swung around the room wildly like he was looking for a threat to pop out and attack us. At least he stopped crying.

“She can’t be down here. Do you know what they do to the girls?”

Jesus.

Just what the hell did they do to the boys?

“Liam, where are your clothes? I’m going to need you to find them and put them on. Can you do that for me?”

I really needed him to put his clothes on. I wasn’t embarrassed by nudity, but his bruises and the simple fact that he was naked in the first place and the possible reasons as to why were really starting to get under my skin.

Liam shook his head frantically, his eyes never staying in one place for very long as they continued to dart around the room.

“He doesn’t have any clothes,” Brighton told me. “They were taken away from him as a punishment.”

And just like that, I did not feel bad about what I’d done to Adrian. I’d been trying really hard not to let my mind wander back and think about it. Now I just didn’t care because the fucker had deserved it.

I stripped out of my robe and held it out to the frightened little boy. “Here, Liam. Take this and put it on. You’ll catch your death. It’s too cold down here.”

The boy grabbed a hold of the robe and tore it out of my hands. I knew he could cry, but at this point, I wasn’t so sure he could actually talk to me. Maybe he had too much damage and could only speak to boys.

He stood up with his back to me and put on my robe. The blood on the backs of his thighs mixed with crusted semen was a shock to see, even though I’d sort of been expecting him to have been raped.

“How old is he?” I asked Brighton, my voice sounding strangled and not right.

“He’s thirteen. He’s only been here a couple of weeks, so he’s still learning about what gets him in trouble.”

Had they raped Brighton too? Was that what he meant when he said they did things to him?

There was a ball of rage and hatred starting to take form inside of my chest. It grew larger by the second, and I needed to get it under control before it exploded out of me and I accidentally burned us all alive in this shit hole.

My robe dwarfed Liam. Either he was small for his age or there was something wrong with him, because Brighton was both taller and bigger than him. He seemed so fragile and in need of protection.

“Take him upstairs, Bright, to the front of the motel. I don’t think he should be left alone in his state, and I’ll need you to explain the situation to

my boys. I'll keep sending them up to you as I find them.”

He looked like he wanted to argue with me again but wisely kept his mouth shut. The boy could learn, I had to give him that.

I felt like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders the moment they walked out of the room and out of my eyesight. I knew I should have worried about them running into trouble, but I couldn't be around them and their obvious damage anymore without losing my mind.

I knew my boys would take better care of them than I could in this moment, and that was the only thing helping me keep my cool.

The next room I walked into had two teenage boys, and I was relieved to see that they had clothes on. It might have been closer to rags, but I'd take that over nothing.

Their eyes widened in surprise when I walked into the room and immediately dropped down to my chest.

I had a feeling my hard nipples were showing through the thin, wet, clinging fabric of my tank top. Jesus effing Christ. If I wasn't on the verge of freezing to death, my cheeks would probably be blazing as bright as a tomato.

Fucking teenage boys and their extreme hormones. I knew they couldn't help but look, but did they have to continue to stare at my tits like that?

I had a feeling neither Quinton nor Rain were going to like these two. I couldn't blame them. I didn't think I was going to enjoy them much either if they kept this nonsense up.

“Eyes up here, boys.” I pointed at my face.

Unfortunately, this brought their attention to the scar on my cheek. Oh, they better not ask about how it got there, because I wasn't in the mood for it. I was really ready to go home, take a bath, and maybe sleep for the next six months, and then maybe when I got back up, I could come back here for the last time ever so I could burn this place to the ground.

Not that I wanted to come back here, but it sounded like a good plan to me.

“You’re Ariel Kimber,” the blond on the right said in a deep voice I hadn’t expected to come from him.

I rolled my eyes. I was getting really tired of everyone knowing who I was upon first sight.

I dipped my head in a silent yes. “I’m sending all you boys up to the front of the motel to wait for my coven. They are on their way and should be here soon. You should take all of your belongings with you, because you will likely never be coming back here again.”

They both gaped at me. “But what about—”

I didn’t have time for this. “Just get your butts out of here. Please.” That please hurt a little bit coming out of my mouth.

I didn’t stick around to see if they would listen to me or not. I left the room and continued on my way. They either got with the program or they didn’t, but I wasn’t going to stand there any longer while they ogled me as if I were some sideshow at the circus.

I found two more rooms with a total of ten more children in them, all under the age of fifteen. None of them eyed my breasts or so much as tried to argue with me, they all just did as they were told, like good little boys.

That was all I was willing to allow myself to think about, because if I started to think about the fact that some of them weren’t wearing any clothes and others were crying and... my mind blanked. Yeah, I wasn’t going there because I couldn’t afford to if I wanted to be able to think straight.

The longer I spent time down here, the more sick to my stomach I became. This was no safe haven for witches, it was a motel of nightmares instead. A place where vulnerable people came to be abused.

A place that needed to be obliterated.

Owned by the Council that also very much needed to be obliterated.

Something beneath my skin itched, desperately wanting to be let out.

The abuse down here in this dark basement was bringing my own painful memories to the surface. There was too much pain trapped down here, too

much pain trapped inside me that I had fooled myself into believing I was over.

I was so fucking stupid, and who the hell knew whatever else I'd been fooling myself into believing, but I seriously hoped it stayed buried deep inside of me.

Hello, denial and obliviousness, thanks for being one of my closest friends. Not that I had many friends who were real to call my own.

How sad was that? Now I was claiming emotions and feelings as friends because I had no people to fill those roles.

Something in the dirt corridor before me had my steps slowing down as I approached a corner. The air blasting from there almost seemed arctic, and the already dim light looked darker.

A feeling crept in from around the corner—a feeling of immense dread.

I hoped it led me straight to Marcus Cole and the rest of the Council.

That got my feet moving again, and I whispered a quick spell to keep my footsteps silent to help mask my approach.

I sidled up next to the dirt wall and pressed my palm flat against it while I peeked around the corner.

Apparently the bedrooms had stopped, and the space before me was huge and open, cavernous. I couldn't see the end of it, but the corner I could see was closest to me and dark. There weren't even walls to see, and as far as I could tell, the space just eventually faded into darkness on all sides. It was creepy as fuck, and any sane, smart woman would have turned and ran far, far away. I should have gone back upstairs and waited out front with those boys for my coven to arrive so they could back me up.

It was stupid to do this alone. I knew that.

But, the thing was, I wasn't about to walk away from the scene in front of me.

Oh no I was not.

Fuck no.

I had finally found Marcus Cole, and I was going nowhere until I got my pound of flesh—that was, after someone else finished getting their pound of flesh from him.

It was something I knew I'd never forget seeing, and it made me want to keel over and vomit at witnessing it now.

I could have gone my whole life without seeing this.

And, as much as I hated him, I couldn't stop myself from feeling incredibly sorry for the man who was Marcus Cole.

I couldn't be sure, because I'd never been to one before, but I thought this place was a torture chamber of sorts. Either that, or some type of sex dungeon, which was a place I'd also never visited before.

There were leather couches spread throughout the room and weird, painful-looking devices filled up the space between. There were chairs and tables with straps on them. One of the wooden chairs had a huge round hole cut into the seat of it. Below the hole on the floor was an apparatus with several different size dildos attached to it. Some of them were rather large, and others were slightly... misshapen.

On one of the shiny metal tables was an array of knives and saws in different sizes. One bunch was covered in sharp-looking spikes, their silver coloring gleaming with flecks of rusty red.

My mind immediately attempted to reject everything I was seeing, but it appeared to be an impossible task. No matter how hard I tried to blank everything out, the scene before me refused to go away.

The men on the Council weren't concerned about Adrian being alone in the woods with me in the slightest. They found new prey to play with, and they were living it up.

Most of the men down here still wore their black robes, but now the hoods were down and the fronts were no longer tied shut. Two of the men

were entirely naked.

Casual nudity was something I felt I'd never be entirely comfortable with. Even at home... all those swinging dicks on display. It could intimidate a girl at times.

Now I wasn't intimidated by all the cock on display, even though the one was rather large and angry looking.

A couple of men were sprawled out on couches with drinks in their hands, their eyes on the prize in the center of the room.

One of them had a naked woman on his lap. His hands were on her hips. Her heavy breasts swayed back and forth as she bounced on his cock. Why she was riding him backwards, I did not know. It appeared as if she was too high to even see what was happening around her. She was completely blissed out, gone.

Either she was another abused witch or a willing participant, but I didn't care, and she didn't hold my attention for very long.

No, my attention kept going back to Marcus Cole.

He was strapped down to a long, rectangular wooden table, his chest pressed flat against it. His arms were stretched out in front of him, and his wrists were shackled to the table with shiny metal cuffs. His legs dangled off the side, the tips of his toes just brushing the dirt floor.

His bare ass was up in the air, and he was getting fucked by a beast of a man whose back was covered heavily in tattoos.

Marcus had a gag in his mouth. His eyes were squeezed tightly shut, and his fingernails were digging into the wood of the table.

He did not appear to be enjoying himself, and I couldn't say I blamed him. I wouldn't enjoy that shit either.

The beast snarled out angry words with each thrust. The sound of their skin slapping together mixed with his harsh voice and echoed around the dark room.

“Just you wait until Adrian brings the girl down here. Just remember, he



said you get the first crack at her. All you've got to do is make your payment to the rest of us first to make up for it. You know nothing in this life comes for free. And here you are, giving it up like a fucking champ. I hope she's worth it. Personally, I don't see what all the fuss is about. The bitch is already broken in. You" —his hips slammed forward with so much force, the table slid forward— "on the other hand, are nice and sweet and tight."

Holy fucking shit.

My knees went weak.

Everyone in the room laughed loudly and obnoxiously.

This time I really was going to be sick.

A hand wrapped around my elbow, I was yanked around, and my back was pushed none too gently into the dirt wall.

Enraged green eyes, the same color as my own, hit mine, and I knew just with one look into my father's eyes that he'd heard every single word that had been said.

Rain Kimber knew that Marcus Cole had made a deal with Adrian so he could fuck me.

A tear slipped free from the corner of my eye and crawled its way down my cheek. Rain watched it fall and a muscle in his jaw ticked.

Reaching up, he caught the tear with his fingertip. He rubbed his thumb and his fingertip together, making the salty moisture disappear.

"I made promises, and now I intend to keep them."

I blinked at him stupidly, having no idea what he was talking about. What exactly were these promises? I slogged through my memories but came up blank. My brain wasn't working properly.

One second Rain stood in front of me, and the next second he was gone.

Shit.

I went to chase after him but was once again pushed back against the wall.

Silver eyes flashed with rage. "Oh no you don't," Trenton snapped at me.

“Get out of here.”

“For once, do as you’re told,” Simon growled.

Double shit.

From the rage pouring off of them in violent waves, I just knew they’d heard the same thing Rain had. And now they were so far from happy, it wasn’t even funny.

They disappeared just as fast as Rain had, and for the first time since waking up in that stupid hole, I felt like I could take a full breath. I wasn’t alone anymore. With my dad and my bodyguards here, I knew nothing bad was going to happen to me, they wouldn’t allow it. Well, nothing else bad would happen to me.

But I couldn’t leave.

I couldn’t walk away from this. Not when I’d started it. I wanted to see it through to the bitter end. Even if it messed with my head later, and there was no doubt in my mind that it would, I wasn’t going to run away and hide while everyone else did the dirty work for me.

I wasn’t weak, and I refused to let them treat me like it.

I stepped around the corner and into the room. My feet skidded to a halt, and I stood there frozen in shock.

Jesus.

How long had I been huddled against the wall, giving myself a pep talk? These guys worked fast, and they were not fucking around. All of the men who’d been sitting on the couches and chairs had their throats slit. They were bleeding profusely but not dead yet. They’d get there though. They had been effectively neutralized and were unable to fight back.

The lady who’d been riding the one man was now on the floor, curled up in a ball with her arms wrapped around herself, and she was sobbing uncontrollably. I didn’t blame her, I’d be crying too.

I wanted to cry now, but I didn’t have the luxury of a breakdown at the moment. That would come later when I was home alone.

The beastly man who'd been going to town on Marcus was still alive. He abandoned Marcus and turned around to face off against Rain. His hands were raised and outstretched in front of him as if he were calling up his magic.

I couldn't focus on that. All my eyes could see was his ginormous cock. The thing looked like he had a third leg dangling between the two he stood upright on. It was thick, incredibly veiny, and most definitely the largest cock I had ever seen in my entire life. It was terrifying, and I didn't think there was anything worth letting that man put that sucker inside of me.

Perhaps I should be flattered. Marcus took that for me.

Instead, I just felt dead inside. My brain shut down in order to protect myself, and my emotions were capped off.

I stood there, blissfully numb, and watched as the man suddenly dropped to his knees as his legs gave out from beneath him. The ground felt like it shook with his weight and the force of which he hit the dirt. Blood poured out of his nose, the corners of his eyes, and his ears. He opened his mouth and coughed as he spat out a mouthful of blood.

The air filled with the scent of pennies. The longer he kneeled there bleeding, the thicker the smell became in the air.

He closed his eyes, and his body slammed forward. He fell face first into the dirt and moved no more.

"Unchain him," Rain snarled, and I jumped at the viciousness of his voice. Usually you had something to worry about when his voice went empty and dead, so I wasn't used to hearing this kind of emotion coming from him.

Without hesitation, Simon and Trenton moved to do his bidding. They unhooked Marcus's wrists and picked him up off the table. They dragged his body backwards, turned him around, and then unceremoniously dropped him like their skin burned just from touching him.

Marcus's knees hit the dirt beside the now dead man with a massive cock. Unfortunately, this did not hide Marcus's cock from view, and I hated to

admit it, but I couldn't stop myself from looking.

It made me feel like a goddamned pervert, but I couldn't stop myself.

It wasn't a bad cock, per se. It just wasn't one that appealed to me, and his balls were a good bit on the saggy side. I hoped, for his sake, it grew a bit when erect.

He had wanted to stick that cock of his inside of me whether I'd wanted it or not. And there was no way anyone could miss the fact that under no circumstances would I ever want it. He wanted to stick his cock in me so much he kidnapped me and handed me over to Adrian because he thought that would get him what he wanted.

Then he'd allowed that man to... whatever, I wasn't even going to go back there.

I had no issue with men having sex with men. Take Jules and Damien for example. They were smoking hot together. This, whatever this was, hadn't been hot to me. I bet if Damien tied down our lover and did him dirty, it would get me off in a really big way.

Marcus didn't have that effect on me. Neither did the beast who'd fucked him.

Just the fact that Marcus thought about sleeping with me after he'd been with that child abuser Vivian was very disturbing to me, as well as the fact that I had looked at him like a father figure and had assumed he looked at me as if I were one of his children.

Had he never seen me that way?

It was obvious that he had not, and if I hadn't shut down my brain and emotions, I would be more devastated than I already was by his actions.

"Look at me, motherfucker," Rain snapped, and I realized that while I'd been looking at Marcus and thinking about heartbreak, he'd been looking right back at me with longing in his eyes. "Don't you fucking look at my daughter. I want your eyes on me." He gritted each word out between clenched teeth.

In typical Rain form, he'd known I was there even if I hadn't made a sound, and he was doing everything to look out for me.

I appreciated my dad, and I loved it when he went all out for me. But... there were things I actually needed to know, questions that required answers, and I knew only I could get those answers. I didn't figure they'd be given freely to Rain.

"Why?" I asked in a voice that croaked as I walked deeper into the room. I cleared my throat and stopped a good three feet away from Marcus. I refused to allow myself to get any closer to him. He'd never be allowed to get within touching distance of me again. Not ever. "Why would you do this to me? I loved you like you were family."

My voice cracked, and I could get no more words out even if I wanted to. I realized I didn't want to, because at the end of the day, nothing he said would change the things he'd said and did. You couldn't fix this, there was never any coming back from it.

Anything he had to say wouldn't make the hurt he'd already caused go away. So what did this really matter?

"You took Vivian away from me. Your coven took you away from me. I've been left on the sidelines with nothing, forced to watch everyone else as they got everything I wanted. Well, it's bullshit and I'm done with it. Adrian promised me—"

I was right, this wasn't helping anything at all. It was only making me feel worse.

I cut him off because I couldn't hear any more, I couldn't stomach it. "Adrian's dead, so that ship has sailed for you." I shrugged. "Sorry, not sorry."

He smiled, and it wasn't nice. In fact, it was downright mean. "I don't think you understand how those markings work. Once he—"

Again, I cut him off. My voice came out smug and immediately wiped the smile right off his face. "See, that's where you're wrong. I figured out how

they worked after we both drowned down there. He died again after we got out of the hole. I bashed his brains in with a rock. He's definitely dead."

A look of horror crossed his face, and a dark part of me rejoiced at that expression.

"What did you just say?" Rain rasped in a shocked voice.

Shit, I'd forgotten he was here.

"You drowned?" Trenton whispered at the same time his brother snarled, "What the fuck?"

Shit, I'd forgotten they were standing behind me as well.

"Baby," Quinton called out from behind me. "You've really got a thing for nailing people with rocks. You might want to check that."

Wonderful. I bet the gang was all here now.

Rain grabbed me by my shoulders and shoved me backwards. Arms wrapped around my chest. I was expecting them to be covered in flame tattoos, but they weren't. They were covered in silver swirls, and I looked over my shoulder and met bright, silver glowing eyes—Trenton.

His arms tightened around me. "Don't you even think about trying to fight me. I'm tired of you running off and getting yourself into trouble. I've fucking had it with your bullshit. We're going home and your ass is coming with us. I'm not going to let you go so you can disappear again only to find out later you're talking about things like fucking drowning and beating people to death. That shit is not going to fly anymore."

I squeezed my eyes shut and turned my head away so I didn't have to see his anger anymore. I didn't like knowing he was angry with me, and I really didn't like how upset with me he was. I didn't think he'd ever been upset with me before, and it really didn't feel good now.

Simon stepped up beside us and took hold of my hand. He laced our fingers together and glared at his brother. "Don't be an asshole. She's had a rough night, and we don't need to make it any worse. You can be mean to her tomorrow. Hell, I'll even join you."

Great, something to look forward to. I couldn't wait.

The sound of flesh hitting flesh drew my attention, and I caught Rain cocking his arm back again. He swung his fist forward, and it slammed into Marcus's face again with a thud.

Marcus's head jerked to the side before he surged up to his feet and rushed Rain. But Rain was ready for him, and he'd expected the move.

Rain stepped to the side at the last second and struck out with his foot. Marcus flew face first toward the dirt and landed with a heavy thud. Rain wasted no time. He drew back his boot and kicked Marcus in the side. Marcus groaned as his middle lifted off the dirt before dropping back down.

Rain landed kick after kick to Marcus's sides and his back. Every time Marcus attempted to curl in on himself to protect his body from Rain's vicious attack, my dad would kick him in the side of his head or between his legs, and Marcus would move to protect those places instead of the rest of his body.

It was horrible to watch, but I knew better than to step in and attempt to stop Rain. It was like he'd unleashed a demon he kept locked away inside of him, and it wasn't going to be put back in its box until he let its rage burn out.

I wanted no part of this. I thought some sick part of me would get relief or joy at experiencing Marcus's demise after waking up in that hole. But boy had I been wrong. This was not bringing me anything but pain.

Why wasn't Marcus fighting back? I hated that as well.

I was a mess of emotions, and I wished I'd felt empty on the inside again, because I couldn't handle the way I was feeling. The last thing I wanted to do was break apart because of this man. Not after everything I'd gone through to get here.

"You should take her out of here," Dash said, and I found him and Romero standing off to the side, watching Rain beat on Marcus. Both of their faces were carefully blank, and I couldn't read either of them.

"She's fine," Romero murmured quietly to his son. "She's the least

fragile woman I've ever met in my entire life. If anyone can hack it, it's her. Leave her be. She's far from stupid, and if she can't handle it, then she'll remove herself from the situation."

I blinked slowly at them, still processing Romero's words. Those were quite a compliment coming from him. He hated women, all women.

Oh, and I hated to admit this even to myself, but he was wrong. I was stupid and wouldn't remove myself from the situation if I was uncomfortable with it. I wasn't leaving until the rest of them left, and that was that.

Rain didn't give me the chance to walk away, and I knew he did it on purpose. He wanted me to see this. It wasn't to be cruel, but he definitely wanted to make a point.

He climbed onto Marcus's back and wrapped his hands around the underside of Marcus's jaw. I didn't look away as he cranked Marcus's head, twisting it a certain way. There was a horrible cracking noise, and then Rain let go. He stepped back, and Marcus fell face first into the dirt.

And he didn't get back up.

He'd never get up again.

Because Marcus Cole was dead, and Rain Kimber had killed him.



“*D*id you meet Brighton?” I asked as Tyson wrapped his hand around my thigh and squeezed.

I knew Brighton was the very last thing he wanted to talk about, but I wasn’t about to let him poke at me right now. He wanted me to talk about my feelings, they all did.

Avoidance was key here, and I had every intention of working at it until I was forced into facing reality again.

They’d all tried to corner me and get me to talk. All except Romero and Rain. They had fallen into the roles of leaders, and they were too busy bossing everyone else around. They’d taken charge of all the boys and the cleanup.

I didn’t want to be around for any of that, and when I said so, Tyson had wasted no time in scooping me up, putting me into his car, and driving out of there like a bat out of hell. I thought he was worried that someone else would have tried to step in and take me home before he could, and he really wanted to be alone with me right now.

I understood his need. He’d left me in a tent like I’d asked him to even though that had been the very last thing he had wanted to do. When he came back to the tent to find me missing, it had really messed with him. Now he felt guilty and desperately wanted to make sure I was okay.

I wasn't okay and likely never would be again after tonight, but I would never tell him that, and I certainly didn't think any of it was his fault.

"Brighton is..." His voice was full of awe and pain.

I understood both emotions. It was the same way I felt when I had first met Rain and found out who he was.

"What did Quinton say when he met him? I'm really sad that I didn't get to be there to see you both meet him for the first time. He reminded me a lot of the both of you, the little amount of time I got to be around him. He was very sweet but full of attitude. And incredibly stubborn."

His grip on the steering wheel tightened to the point his knuckles turned white.

"He gave them Brighton knowing exactly what they were like. He gave them his son and then never looked back. He's been with these evil people his entire life, and we never even knew he existed." His voice got choked up, and he stopped speaking.

I hoped like hell he didn't start crying, because I knew if he did it would set me off and I'd be bawling like a damn baby. I didn't want to cry and had promised myself I wouldn't until I was all by myself and could really just let go. No one needed to see that shit show, it would probably scare the life out of them.

Quinton's father, who was Tyson's grandfather, had not been a very good man. He'd tortured Quinton and had done horrible things to Quinton's mother.

I didn't think anyone knew the extent of what he'd really done to Quinton, and I figured we'd never know. I just knew that well ran deep, and Quinton was very tightlipped about what exactly there was floating down in it.

Not that I could blame him. Nobody really wanted to share their living nightmares with others. Those were things we liked to keep in the dark.

The thing that bothered me about it, and not just with Quinton but with all

of them, was that while they could keep their demons in the dark—I was more than okay with that—mine always had to be brought out into the light. I hated the double standard they had when it came to me, and I had my own ways of getting myself out of it whenever I could.

Quinton would take this way harder than Tyson would. He always treated Ty as if he were his little brother, but this was an actual little brother that he never knew he had. He named himself as the protector of his family, and just knowing he wasn't able to be there for his little brother was going to eat him up on the inside.

I hated that for him.

And Tyson would hate it just as much as I did because he looked after his uncle just as much as I did. We loved him so much, and he needed us to look after him because he didn't do very well looking after himself.

I cleared my throat and placed my hand over his on my thigh. “We are going to need to keep an eye on Quinton for the next couple of weeks. He's going to beat himself up over this.”

He flipped his hand over and laced his fingers with mine. “You let me worry about my uncle, and you just worry about making sure you're okay and healing. That's what's really important here. Everyone will agree with me, and you know it.”

I didn't have anything to heal save for my mind, and only time would be able to help with that. He was nuts, though, if he thought I wasn't going to help look after his uncle. It was my job to look after all of them as their other half.

“Are you going to be okay with Brighton living in the house with us? I know Quinton and I won't want him to be too far from us. Not until he's at least forty-five.”

The smile on my face felt small and foreign and not quite right. Tyson was going to take on the role of big brother too, no matter that he was Brighton's nephew as well.

“Of course I want him to live with us. He’s our family, and we take care of what’s ours. It’s as simple as that. But what I want to know is, what are we going to do with the rest of the kids? And that drugged out idiot girl? And whoever else we find there?”

I felt a pang in my chest just thinking about all of those boys. They all probably had empty homes to go back to, but they were far too young to be living on their own and taking care of themselves.

“That’s a worry for another day.”

But should it really be pushed back for another day? Technically I was the only living member of the Council left. Didn’t that make them my responsibility?

I didn’t think so, but that seemed like a very selfish answer. Then again, I’d only agreed to join the Council in the first place for selfish reasons that had nothing to do with wanting what was best for the rest of our people or wanting to make a difference for the greater good.

I didn’t know that I had it in me to care about everyone else outside of my coven. It took everything I had to care about the people I loved. I wasn’t so sure I had it in me for much else. Was that selfish or was it just being realistic?

I didn’t have an answer, and that unsettled me.

The rest of the car ride home was silent, but the air was heavy. I knew we both had a lot on our minds to think about. I was just glad we didn’t have to speak about it.

That might have been the wrong way to look at things, but I’d be damned if I wasn’t incredibly thankful for Tyson allowing me to avoid all of our problems. He usually didn’t let me get away with this type of behavior. He always called me out and then made me face things head-on. But he always did it standing beside me and holding my hand like a best friend would.

I dozed off, and the next thing I knew, we were pulling into the garage. My Corvette was the only other car in the garage. I looked out the back

window and saw there were no other cars in the driveway. I was very thankful I could not see the house next door. I wasn't ready for that.

Maybe we really did need to put up a fence, because I didn't even want to see the house next door. Not after watching him die.

I'd never step foot in that house ever again. Never.

I was glad we'd moved here, because it brought me to my real family, but that house was where Vivian died, and I had no desire to return to it. I had after she died, I'd even lived there for a brief time afterwards, but now with Marcus being dead too, I drew the line in the sand. I had my limits, and that was a hard one for me now.

Places, like certain things, had the ability to carry memories, and I would never be able to set foot in that house again without being assaulted with memories I'd forever associate with Marcus Cole.

If I had my way, we would buy a bunch of land in the middle of nowhere, put up a fence around the entire place, and then build a ginormous house that was big enough for all of us to have our own space. There would be zero neighbors for miles and miles.

But that was selfish and not something I would ever ask for.

Quinton had his house set up and it was what he, Tyson, and the twins had called home for a few years now. It was a home Quinton had made for them and a safe space. He had prided himself on giving them all a safe space.

I would never ask them to give that up so they could start over with me. Even though I knew they would do it for me, I would never ask.

Maybe we could buy a vacation house somewhere else, and I could get my fix every now and then with that. Maybe I could even learn to snowboard or something.

"Hey, girl. You doing okay?"

I blinked and looked across the seat at Tyson. He was visibly concerned, and I couldn't say I blamed him. I kept spacing out, and my mind wandered to shit that really didn't matter because I was avoiding the things that did.

I was not okay.

I had been kidnapped tonight.

Chained up.

Drowned and kind of tortured. I could consider that torture, right? Maybe not by most people's standards, but whatever.

I had killed the same man twice.

Been forced to face certain horrors.

And my dad had killed a man who had once meant a great deal to me, along with several other people.

Yeah, definitely not okay.

I didn't know how to process any of it, and I didn't know what to feel or how to behave.

Despite the heat being cranked up all the way to the max in the car the entire ride home, and a hoodie I was wearing that had belonged to one of the twins, my body was still frozen to the point of almost being numb.

I felt like I might never get warm again.

"I need to take a shower," I croaked out as I reached for the door handle. I avoided answering his questions because I knew he wouldn't like hearing what I had to say.

I really did need a shower, desperately so. Every time I had a run-in with the Council, I felt like I needed a shower immediately afterwards, and even then it still didn't make me feel clean.

This time was no different.

I got out of the car and didn't bother waiting for Tyson as I headed to the door that led into the house. I wasn't the least bit surprised to see the headlights flashing in the driveway before closing the door behind me.

My money was on Trenton and Simon. They'd want to be near me right now and wouldn't be any good at anything other than babysitting because they would be too worried about me.

I thought about sticking around to point out that the threat against me had

been eliminated, therefore I no longer required a babysitter, but I knew it would fall on deaf ears.

I didn't hesitate to make a beeline for the dining room. I moved to the storage room connected to the dining room and jogged up the stairs to my and Dash's apartment.

All the lights were on in the kitchen and living room. The hallway light was on, but the light in my bedroom was off. The fairy lights around my bed were on, and it hit me that all the lights were on in the house downstairs even though no one had been home. For that matter, the door in the garage that led inside to the house had not been locked either.

Proof positive they'd left in a hurry and hadn't had the time to lock down the house or even turn off the lights. They'd been so concerned with me they hadn't cared about taking care of the house.

The door to the closet was cracked open, and the light was on in there. I peeked inside and my heart melted. They might have been in a hurry to get to me, but they'd still taken the time to take care of my babies for me.

A pack 'n play had been set up in the closet. A gray, soft, fuzzy throw blanket had been placed in the bottom, and both Ash and Bone were curled up in a blanket and cuddled together.

Binx lay on the island with his paws curled up beneath him. His eyes were locked on the sleeping kittens in the pack 'n play, and when I walked in the room, they shot to me. They looked old.

He looked tired.

But here he was, keeping watch over my kittens for me when there was no one else here to do it.

The sudden urge to cry overwhelmed me. I couldn't stay in here with these cats or I'd crumble.

"Thanks, Binxy boo," I whispered brokenly as I backed out of the room and didn't bother closing the door. Since people were home now, Binx didn't need to watch over them anymore. He could go back to being ornery, doing

Binxy things, and pretending like he hated almost everyone.

I actually enjoyed that side of him. Watching him make people want to cry was quite pleasurable, though I would never tell anyone else I felt that way. They would think badly of me.

I stripped out of my clothes just inside of the bathroom and let them fall to the floor in a rumpled pile. They needed to go into the garbage, because I never planned on wearing them again. At least they weren't favorites of mine. Still, I hated that certain events ruined clothes for me.

Good thing I wasn't poor anymore and didn't rely on the same four to five outfits to keep me clothed all the time. Those had been the days.

I really needed to live in the moment and stop thinking about the stupid past. I already had enough things on my mind to wreck my life, but there I went, always looking to further hurt myself any way that I possibly could.

I stepped into the shower and fiddled with the handles, and hot water immediately began pouring out.

I moved under the fall of hot water and just stood there as it rained down over me. I couldn't even feel it at first. The cold had seeped into my bones, and it felt like it planned on staying there for a good long while.

I didn't know how long I had been standing there when I felt him arrive in the bathroom. I didn't watch as he stripped out of his clothes, and I didn't turn around when he stepped into the shower.

He pressed his warm, hard body into my back and wrapped his arms around my chest. He pulled me back until there was no space between us, and his chin went into the crook of my neck.

He held me like that, without words and with a patience that astounded me, as the warmth finally seeped into my skin.

He held me as silent tears poured down my cheeks, and I didn't even really know why I was crying at this point. There were so many reasons to choose from, I didn't feel like picking one. I just kept crying while Tyson held me and offered me his strength.



He was definitely my best friend for a reason.

I felt them when they, too, came into the bathroom.

Trenton and Simon.

For fuck's sake.

This crossed a line, even for them. They had been very careful with my privacy so far and had yet to invade it in a way that I would take issue with.

Sitting in the bathroom while Tyson and I were naked in the shower as I cried my eyes out was something I was choosing to take issue with.

They were going to make Tyson uncomfortable.

He lifted his head slightly so he could whisper in my ear. "There are always consequences, pretty girl. You know that. Those two are going to be stuck to you like glue for a while after this latest stunt you pulled. If you give a shit about them at all, you'll leave them to it."

Huh.

It appeared Tyson didn't care that they could see him naked. I wondered how far that would stretch and immediately shut that line of thought down before it could take root and grow any bigger. I didn't need to be getting any crazy ideas.

I stood there and continued to cry as Tyson shampooed and conditioned my hair. He moved my limbs around as he scrubbed my entire body with body wash that had a faint scent of cinnamon to it that I knew belonged to Dash. His shampoo and soap carried that scent, and now when I got out of the shower, I would smell just like him.

I liked that very much.

I felt warm and almost human again by the time Tyson turned the shower off. He came back with a huge, white fluffy towel that he used to dry me off and wrap around my body when he was done. He covered me from my armpits all the way down to my knees.

I felt like a child with him taking care of me like this, but for whatever reason, I couldn't get my mouth open in order to tell him that I could do it my

own damn self.

Did that make me weak?

I didn't think so. I thought it meant I ought to be grateful for having found such wonderful partners that I could rely on in my time of need.

Tyson scooped me up in his arms and carried me out of the bathroom. I studiously avoided looking at either of the brothers and was attempting to convince myself they weren't there—and failing miserably in this endeavor.

Oh well. Tyson had been right, and I wasn't about to ask them to leave.

Tyson sat me down on the edge of my bed, and his towel covered ass made its way into my closet.

Trenton and Simon followed us out of the bathroom. They both moved across the room beside the dresser and leaned against the wall. They watched me with their silver eyes, and I wanted to scream at them to get the fuck out because I felt like I might come out of my skin under their watchful gazes.

Neither said a fucking word. It was maddening and made me shift uncomfortably on the bed as I clutched the towel tightly to my chest.

Christ on a cracker, this was going to get old really fast.

At least I had stopped crying for the time being.

Tyson came out of the closet with a handful of clothes. He was no longer wearing a towel, but instead had on a pair of black boxer briefs. Seeing him wearing Dash's underwear was almost enough to make me laugh. Today I didn't even smile.

Tyson dumped the clothes beside me on the bed. He pulled me up to my feet and ripped the towel away from my body. An angry, embarrassed noise left my throat, and I felt my cheeks heat.

I knew they'd seen me naked in the shower, but this time felt different to me. I was going to *kill* Tyson for this.

I stood there like a living doll as he dressed me in panties and a tank top. When I was dressed, he gently pushed me back down to sit on the edge of my bed. He walked over to the dresser, picked up my hairbrush, and crawled into

the bed behind me with it clutched in his hand.

I closed my eyes as he brushed out the wet mess that was my hair. It filled me with a sense of peace that almost had me crying again.

Vivian had never brushed my hair like this, but I bet my real mother had.

It was the small, simple things that made me feel loved, and I figured Tyson knew that.

“I’m tired,” I said in a small voice, and I realized in that moment just how true those two words were. It was more than just a physical thing. I was exhausted in every way possible. Mostly emotionally drained.

“I know, beautiful, I know,” Tyson murmured. “Just give me a minute to finish up with your hair, then we can lie down and sleep. You’ll feel better in the morning.”

He was wrong. Sleep wasn’t going to change anything, and I’d still feel like shit in the morning. I might actually need therapy this time.

Tyson finished brushing my hair and put it up in a loose braid. Like me, he knew that sleeping with it wet and free meant I would wake up with it messy and wild, and I hated that. He’d likely wake up in the morning with his own long, wet hair messy and wild, but he wouldn’t care. He’d just jump in the shower and wash it again to tame that mess.

He pulled back the covers, and I crawled under them. I expected him to crawl under them with me, so I was surprised when he got off the bed and headed back to the closet. He came back out with Ash and Bone in his arms.

Of course. How stupid was I that I’d forgotten about them? I’d make a terrible mother to real children.

Tyson came back to the bed and deposited my babies down onto my bed before walking around to the other side of the mattress, the side closest to the windows, and then he crawled in with me.

My kittens made a beeline right for me, and they climbed up onto my body over the covers. Ash came up to my face, and she rubbed her little cheek against my chin. Bone came up on the other side of her sister, and she

dropped down to her belly, resting her head on her little kitten paws. Ash scooted back and copied her sister's pose like a mirror.

"I think they missed their mama," Tyson whispered as he scooted closer to me on his side. He wrapped his arm around my lower stomach and threw his leg over both my thighs, pinning me down to the bed and making it so I'd be unable to shake him if he were to fall asleep before me and I felt like sneaking off.

Not that I could even get far with Simon and Trenton watching over me like they were. Or with my cats lying on me like that.

"Why don't you close your eyes and try to sleep?" Tyson suggested. "You're home, and you're safe. Nothing is going to hurt you ever again."

I knew I was safe here because all of my enemies were now dead. And besides, this was my home and they always made it a safe space for me. Always.

I closed my eyes and tried to do as he told me.

I swear I lay like that for over an hour and sleep evaded me. Tyson's body weight eased into me at my side about twenty minutes after he lay down, and I knew he'd found sleep. It hadn't taken nearly that long for my kids to start snoring softly with sleep. It was just me who struggled.

My cats were either lazy and sleeping or they were crazy little terrors. They were perfection, and their weight felt good. It felt right, like they belonged right here with me.

The side of the bed Tyson wasn't sleeping on dipped at the same time as I felt movement at the foot of the bed.

Trenton and Simon had finally given up on watching over me and decided to join us in my bed.

This did not bother me or make me uncomfortable. I had a really big bed, and I was used to people crawling into it with me all the time. Trenton and Simon might not be my lovers yet, and they might not actually ever become that, but they'd long since become my family. I trusted them and always

would.

A hand rested on my blanket covered foot, and another one rested above my hip, below Tyson's arm and above his leg.

My body melted into the bed, and it didn't take long for me after that, safe and cocooned by people who would do anything for me, to fall into a blissfully dreamless sleep.

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**T**yson Alexander opened his eyes the moment he felt Ariel slip off to sleep.

There was a hollow, empty feeling in his stomach that he knew would take weeks to go away. It would take that long, seeing her in their home and safe, before he could banish the feeling.

And even then it wouldn't entirely go away.

This was the price of loving someone more than you loved anyone else.

Uncle Quinton came in second, and before Ariel had come into their lives, he felt this way with Quinton on more than one occasion.

In the end, he knew it was worth the feelings and the worry. With two dead parents and only his uncle to really call his own, Tyson had learned a long time ago that being able to be with the people you loved was one of the most priceless, precious things you could have in your life.

He and his uncle had lost too much, so they were holding onto Ariel for all she was worth.

And she was worth fucking everything.

And now she'd found Brighton, so they'd had one more blessing in this family. She just kept bringing home blessings left and right.

Tyson hoped like hell she'd wake up in the morning and realize she had two of her own blessings right here in bed with her. Then hopefully she'd fuck them both and put them out of their misery.

Tyson Alexander just hoped that they didn't kick him out of bed so he got to stay and watch. He was possessive and could often come across as an asshole to anyone who wasn't Ariel, but when it came to the other men in her life, he got off on thinking about them fucking her brains out and giving her everything she deserved.

Oh yeah.

Against his will, his cock started to harden.

Fuck yeah, he got off on that big time.

His lips curled up into a smile as he willed his cock back under control.

He fell asleep and, thanks to the dreamcatcher he made for Ariel, he did it without dreaming.

Sadly for him, when he woke up the next morning, there was no orgy taking place in the bed he lay in.

But that was okay though, because everyone he loved was home safe where they belonged, finally.

And that included Brighton Alexander.

The rest?

Well, Tyson Alexander had faith the rest would come later when the time was right for it to happen.

The sun kissed the horizon in the sky, and soon daylight would be upon us.

Everyone was home safe, and now Marcus Cole's house was lit up like a beacon with a bustle of activity happening inside. The guys had decided that since Marcus would no longer be occupying the space, why not make use of it? They placed all the boys and the one lone female from the motel basement over there.

Even Brighton, which I had assumed had to have caused quite the verbal tussle with Quinton. I was proud of the little shit for standing his ground and getting his way.

Then again, I really wanted to go over there myself and drag his ass over here where he rightfully belonged, with his family. I might have actually done it too, if I hadn't just sworn the day before I'd never so much as set foot in that house again.

I sat on the back deck with a mug of coffee between my hands. Trenton and Simon hovered close behind me because they decided to dedicate themselves to becoming my real-life shadows from here on out.

I'd come out here with every intention of watching the sunrise and being incredibly thankful for waking up breathing another day. I'd gotten distracted by the activity next door, and then my eyes had been drawn to the watery

depths of the pool.

It didn't take a genius to figure out why I couldn't take my eyes off the water. After sitting out here and staring at the stupid thing for less than a minute, I had to get up and go inside to the power box so I could flip the switches that turned all of the lights on at the pool.

Someone made a point to turn them off during the day, and in the chaos that had been my kidnapping yesterday, they hadn't been turned back on at night.

I had once suggested they run on a timer, but Quinton hadn't been interested because he was a crazy control freak like that. Still, he showed me how to turn everything on myself because he liked to give me a false sense of independence.

I'd turned the lights on a while ago, and I still could not take my eyes off the water.

The delicate, feminine sound of a throat clearing drew my attention, and I glanced over my shoulder to see the person who'd made that noise.

I expected to be faced with the Council cock-riding chick from the motel basement because she was the only other female I knew to be around. Color me surprised when I came face-to-face with Isobel.

She might have been a total pain in my ass, but boy was she a pretty one. Long black hair that went down all the way to her waist. It was thick, straight, and had a whole lot of volume that made me jealous. Her eyes were as dark as her hair except for a small ring of brown at the very edge. You had to look closely to even notice it, otherwise they just looked black. She was too thin, and no matter what she ate, she always seemed to stay that way.

She strutted right up to the chair beside me and plopped her ass into it without invitation. Her eyes slid across the backyard, and I watched with a heavy heart when they reached the pool and faltered.

Looking at her now made me feel like the world's biggest piece of shit.

I'd spent one night in a Council made hole on Council lands. Isobel



wasn't exactly open to talking about how much time she spent down in hers, but I knew we were very different in that aspect.

Her entire family had been murdered before she'd been chained up in her hole. I also thought she'd been down there for a very long time before they decided to fill it full of water.

There'd also been no markings to bring her back to life. They had meant to kill her and be done with her. She hadn't even been worthy of them keeping around to stick their cocks in.

But me?

They wanted to keep me alive. No matter what, that had been their endgame.

They'd been stupid enough to want me to live, and I had rebelled at every chance. I was also lucky enough to have a small army at my back. Isobel had been cornered and forced to be alone with no one to save or help her until she'd been forced to reach out to complete strangers in a last-ditch effort not to die.

She was fucking lucky I'd been receptive.

I still wondered what the Council saw in me that they hadn't seen in her.

Why had I been found worthy when she had been found lacking? It still made no sense to me.

I now considered her family and an actual friend. I wasn't quite comfortable asking her these questions. I didn't want to offend her or hurt her feelings by asking, so I kept my mouth shut on the subjects. And she not once offered answers all on her own about these things.

Perhaps it really just had to do with our power levels, and it was as simple as that. My stupid mind thought that seemed far too easy, and I was waiting for the difficult version to hit.

"Rain called," she practically purred. "As soon as he said the Council members were dead and it was safe to come home, we were on a flight back here."

A lot of things about that pissed me off.

It hadn't been Rain who'd sent them away. It'd been me, and as their point of contact, they should have waited for my okay before coming back. I should have known better with Isobel. The woman panted after my dad like she'd never met another man with a cock before. Of course she'd listen to him and not consult me first.

That was my first issue with this BS.

My second...

I still had no actual idea how many Council members there really were, because I'd never met all of them before.

There were other Council members in different parts of the world. There were also ones in the US who didn't live near us and couldn't be here for every event.

I figured I'd meet them all eventually, and I'd have to answer to them for not only my actions but everything my coven had done.

Personally, I didn't think the rest of my coven had any idea, but we'd cross that bridge when we came to it. One problem at a time.

"Do you ever think about being back in that water?" I asked her, switching subjects so I didn't end up yelling at her.

She sighed as she kicked her legs out in front of her and crossed her feet at the ankles. "Sometimes I dream about it. Sometimes it'll be the middle of the day and sunny out, and all of a sudden a chill will come over me that takes hours to shake off. I probably should have gone to therapy afterwards, but it's not like I can share what happened with me with a normal therapist. They'd think I was insane or making shit up."

Huh.

There was this therapy business again. I had hoped that we'd be able to find one with magic whom we could trust.

She turned in her seat to stare at me, but I refused to take my eyes off the pool. If she looked into my eyes, she'd see too much, and I'd give away all of

my secrets.

“What I want to know is why you’re asking. Rain wouldn’t tell me about your involvement, just that the key players were dead and it was safe to come home. You want to tell me what went down? You know you can talk to me about anything, we are like sisters.”

I knew I could talk to her about anything, but we absolutely were not like sisters. How absurd. I’d never call someone who wanted to sleep with my dad a sister.

More proof Isobel was off her rocker

She might actually have been the only person I could talk to who would understand what I’d gone through, but I didn’t want to talk to her about it. She wouldn’t judge me, she’d listen and probably hold my hand while telling me everything would be all right.

Still, for whatever reason, I kept my mouth shut.

“Not today, Isobel. But thanks for the offer,” I said so as not to hurt her feelings. “Maybe someday, when I’m ready, I’ll take you up on it.”

I wouldn’t. I knew myself well enough to know that.

She protested, “But—”

“Maybe what she needs right now is for you to shut your mouth and go back inside so she can sit out here in peace once more,” Trenton said, cutting her off.

I wanted to tell him to shut his mouth but didn’t because he was not wrong. That was exactly what I needed, but he could have worded it in a way that wouldn’t hurt her feelings. At least he had been the one to do it and not me. I didn’t want to have that burden on top of everything else.

“Fucking asshole,” she snarled as she launched herself out of her chair and stomped across the deck to the sliding glass door. She slammed that sucker shut with so much force the deck shook.

“Why does she always have to be such a drama queen?” Simon mumbled under his breath. “I definitely did *not* miss her.”

At that moment, I didn't think I'd really missed her either, but that didn't mean I wasn't happy to have her returned home.

I wondered how Romero would feel with her sleeping at Rain's house every night. Would he be jealous? He was such a strange man.

Trenton and Simon fell back into their roles of playing the good little bodyguards. They stood behind me in silence. They were both obnoxiously quiet. They were going to slowly drive me insane.

I placed my coffee mug on the table, pushed my chair back, and stood up.

I didn't want to do what I had to do next, but I was going to do it all the same.

Quinton had forced me to learn how to swim because he viewed it as a weakness someone could exploit and use against me. He'd been absolutely right.

The more I stared down at the water, the more my unease had festered, and fear had finally taken its place. If I let this continue, I'd end up terrified of the water and I'd be left with another weakness someone could use against me.

Not good.

Not good at all.

I walked down the steps and directly to the side of the pool. I could go inside and put a bathing suit on. I probably should, especially after what happened the last time I went swimming in this pool. The problem was, I left Tyson sleeping in my bed all by himself.

The cats had been missing by the time I had woken up, and I figured they'd either been kidnapped sometime in the night or they were off destroying something in the house. I was more than okay with both options.

I didn't want to go all the way back up there because I wanted to let Tyson sleep. For him, but also for mostly selfish reasons. I didn't need yet another shadow following me around. Two was already bad enough, three would be overkill.

Thankfully I added more clothes than just the tank top and underwear I'd gone to sleep with, so I could remove some things and I would still be able to keep my modesty in case I found myself with another audience.

I took off my fuzzy yellow socks and slipped out of my black zip up hoodie. I dropped it next to my socks. I shoved down my black track pants and stepped out of them. I dropped my tank top on top of the pile and stood in my bra and underwear. They covered up more than that orange bikini had.

"What the hell do you think she's doing?" I heard Simon ask his brother.

"Who the fuck knows?" Trenton muttered back. "Let's just hope she doesn't take anything else off."

"No shit. I don't want to have to beat the shit out of some poor teenage boy for popping a hard-on after catching an eyeful of what she's working with."

Now this was a conversation I could have gone my whole life without hearing. They were both idiots.

There would be no beating up teenage boys who couldn't help their hard-ons. Hello, they had raging hormones to deal with. It was not like it would be their fault.

And I'd wear whatever the fuck I wanted to and absolutely nothing at all if the mood struck me. Perhaps they hadn't been here with me long enough to learn that. Learn they would though. I'd give them no other option.

Just like I'd done with the rest of them.

I dove into the water before I could talk myself out of it.

It was the exact opposite from being under the water in that shitty hole in the ground. It was warm and so far from dirty it was stupid.

The water felt incredible as I swam to the opposite end of the pool. The chlorine burned my eyes, but I didn't mind, I welcomed it. It made me feel clean as opposed to the dirty, muddy water from that hole.

I touched my hand to the smooth flat surface of the side of the pool, and my head surfaced above the water. I sucked in a lungful of air before

spinning around, tipping back under the water, and soaring through the water in the opposite direction.

This was better than most things, so much better. I finally felt free gliding through the water.

I swam lap after lap, back and forth, until my mind was entirely empty of the bullshit clogging it up and my body was completely exhausted.

I still needed sleep to help heal my body and my mind, and I could really use some food, which was laughable because before I'd been taken, I'd been complaining about being overstuffed with food.

I stopped swimming in the middle of a pool, floating with my head above the water for a few seconds before going completely under. I was ready for it this time and sucked in a lungful of oxygen before letting my body weight drop.

I imagined huge boulders tied to my body, and I sank to the bottom in a flash, as if they were real.

I felt my ass touch the smooth cement bottom, and I curled my legs up to my chest so I was able to wrap my arms around my knees and hold on.

My hair floated all around me, and even though the chlorine burned my eyes, I refused to close them. I needed to know it was safe here in this pool and underwater. In my head, I already knew that, but for my own peace of mind, I had to do this.

I wasn't weak, and I wasn't about to let something the fuckwad Council did to me break me in any way.

Eff that.

I stayed down there until my lungs burned and I was forced to go up for air. Then I dropped down and did it again.

And again.

And again.

I did it so many times, I lost count. I did it until I was comfortable enough to close my eyes down and simply let the darkness surround me.

There was no Adrian attacking me.

There was no Council standing around the pool watching me.

There was only me and the surprising stillness surrounding me.

No flashbacks.

No terror.

There was just me and my trusty bodyguards as they stood back watching over me.

When I finally crawled out of the pool, I collapsed onto the cement and rolled over to my back. I swiped the wet, tangled hair out of my face and then just lay there panting and staring up at the sun shining brightly overhead.

A towel dropped down on top of my chest. I raised my arm up to shield my eyes from the sunshine to see Tyson standing over me.

“You’ve got perfect timing,” he growled at me. “I almost had to jump in to drag your ass out of there. I need you inside. Uncle Quinton is losing it, and I need you to help me talk him down. I think you and I are the only people who can successfully do it. Rain is giving it a good try though, but he’s failing, and when Uncle Quint snaps, we are all going to be fucked. He’s going to fucking destroy everything. Get your ass in the house. We’re up next.”

Fuck.

I picked up the towel and buried my face in it. I didn’t scream, even though I really, really wanted to.

I didn’t need more shit to take on right now. Maybe I didn’t need more shit to take on for roughly the next six to eight months. I was officially taking myself off duty right after I cleaned up this latest mess, because my head was now filled with visions of Rain and Quinton coming to blows.

I wasn’t sure if there’d be a winner, but I was positive the house would end up destroyed afterwards.

Homeless was never a good look, but now we had all these damn boys to think about. They needed safe places to sleep at night. Hell, they just needed

safe places to simply *be*.

That got me up off my ass and wrapping a towel around myself.

My fucking life.

There was never a dull moment.



I heard them before I saw them, and it wasn't pleasant, to say the least.

My heart hurt so badly I figured you'd see the blood from the invisible wound all the way through my towel.

I looked down just to make sure there was nothing there. There wasn't. Finally, something to be thankful for.

"You need to be calm, boy."

"Fuck calm. And fuck you calling me a boy. I am not a boy."

"You're right, you're a man. You're also wrong because you're always going to be my boy. Don't pretend you don't already know it. Respect me enough not to stand there and bullshit me right to my fuckin' face."

I picked up my pace and immediately faltered at Quinton's response. His words were guttural and sounded as if they had been ripped from his very soul.

"My brother, my baby brother, whose entire existence had been hidden and stolen from me, was *raped*. You tell me what in *the fuck* I'm supposed to do with that."

Oh no.

No, no, *no*.

The agony in Quinton's voice was so raw, so real, that I felt pain slice

across my chest as if his words had been wielded like a knife.

Anguish scorched through me, leaving the bitter taste of ash in my mouth.

“Boy,” Rain rumbled in a gravelly voice, a voice that sent chills down my spine. “If you don’t think I don’t understand even a little bit about what you’re going through right now, then you’ve lost your fucking mind. You’re forgettin’ my baby girl was kidnapped by my own fucking sister and stolen right out from under my nose. I had to watch as my fucking wife and father died from broken hearts. Then I had to live years by myself searching for her—searching for her and all the while worrying about what she was going through while I couldn’t find her. Then to find her covered in scars because she had fucking years of abuse that I did nothing to stop, couldn’t do anything to stop because I wasn’t fucking *there*. You best open your goddamn eyes and pay attention to who the fuck *you’re* talking to you.”

My chest seized.

Pushing out air just so I could suck in more was one of the most painful things I’d ever had to do, all the while keeping the tears at bay.

Tyson had been right in thinking I could calm Quinton down. I could in almost every scenario that probably even included this one, but that didn’t mean I should involve myself in this conversation. This was one I very much needed to stay far, far away from.

Neither Rain nor Quinton would appreciate my being around to so much as hear this conversation. If I actually stepped foot into Quinton’s office, they might both lose it.

They were men, strong men. They weren’t uncomfortable sharing their emotions with me on their own terms.

This, though, was different

I was smart enough to know when I wasn’t needed or wanted. This was very much one of those times.

I stepped back and tugged on the sleeve of Tyson’s black T-shirt. He bent down so we were super close, and my mouth brushed the crest of his ear.

“He’ll hate you if you bring me in there now. They both will. He doesn’t need me right now, Tyson, he needs *you*. You go take care of him. You and Rain have this.”

He pulled his head back, and his eyes searched my face. I fought really hard to keep it straight. I won the battle, but barely.

There was a damn good chance Quinton would take his anger and all the other horrible things he was feeling out on Tyson. It wouldn’t be fun for either of them, but in the long run, it would work out better for everyone if it had to be him in there and not me. Nobody wanted that.

I rushed to reassure him of what I knew to be the truth. “You’ll take good care of him, I know it.”

Tyson looked skeptical and almost fearful. I patted him on the cheek gently before walking back the way I’d come.

He might not have had confidence in himself, but I always had the utmost confidence in him. Always.

But most especially when it came to his prickly uncle. There was no better man for the job than Tyson Alexander.

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**I**’d been an alright cook when I first moved here. I could read the instructions on the back of any box and figure out how to make it.

Since then, I’d branched out and found that when I wasn’t with Damien, I actually liked cooking. I had even started watching cooking shows on Food Network when there was no one else around to judge me for it.

I very rarely got to cook anymore and try out the recipes and awesome food I’d seen on TV.

I was excited to find myself alone in my kitchen in my and Dash’s apartment after showering and getting dressed for the day.

Trenton and Simon had disappeared.

I still very much needed an eight-day nap.

But I could do that after I ate something, which I very much needed to do if the angry noises my stomach kept making were anything to go by.

I was going to feed the rest of my family while I ate. The problem was... the contents of the refrigerator weren't exactly anything special. There was nothing really suitable for an early lunchtime sort of meal.

I didn't think this refrigerator had been restocked since my date night with the twins. On lockdown when the groceries had come in, they'd all been sorted and put away in the kitchen on the main level.

We didn't have much up here, but I found bagels, ham, cheese, and eggs—enough to make breakfast sandwiches for the members of my coven and our family.

I couldn't do anything fancy though, and that was kind of a bummer.

Those sandwiches were pretty awesome though. Once you got down into the part that hid the egg and the yolk broke, yum. It made everything so much better.

It wasn't gourmet, and if they didn't like it, they could all kiss my ass. Right, of course, after they choked down every single bite of their sandwiches whether they liked that shit or not.

Just to be nice though.

I also pulled out Tupperware dishes with pasta salads I made earlier in the week. They were delicious cold and could be eaten on the go. I often brought them into the shop with me to eat throughout my shift whenever I felt even a tiny bit hungry.

I got out plates and lined them up along the counter. Each plate except for mine got two sandwiches, I only put one on my plate because even starving, I knew myself well enough to know I wouldn't be able to eat more than one.

I made enough extras to fill another plate before running out of eggs. Those would get eaten as well.

Personally, I didn't know how they did it, but the males around me ate

like they were bottomless pits. At least one of those suckers ought to even be chunky, but every single one was a fit beefcake.

It all seemed very unfair to me.

I was all prepared to go in search of them to call them up for the meal when Dash shocked the shit out of me by strolling out of the hallway that led to our bedrooms.

He'd been back there? All this time?

How had I not known he was up here with me? Had he been here with me the whole time? I thought I'd been alone.

Shouldn't he be at the cottage with Romero?

Yeah, stupid question. They'd both be here waiting for me to be okay. Only when they knew all was right in my life would they go back to doing their own thing. I always came first though. That was family for you.

"I'll send out texts so all the boys know to meet us up here for lunch," Dash said as he reached me.

He grabbed the side of my head and pulled me in for a quick, chaste kiss.

He stepped back, picked up a plate, and headed into the living room. "It was good of you to cook for us," he commented without looking over his shoulder as he plopped down onto the couch with his plate held in the air in front of him. "Boys will be here soon. They'll give their thanks before stuffing their faces. You did good, honey."

Well, alright then, I'd just take his word for it.

I took my plate with my sandwich on it and carried it over to the table. I got myself a cup of coffee in a mug with a creepy clown on it that advertised balloon animals no child in their right mind would ever take from such a clown. This one was new and not one I ever planned on using again. Clowns were not my thing. They weren't Dash's thing either.

Clearly Dash had gone off the deep end.

Maybe it was Romero's? That made sense to me.

Addison and Abel arrived first. They had wet hair that had me assuming

they'd just gotten out of the shower. Probably a shower they'd taken together. How sad that I hadn't been invited.

They each had a kitten in their arms, making me smile at them.

Julian and Damien weren't far behind them. Their hair was wet too. Probably from another shared shower that I hadn't been invited to

I was surrounded by assholes, the whole lot of them.

The twins put the cats down, giving them free rein, and they carried their plates over to the couch to join Dash. Damien and Jules joined me at the table.

Romero came in on his own. He got a plate but didn't sit down with it. Instead, he stood with his back against the wall while he ate, watching everyone like a freaking hawk.

Rain came in with Quinton and Tyson behind him. Rain brought his plate over to the table, likely so he could glare at the other people sitting at the table with us while he ate.

Tyson followed Quinton over to the couch. He hovered close to his uncle, and I breathed a sigh of relief at seeing them together. It looked like Quinton just got himself a shadow, and I was down one.

Which reminded me... "Where are Trenton and Simon? I thought we were all meeting here."

"They are next door, babysitting. They relieved me so I could be here for this family meeting we are about to have."

My mouth dropped open as I stared at Romero in shock. Who the hell thought it would be a good idea to have him babysit those poor, damaged kids next door? He was a damn crazy man who shouldn't be babysitting anyone.

"Aren't Simon and Trenton now family?" Tyson asked.

This, too, shocked me. Did he really see them that way? Since when?

"Damn straight they are," Rain grumbled as he shoved half the sandwich in his mouth and bit it off.

If I tried to stuff that much food in my mouth at once, I would choke to death.

“Are you okay?” Jules asked me in a quiet voice as he placed his hand on my knee beneath the table.

Even though it was under the table, Rain still tracked the movement as if he could actually see it with his eyes. Uh-oh. Rain didn’t like Julian on a good day.

I didn’t understand his animosity toward this particular boyfriend of mine, but it had been there since day one. Thankfully Julian didn’t seem to mind, and he never backed down when Rain started throwing out barbs.

“Ariel?”

Right. How to answer that loaded question. I didn’t even have to think about it. “I’m fine.” I was. Mostly.

I would process my feelings on my own damn time and not a moment before I was ready to do so. They weren’t going to bully me into it, not this time.

Quinton snorted. “Yeah, baby, I’m sure you’re doing really fucking *fine* right about now. We’re *all* doing fucking *fine*.”

Well, it appeared I was doing a good deal better than he was at the moment, but that was understandable. In his shoes, I’d be an absolute wreck too.

What he needed was a distraction. It was actually something we all needed. Good thing I had just the perfect thing to get the job done.

First things first, we had business to take care of.

“We’ve got to talk about Marcus’s house. You can’t keep using it as if it were your own. He might not be in contact with his kids and family on the daily, but sooner or later, they are going to notice he’s missing. When that happens, someone’s going to come looking for him. We can’t be all up in his shit when that happens. That means we’re going to need to find alternate lodgings for those—”

“Baby,” Quinton said, cutting me off, “we’ve got that all taken care of. You don’t need to worry about any of it.”

I sighed as I sat back in the chair and covered Jules’s hand with my own. It was better to have my hands occupied so I wasn’t tempted to pick something up so I could chuck it at Quinton’s head like I really wanted to.

“I had my lawyer draw up the paperwork that says Marcus sold the house and land to Quinton. There’s money in his account to back it up. We also texted his son from his phone before dumping it. Marcus is currently on sabbatical, but when he returns, he won’t be returning here. He’ll be off in search of that fresh start he’s needed ever since Vivian ran off on him. Trust me, everything is sorted. One of his kids might show up asking questions, but we’ve got it covered,” Rain primly informed me.

It sure sounded like they had it covered. And, yay for me, I didn’t even flinch at hearing Rain speak Vivian’s name.

“Okay,” I mumbled sullenly. “On to the next problem then. We should talk about all those kids and what we’re going to do with them. I—”

Again, I was cut off. This time it was Quinton. He was really good at that. Surprise, surprise. *Not.*

“We can add on to Marcus’s house. Make it a safe place for them, a fortress if we need to. Hell, I like that idea for our house too. We’re totally putting up a gate at the driveway and a fence all the way around the properties. Those kids need guidance and schooling—what the Council should have given them and didn’t. That’s what we’re going to give them. We’ll have our very own wayward school of magic for little orphan witches. I love it.”

All I could do was glare at the back of his head.

A wayward magic school for orphaned witches? What the hell kind of operation did he think we were running here?

This was our life here. He couldn’t just move a bunch of kids in next door and open up a school for them. At least not without discussing it with the rest



of us first.

He was all kinds of crazy.

“Speaking of family,” Damien began, and I snorted. We weren’t talking about family anymore, but it was a good change of subject. “Why aren’t Isobel and Baxter here?”

Did that mean he thought of them as family? I understood Baxter, but Isobel? She might have been my family by default, but I thought most of the others couldn’t stand her. I guessed that didn’t seem to matter when claiming our new family members.

“Isobel opened up the shop and took the little guy with her,” Rain informed us. “She needed something to do, and half those teenage boys next door were looking at her and getting ideas in their heads. That girl should have been born a whole lot uglier, and she would have been doing me a favor.”

Holy hell, but I was not going to read anything into that or it would be me who lost their mind next.

Romero glared at my dad, and I shoved the rest of my sandwich in my mouth to stop myself from calling him out for it.

Tyson groaned loudly, sounding as if he were in pain. “Shit. She can’t be there by herself. She’s mean to the customers.”

I laughed and almost choked on the food I was swallowing. Right, so being nice to the customers was something we were caring about now? In that case, we were screwed, and both Rain and Quinton needed to be fired immediately. Maybe even Damien too. I didn’t think many people found his *I’m looking down on you, peasant, because you’re beneath me* attitude to be too appealing, even though he was really freaking pretty to look at while dishing it out.

For that matter, Tyson might actually have to fire himself too, because he wasn’t exactly known for being the nicest of people. He had a bad attitude and could be a huge asshole at times.

Maybe Dash too, now that I thought about it.

Shit.

Who did that leave me with? Jules and the twins. We were so royally screwed, and so were the customers, because those three liked to mess with people and they could be relentless.

What was the matter with these people?

I squeezed Jules's hand before letting go and standing. I picked up my empty plate and carried it over to the sink. I rinsed it off and placed it in the dishwasher, hoping everyone else would be smart enough to do the same because I was not cleaning up after boys today.

"You want to tell Isobel what she can and can't do?" Rain asked Tyson before bursting into fits of laughter. "Make sure you call me beforehand so I can watch her kick your balls in. I'll even record it for the rest of you idiots to get some enjoyment out of it."

I sighed. Tyson and Rain might have a decent relationship, but those were fighting words if I ever heard them.

I was so very tired of fighting.

I cleared my throat, turned around, and placed both my palms flat against the countertop of the island.

I had everyone's attention. Just how I wanted it.

I locked eyes with Quinton. "Even though the threat has been eliminated, I'm going to assume you still want to marry me and have a commitment ceremony, yes?"

He'd have to cut my finger off if he wanted to take my ring away from me. I might have hated the stupidly large thing at first, but now it was mine, and I loved the damn thing.

Quinton scowled at me before turning back around. He tossed his empty plate viciously onto the coffee table in front of him with a clatter. He rose to his feet, turned to face me, and angrily jabbed his finger in my direction.

"Don't you dare, for one fucking second, think you're going to back out

of this. I won't allow it."

Boy, was he adorable when he was all riled up or what? I loved it.

I looked around the room at the rest of my coven, avoiding eye contact with the dads. "And the rest of you?"

We were a team, so it was all or nothing.

*Goonies never say die*, or whatever. This wasn't necessarily a life-or-death situation, but it would turn into one if one of these guys tried to reject me.

"Don't you dare even think about breaking my heart," Dash said in a voice so fierce it made me shiver.

Dash was in. His words made me so sad for him that he broke *my* heart.

"Don't be stupid," Tyson snapped as he glared at me.

Ty was in. He also sounded like if I tried to back out, he'd drag me down the aisle by my hair, kicking and screaming, if he had to. BFF duty and all that.

"Pretty girl," Abel said as he shook his head in exasperation. "Are you real with this nonsense?"

"My twin is right to ask." Addison looked at me with disappointed eyes. "I cannot believe you'd honestly even ask us that. You hurt our feelings."

Abel and Addison were in.

I hated hurting them with my question, but it needed to be asked. I needed to know they were sure.

Damien glared at me. "You're not about to rob me of this. It's as much my day as it is yours. I already know what cake I'm making, for fuck's sake."

Everyone turned to look at him with varying shades of horror on their faces. Everyone still remembered the birthday cake.

Damien was in.

"I want everything, and I already know you're going to give it to me," Julian stated arrogantly. He turned to Rain and smiled so big it looked like his face was in danger of cracking. "I can't wait to call you my new daddy."

Oh boy.

Jules was in.

And that made all of them. I wanted to crow in victory, but I'd wait until we were tied together for life before I celebrated.

I didn't think it'd be good luck to celebrate before the battle was won.

Before an all-out war could break out when my dad assaulted Jules, I spoke my piece. They'd given me the answers I needed, so they deserved the truth from me.

"Good," I said calmly as I looked at all the men now standing in the room. "You have five days to sort everything out and set it up. I'm not waiting any longer. If you need my help with anything, all you have to do is say so and I'll give it to you. Otherwise, I'll expect you to figure it out on your own, and I expect it to be perfect."

"Five days?" Damien whispered in horror.

"Perfect," Tyson whispered reverently. "Since you're perfect, I figure we can make just one day perfect for you."

Aww, it was sweet he thought I was perfect. Misguided at best, but definitely sweet.

I laughed at him, he was so adorable. "That'll work for me. Thanks, babe."

"Babe," he murmured happily as a bright, blinding smile crossed his face.

That smile was a rare, beautiful sight that robbed me of the ability to speak. It blinded me and made me stupid.

I needed to get the hell out of here before I said or did something that might embarrass me in front of my father.

I was getting married in five days, and I had shit to do. Important shit.

I blew them kisses on my way out the door.

It took a lot, but I managed to walk away without looking back.

I had a plan and a bag packed with everything I thought I'd need—not that I knew what the fuck I was doing, because I sure as shit *did not*—and I was ready to roll.

There was just one tiny little problem. Wasn't there always?

Or one person, really.

Finn.

I needed his expertise, but not one single person knew where the little rat was. I'd looked around every corner, and in every nook and cranny, and I still couldn't find him. So frustrating.

Because I was still too chicken shit to go over to Marcus's house, I called the landline over there. The phone was passed from stranger to stranger while I asked each of them about the two guys who'd been in the tent the other day with Finn. I thought that if I could find them, then they would lead me right to Finn.

None of them even paid any attention to my questions. They kept saying things like, "Whoa, is this really Ariel Kimber? You're like, famous." I got frustrated with every single one of them until the phone was passed to Brighton.

Good ole Brighton.

Apparently a few days away from him had me forgetting entirely about

that Alexander attitude he was packing.

The little shit.

“Ariel, is this really you? You’ve got everyone in a tizzy over here. And aren’t you just right next door? What, are you lazy now? You can’t walk across the front yard?”

That was it. I was going to ground him as soon as I felt I had the right to do so. And I was going to make him clean all the toilets in the house every time he was grounded. It’d be like torture, boys were disgusting. Dash made sure our bathroom was pristine at all times, and I really ought to thank him for it.

I’d recently used the bathroom closest to the living room and decided I wouldn’t be going back there again anytime soon.

Maybe just more than Brighton could do some chores around here. Hell, I’d even pay them allowances. Teenagers loved money, especially when they didn’t need to do something fucked up for it.

“Shit. I think Trenton knows it’s you on the phone, and I really—”

I hung up on him before I could tell him swearing was still bad and I just couldn’t wait to wash his mouth out with soap.

I needed Trenton and Simon all over me right now like I needed some nasty STD. That was to say, I *never* needed that.

Poor little Brighton had just moved his way up to the very top of my shit list.

Stumped, I actually had to stop and think about Finn. I didn’t actually know anything useful about him outside of the fact he was a psychopath.

Since he wasn’t in either house, I decided to go where I’d last seen him. It was a bitch to get out of the house without anyone following me, but somehow, I pulled it off.

An effing miracle.

The tent was still standing exactly where I’d remembered it to be last. I almost wished it’d been burned down so I would have every reason to buy a

new one—a new one I could replace with shiny new memories that didn't involve a man who I trusted kidnapping me.

I found Finn alone inside the tent.

He looked a lot better than he had the last time I'd seen him, that was for sure. He'd clearly bathed. His hair was clean and healthy looking. His clothes no longer looked ravished and dirty. He was clean and very well put together in clothes that were very much his own, and he looked more than comfortable in them.

I had never wanted to punch someone in the throat so hard before ever. Punching him would do me no good, though, so I kept my hands all to myself.

I did not even give one single crap anymore about how Quinton felt about this man. So they could have been friends once and went through a rough night together, but that did not mean I needed or wanted to take him on as my friend as well.

Fuck Quinton.

And furthermore, fuck Finn.

“Where did your little wannabe boyfriends go?” I asked as I pushed the tent flap aside and stepped inside the space. “They finally get a load of your inner psycho and bail on you?”

Okay, so perhaps that was a bit too harsh, but I was done hand holding stupid witch boys. No more coddling, it was time to kick all their asses back in line.

“Leave me alone,” Finn grumbled sullenly as he curled in on himself pathetically. He lay on his side and pulled his knees up to his chest.

His shoulders shook, and I knew he was crying.

Good grief.

Where had his moxie gone? He was usually a whole lot less... breakable.

How sad and very pathetic. Now I wanted to punch him even more than I had starting out.

“Jesus, Finn. Get yourself together.”

If Tyson were here, I just knew he’d make some comment about Finn’s lack of testicles. Tyson had no problem talking about his own balls. Personally, I didn’t get what all the fuss was about but, well, men.

“I miss Rebel,” he sniveled.

I most certainly wasn’t the right person to be dealing with this crying business. I always tried to cry in private when there was no one else around to witness it. Either that or I tried to cry in silence if I had to do it in front of people.

If I had cried in front of Vivian, she would have laughed in my face right before slapping the crap out of me.

If I slapped Finn around, maybe that would help him?

I cleared my throat as I gingerly approached the bed. “So they left you, did they? Is that what this is really about?”

I mean, he didn’t really care all that much about Rebel, right? I was a firm believer that you didn’t ever abuse the ones you loved, and Finn had grossly mistreated Rebel at every turn. I thought he’d been putting on a show to make us all feel sorry for him or endear himself to us.

If that was love, then I didn’t want any part of it. Toxic love wasn’t for me, thank you very much.

Finn swiped at his cheeks, smearing the moisture on his face. “No, you fucking moron, they didn’t leave me. I saved them, remember? People don’t usually run away from their saviors. What the hell’s the matter with you?”

Well, wasn’t that a loaded question? I didn’t have enough time to list it all off for him. We were on a time sensitive mission here, I just needed to sort his stupid emotions out so we could get to it.

I sat down on the edge of the bed and tamped down the urge to shake some damn sense into him. “If they didn’t run away from you, then where are they?”

Truth be told, I didn’t really care where they were. I just figured that since



he did seem to care, it was only polite that I asked.

He sat up and glared daggers at me. “They are somewhere safe, and that’s all you need to know about them. I don’t need your toxic pussy stealing them away from me. I mean really, why are female witches so damn important to us anyways? We can grow babies in test tubes if we need more witches. Your goddamn wombs are worthless to us now.”

And that was the last straw for Finn.

Quick as a flash, I reached out and did something I’d just told myself I wasn’t going to do. I smacked that prick right upside the back of his head.

“Ow, fuck!” He moaned as he rolled off the bed and away from me. He rubbed at the back of his head, messing his hair up a bit. “Why did you do that?”

Was he for real? He’d called my womb worthless. Yes, it was worthless as far as I was concerned, but he didn’t get to talk about it like that.

I hopped off the bed and decided it was time to stop messing around. “Look, I don’t really give a shit about you or your stupid problems. They mean nothing to me. But unfortunately for you, I need your help with something. You’re going to come with me, and you’re going to help me, or I’m going to kick your ass.”

I was pretty sure I could kick his ass, and if I couldn’t, then I could always use my magic to smother him to death with the very air he was currently breathing.

His mouth dropped open, and he gaped at me like a fish out of water. I didn’t have time for this BS either.

I spoke over my shoulder as I made my way out of the tent. “Let’s go. You’re not going to waste any more of my time with your lame tears. And you’re not welcome to use my tent whenever you feel like it. It’s mine, it holds special memories for me, and I don’t need you ruining it any further with your seedy presence and your sopping sobs.”

I wasn’t surprised in the slightest when he followed behind me without so

much as a peep.

I made a mental note to ask Dash to burn the bedding in my tent and get us some new ones.

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“**W**hat the fuck is this?” Finn grouched from the passenger seat of my ‘Vette.

I almost stopped on the way here to buy a roll of duct tape so I could use it on his big, stupid mouth. He might have been quiet when he’d followed me out of the tent, but from the moment he’d sat his ass in my car, he hadn’t shut his mouth once.

I had even tried to drown him out with music, but he’d just turned the volume all the way down to zero.

I thought about snapping his fingers in half, and maybe I would have even tried it if I didn’t think I needed him for what I had to do.

I couldn’t ask anyone else to help me. I wasn’t sure they’d understand, but I was fairly positive the others would try to talk me out of it. Finn was just the right kind of crazy to talk him into doing things my way.

Jules probably would have been down for it, but I couldn’t risk the chance of him telling me no and then spilling his guts to the others. Jules was too busy being whipped by Quinton’s nonexistent pussy.

I didn’t take offense, though I should have been mad he wasn’t hooked on my real life one. But that was the magic of Uncle Quinton for you.

He had that effect on me too. Bless him.

“Hello,” Finn snapped as he waved his hand in my face. “It’s like you’re not listening to a single thing I’ve been saying to you. You want to practically kidnap me and then ignore me? I know you think I’m rude, but bitch, maybe you ought to be taking a look in the mirror.”

It was official, I hated Finn.

I parked my car in front of the cottage and shut her down. I turned in my seat to look at him. Really, I just tried to keep myself in my seat instead of leaping across the gear shift and attacking him.

“This is the home Dash grew up in. We’re here to see about taking care of Binx. Now get your sniveling ass *the fuck* out of my car right now.”

I grabbed my bag and got out. Somehow I refrained from slamming the door. I knew Rain wouldn’t like it much if I did that. You didn’t keep your baby safe all these years just to allow someone to come along and abuse it.

Finn got out without me having to drag him out, but the little rat didn’t hesitate to slam his door.

Asshole.

“What the hell is a trinx and why do I need to be here for this? Just drop me off in town. I can make my own way home, and you’ll never have to see me again.”

Boy, wasn’t that tempting.

“Binx,” I said, automatically correcting him.

I was too busy scanning my surroundings to pay any attention to Finn. Binx hadn’t been at the Alexander house. I’d looked everywhere for him. I knew Isobel had not taken him into the shop with her and Baxter.

That left one place for me to look for him—Dash’s cottage. The Alexander big house was never really going to be home to Binx, this was always his home, just as I feared it would always be Dash’s home.

“Ariel,” Finn hissed as he grabbed hold of my elbow, jerking me to a stop.

I shrugged out of his hold, not interested in being touched by anyone who wasn’t one of my men. We weren’t the kind of friends who touched unless he wanted me to put my fist in his face.

I could get down for that.

Finn tried to reason with me, but it felt more like he was just talking at me and every word went in one ear and out the other. I wasn’t about to take

advice from Finn of all people.

The front door was unlocked, which kind of bothered me. I had my key with me because I'd obviously thought I would need it, and Dash had never asked me to give it back to him. What kind of idiots didn't lock their doors after their house had been attacked by hunters and lit on fire?

Did these boys never learn?

The inside of the house surprised me. I hadn't been back here since before they'd started working on it. All the furniture had been removed, and the walls had been repainted in the living room and dining room.

I hated that for Dash. That he'd have to get rid of everything because it'd all been ruined by the smoke during the fire.

The entire kitchen had had to be gutted because that was where the actual fire had been. That was almost worse than any other room being destroyed because that was where the best memories of his father had come from. Though I guessed that didn't really matter anymore, because he had his actual dad back now, and that was far more important than any memory of sitting around the kitchen table with your loved one ever would be.

The kitchen was now all shiny and brand new. New appliances, countertops, cupboards, and just new everything. The walls had been painted a very light gray color. The cupboards were black. The countertops were white and granite.

The table had yet to be replaced, and a look in the cupboards proved everything in this room was empty.

I hoped like hell it would stay that way unless it was solely for Romero living here. Dash potentially wanting to move back here was a problem for another day, but it still left an unhappy, heavy weight in my belly.

The goddamn cat was nowhere to be found on the main level.

Finn had finally shut his stupid mouth, thankfully. That didn't stop him from watching me carefully with eyes full of concern.

Concern and maybe a little bit of pity.

I tried to ignore the looks and Finn entirely, but it was getting more difficult by the second.

“I’m going upstairs.” I pointed to the door that led to the basement. “You go check down there. Yell if you find him.”

I knew Binx wouldn’t be in the basement, which was the only reason I was comfortable sending Finn down there. I just really didn’t want to look at him anymore.

“I don’t even know what in the fuck I’m looking for,” Finn grumbled under his breath as he stomped toward the door. He grabbed the handle and wrenched the door open. “Fucking beautiful. Now I’m being sent down to the creepy basement to potentially be slaughtered. Haven’t I been through enough crap lately? Now this shit.”

Please.

We’d all gone through enough lately, and we weren’t whining at every dang turn.

I headed up the stairs and expected a sense of loss to fill me. It never came. This had been my home for a little while, and despite Chucky’s attack on Dash and myself, I still felt like this had been a safe home for me. I’d had so few of those.

Instead, walking up the stairs, I just felt like this chapter had finally closed for me, and I was okay with that.

Something pulled me past Dash’s bedroom and to what had once been my room. The room was completely empty now, barren even. The door to the coffin closet was open, and there was nothing inside. The walls had been painted a nice boring shade of white.

A blank slate.

A fresh start.

Perfect for Romero, but completely unnecessary for Dash.

I rubbed absentmindedly at my chest, directly over my heart. Goodness, but I needed to not think about him ever leaving me. I couldn’t take it.

I closed the door behind me on my way out. The cat wasn't in there, and I didn't need to leave the door open so he could run in there and hide from me. He'd do it too, just to mess with me. He didn't usually treat me with that type of behavior, but I wouldn't put anything past him. He liked to cause trouble.

I checked the bathroom next. Another room with a fresh coat of paint with basically everything else removed from it, save for a dirty towel hanging off the counter and a lone bar of green soap in the shower.

Romero really needed to stock him up with some basic necessities. Who washed their hair with a bar of soap for goodness' sake?

Binx obviously wasn't in the bathroom, so I turned the lights out and closed the door behind me.

Dash's things had been removed from his room and replaced with a twin bed and no headboard. The comforter and pillows were boring and white.

That was where I found Binx.

Sometimes it was still a shock to see him with white fur and those little tiny black spots. I didn't think it was something I'd ever be able to get used to. He blended in with the comforter.

"Hey, Binxy boo," I cooed in a super girly voice. "I've been looking all over for you, boy."

I sat down on the edge of the bed and placed my bag beside me. I dug around in it, looking for the vials of blood that I'd taken from Julian's plant room in the basement. He had a refrigerator down there, and I had stumbled upon the vials of blood when I'd been nosing around through his things. I hadn't told him I'd taken them because I hadn't wanted him to tell me no or try to stop me.

Though why he had vials of everyone's blood was beyond me.

Mine had been the only one missing, but I had no problem bleeding myself for a good cause.

"Finn," I yelled without looking away from the inside of my bag. "I found him. Get up here and help me."

I only kind of knew what I was doing, but I figured if anyone would be able to help me, it'd be Finn. He had plenty of experience when it came to spelling blood.

I wanted to use it to tie Binx's lifespan to that of the members of my coven. That way we'd never have to lose him. He could be our mascot or something ridiculous like that.

"Who the fuck are you?" Finn shouted from the stairs.

Perhaps I should have taken my own advice and locked the damn door after we'd arrived. On the plus side, if it was some type of serial killer who'd walked through the door, I was thankful they'd run into Finn first. He'd already survived one serial killer, so I was sure he could find it in himself to live through another encounter.

"I know who *you* are," Romero growled. "Get out of my house, boy. You're not welcome here."

Welp, not a serial killer then. Just a crazy man. It was hard to tell which was worse.

I sat the vials on the bed, making sure to do so gently because I didn't want them to break. It wouldn't do to get blood all over Romero's boring white comforter, and then I'd have to steal more blood, and that would just be ridiculous.

Binx still had not moved or woken up.

This was weird behavior from him, and it sent a chill creeping down my spine. He always greeted me. He didn't like many people, but he loved me very much and wasn't afraid to show it.

"Binx," I called out hesitantly as I reached for him. I ran the tips of my fingers gently along his spine.

Still, he did not move.

He.

Did.

Not.

*Move.*

His body did not rise and fall with every breath he took because my beautiful Binx was no longer breathing.

“Binx,” I croaked out, choking on the emotion clogging my throat. “Come on, pretty boy, open your eyes for me.”

What was that dripping down my face? A nose bleed? No, I was fucking crying again.

I didn’t want another reason to cry.

Not this fucking reason. Never this.

“Binx,” I whispered brokenly.

I couldn’t stop running my fingers through his fur. His body wasn’t warm. How long had he been here, alone and dead?

He’d died all alone, and that didn’t seem fair to me. None of this seemed fair to me.

“Ariel, what the—”

“Oh shit.”

This was okay. I could fix this. There was still a chance that I could make this right and fix Binx. I wasn’t going to give up now.

“What?”

“What is she talking about? Fix what?”

Had I said that out loud? Damn.

“Call her dad. Tell him to come and get her. She’s not going to be able to drive herself home in this condition.”

“I don’t have her dad’s phone number. I don’t even know who the hell her dad is. I have Quinton’s number, I can call him.”

“Rain. Rain’s her dad. It doesn’t matter. Just forget it. I’ll call him. You’re as good as useless.”

I didn’t need them to call my dad, because I wasn’t going home. I needed to fix Binx. Binx needed me right now.

“Binx is the dead cat, I take it?”



Fuck Finn. He didn't get to talk about Binx being dead. He wasn't going to be dead for much longer. We could fix him, I could fix him.

"She's not making any sense, man. I think she's lost her damn mind, and who could blame her after what the Council's done to her. Unless you're hiding some *Pet Semetary* shit around here that only she knows about. In that case, you're better off leaving the cat dead, trust me."

I pulled my dagger out of the bag and whirled on Finn. I was done with him talking like that and talking about me as if I wasn't in the room or in my right state of mind.

I wasn't in my right state of mind, but who the hell was Finn of all people to call me out for it?

"Whoa," Romero shouted as he rushed to my side. "Put that thing down before you hurt yourself. Your dad wouldn't forgive me if you got hurt on my watch."

I thrust my dagger in Finn's direction. He hurriedly stumbled backwards in an attempt to escape me and fell into the wall.

"You brought me in here for this? I thought you'd be a cool chick because of your work with taking down the Council. I had no idea you'd be this fucking crazy. I can only handle my own crazy. I'm out of here."

"You're not going anywhere," I snarled at him as I advanced, clutching my dagger in my hand like a lifeline. "I still need your knowledge with blood magic, and you're not going anywhere until I get what I want from you. Then you can scurry back to whatever hole you've been hiding in, and you can die in there for all I care. Just not before you help me."

Surprisingly, Finn's face softened, but I was too far gone in my own grief and shock to take notice of it.

"Ariel, no. Just no." Romero plucked the dagger out of my hand as if I were a child. He grabbed my arm and dragged me away from Finn and out of the room.

And away from Binx.

I didn't try to fight him. In my heart of hearts, I knew there was nothing I could do for Binx anymore.

I didn't know how I was going to deal with his death. There'd been a lot of death in my life as of late, but this one hit me the hardest. He might have just been a cat to some people, but he was no ordinary cat to me. He was my friend, and I loved him.

"I don't mean to sound callous, but that cat is dead and no blood magic is going to bring him back to life. That freak show boy in there is right about you. You're starting to sound a little crazy. I think you've finally hit your breaking point and snapped. It's been coming, and we've all been on the lookout for it."

I allowed him to guide me out of the house and to the front steps. He forced me to sit down and then crouched down in front of me. His eyes were immensely kind, and his face had gone entirely soft. That struck me as odd for Romero, and like everything else that had happened to me today, it hit me hard.

"Binx fulfilled his purpose, and he did it well. I know you don't like hearing that, but it's true. That cat should have been dead months ago, but I believe he held on so he'd be able to make amends with leaving you all and saying his goodbyes. From what I hear, he hated most people but adored you from the moment he laid his eyes on you. Keep that thought close to your heart, and you'll make it through this. Luckily for you, you'll never have to go through it alone and we're all here for you."

Dash had warned me, but I'd been too wrapped up in everything else I had going on to listen to him. And now it was too late. I'd never gotten to say *my* goodbye, and now I never would.

"My boy and I, we'll take care of him. He was our responsibility, so it's only right that we're the ones to take care of him."

He patted me awkwardly on my leg and stood up. I hadn't even realized he'd sat down beside me, that was how out of it I was. I kept crying, and it

felt like maybe I'd never be able to stop.

Who was I to talk shit about Finn being a crybaby when I was just the same?

Eventually, Romero went inside to make some phone calls, and Finn came out carrying my bag.

I followed him to my car without a word, and I didn't even try to fight him when he very gently settled me into the passenger seat. Finn got behind the wheel of my car, and he floored it out of there, driving like a freaking madman.

He didn't talk to me on the ride home, and it wasn't until we were parked in the garage that he finally spoke.

"Do you know what the difference between you and the other Council members was?" he asked quietly, and I shook my head. Not because I didn't know, but because I didn't feel much like talking at the moment.

He turned in his seat to face me, and I could tell by the look on his face that I wasn't going to like where he was going with this. I wasn't going to like it at all.

He pointed first to my head and then my heart. "It's what's in there, and what's in there. But what you did today with me was not okay. You're better than that, and you're better than all of them ever were combined. When you're over your grief and remember this conversation, you'll get what I'm trying to say."

Did anyone ever really get over their grief? I knew it faded in time, but I didn't think it ever really went away entirely. Given Rebel and then Finn's story about his family, I figured he already knew an awful lot about grief.

"Do better, Ariel Kimber. *Be* better. Otherwise, you're not worth it, and you'll only turn out to be an utter disappointment just like the rest of the Council members."

With that, he got out of my car and left me there crying even worse than before.

At least this time he didn't slam the door behind him after he got out.

I stayed out there by myself for a long, long time after that.

When I did drag my sorry ass inside nobody brought my trip to the cottage or Binx up. But they did treat me like a fragile piece of glass that needed to be coddled and treated with the utmost care.

And for the first time in my life, I didn't mind. It was actually exactly what I needed.

It didn't hit me until I was standing on the grass staring down at the slab of marble that would forever be Binx's tombstone that I hadn't ever been to a funeral before.

I didn't think watching someone being tossed into the dirt in the basement counted. If it did, then I supposed I had been to a couple of them before.

I didn't want to be attending this one right now. It made the whole thing seem more real, more permanent.

There was no going back from this, and I absolutely hated every second of it.

But I was here for the whole goddamn horrible thing because that was what you did for the ones you loved. Even if they were dead, you showed up. That didn't stop it from feeling like one of the hardest things I'd ever had to do, because that was exactly what it felt like to me.

Why did all the important things have to feel like the hardest?

It had been Damien and Julian who'd thought to pick out the stone and put in a rush order on it as soon as they'd learned Binx was gone. Very thoughtful of them.

It read:

*Here lies Binx.*

*Beloved cat. Best friend. Troublemaker.  
Always and forever in our hearts.*

That troublemaker part had made me want to laugh and cry all at the same time. I was glad they hadn't tried to overdo it and make Binx into something he was not. That would have been horrible.

Binx wasn't necessarily friendly.

He'd hated most people and had no issues showing it.

But he loved me, and I loved him. Same with Dash. So that beloved cat and best friend were absolutely spot on for not only myself, but Dash as well.

And he would absolutely and without a doubt be always and forever in our hearts. There would never, ever be forgetting a cat like Binx.

He hadn't actually been my cat because he'd technically belonged to Dash, but could you ever really claim a cat like that? Binx had laid claim to me since the moment I'd first stepped foot into Dash's cottage. Since he had claimed me, I had only felt it was right that I claim him right back. So I had, and he'd willingly become my cat as well.

So Binx had been my first pet ever, and he was gone.

And now here I was, lost and not knowing what to do with all the emotions running through me.

There was a very big part of me that almost resented Romero more by the day by being here when Binx no longer was, but I knew just how wrong it was to even think like that. If Dash and/or Romero ever got a whiff of me thinking that way, they would be completely devastated by my thoughts. And who could really blame them?

I was a mixed ball of fucked up emotions, and I really needed to figure out how to get a handle on them before I exploded and people got hurt, myself included.

I looked around at all the people circling Binx's grave, and I still couldn't believe what I was seeing. All my guys and the dads were here. Baxter and

Isobel had shown up with Rain. Brighton stood stoically between Tyson and Quinton, right where he always belonged. Now, whether or not that was where he actually wanted to be was a completely different story and very much not my problem. It was just too bad for him that two Alexanders were able to bully just one lone one. The poor little shit never even stood a chance.

But what was more was that all the boys who'd taken up residence in Marcus's former house had shown up for this. None of them had anywhere else to go, and every single one of them had jumped at the chance to stay here and had latched on. Them being here for Binx's funeral just proved they were here to stay and wanted to be a part of our lives, they were here to show their support.

It was very kind and very much appreciated, but also very surprising.

The only person who hadn't shown up was the doped up chick from the motel basement. She hadn't shown up because she had actually disappeared not long after waking up at Marcus's house the day after. Nobody knew where she'd run off to, and not a single person had offered to look for her.

I heard grumbles. The boys didn't like her, but it was for reasons they were keeping to themselves. I didn't like it and thought we should have at least made an attempt to hunt her down, but no one agreed with me. Maybe after our commitment ceremony, I would be able to convince them. For the moment, we all had our hands full.

No one had dressed up for this event, we'd all gone our everyday casual. Except for the boys. I didn't know if they were dressed in their everyday outfits. I had only ever seen them naked or in rags before. Today they were dressed in nice clothes that were very much not rags. Damien had kitted them all out with brand-new wardrobes.

Rain, Quinton, and I had all handed our credit cards to Damien and given him no limits. He had been in heaven, shopping for two days straight. He'd gotten clothes, shoes, furniture—like bunk beds that were delivered yesterday—and bedding for everything. He'd gotten them everything they could

possibly need.

They had everything they could need and were finally in a safe environment. That was one burden checked off the list that I could be incredibly thankful for.

I was still very shocked to see them all show up for a cat's funeral. It said a lot about every single one of them.

I expected to be out here doing this in the clearing where the tent was and where we did our moon rituals, but no, that wasn't the case at all. And if not there, perhaps at the cottage, but that had been a hard no as well.

We were in the far corner of the backyard at the Alexander house. A dainty white picket fence had been put up in a ten-by-ten foot radius surrounding the area.

It had me wondering about the amount of space still available. Like, who the hell else were they planning on burying out here?

Maybe me?

I liked that thought more than ending up in the basement dirt. I was incredibly happy Binx hadn't been put down there. I didn't think I could have ever gotten past that. I felt like Finn here.

Obviously, we didn't all fit inside the white picket fence.

My coven members squeezed in, plus the dads. Trenton and Simon stood at the little gate but didn't come inside.

Everyone else stood outside the fence as well. They most likely couldn't even see Binx's stone, but they still stood patiently waiting out there.

"Would anyone like to say anything?" Tyson called out to everyone. "Now's the time to say it."

Anything, really?

I eyed the guys, giving them all severe looks that promised pain if they talked shit about my beloved cat.

Personally, I didn't know if I'd be able to speak in front of all these people. What I had to say, my goodbye to Binx, was private and something I



felt didn't need to be a public spectacle. Not that there was anything wrong with this way of doing things, because there wasn't. Binx deserved all the love, and if this was what the others needed in order to be able to say their goodbyes to him, then I was here for it.

Maybe they needed us to do this together. What the hell did I know?

Dash stepped up beside the stone, and Romero didn't hesitate to step up beside his son and wrap his arm around his shoulders. When they stood there, shoulder to shoulder like that, leaning on each other, I felt ashamed of myself for my earlier thoughts about being upset that Romero got to be here when Binx didn't. For fuck's sake, Dash needed his dad here with him more than anything. I needed to banish those horrible, selfish thoughts and never ever allow myself to think them again. No one could ever know I thought of them in the first place.

Dash cleared his throat, and Romero leaned in closer and laid the side of his head on his son's shoulder. Seeing them together actually settled something in my soul but didn't heal the crack in my heart.

Only time would help mend that. At least I thought that was how it worked.

"For the longest time, Binx was the only source of joy in my life. In a home where violence and abuse were the everyday normal, I'm sure you can understand what it meant to me as a little boy to have someone that was my own who was loyal and brought me happiness every single day. When I found out my dad had sent him to me and why..." His words choked off with emotion, and I watched him visibly struggle to find the right words.

The problem was there were no exact right words in this moment and never would be.

"I loved him, and he was made to love me. The only person he ever loved more than me was Ariel, and that made perfect sense to me. And, well, everyone else, he sort of..."

Both the twins laughed.

“He was a terror,” Abel said through his laughter.

“A mean little shit with multiple personalities,” Addison added.

“We loved him. Mischief and mayhem are always things we can get behind, and Binx rocked both of them.”

Everyone else had something to say after that, but I didn’t really hear them. My brain fogged over, and my vision went blurry.

I had no idea how long I stood there and zoned out, but it must have been a good long while because all of a sudden, I was standing there with only Quinton beside me.

He squeezed my shoulder gently to get my attention. I was glad he didn’t try to smile at me. “You take all the time you need, baby.”

I nodded once before my eyes dropped back down to Binx’s stone.

“Will you do me a favor?” I whispered.

“Always. Just ask it of me and you’ll have it.”

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**I** sat on the grass with a notebook open in front of me with a pen on the blank page. Quinton had gone into the house and got them for me while I’d gotten comfortable on the grass.

I wasn’t quite ready to leave Binx’s spot just yet. Not until I got out my proper goodbye. Which was what the pen and paper were for, but I kept stalling, waiting for the right words to come to me.

It took a while, and when the words finally came, they flowed right out of me. Along with the tears.

*My dearest Binx,*

*I’ve never had to do something like this before, say goodbye to someone I loved. I’m not quite sure I know exactly how to do it now or if I’m even going to be able to do it properly.*

*All I know is that for you, I’m willing to try.*

*Though, there's a really big part of me that just wants to say fuck it and never say goodbye. Like, if I never actually say the words, then you can't really be gone, right?*

*Or is that stupid? I guess it kind of is.*

*Whatever, I guess it doesn't even really matter.*

*I'm going to miss you, my Binxy boo. So, so very much. I hope you're in a better place, but I don't know. Recently, I died, and before I came back, there was nothing but darkness, and I have no memory of what happened while I was there. I hate the thought of you being in the dark with absolutely nothing. I hate the thought of you just being gone.*

*I feel like you took a piece of my heart with you that I'll never ever be able to get back.*

**T**he tears made it impossible to continue, so I tore the page out of the notebook and folded it up carefully. I placed it inside the magical box that I'd been given for my birthday. I didn't want anyone else ever being able to read my private thoughts.

I felt slightly better for having at least gotten something out, and I knew it would not be the last time I wrote to my friend. That way I never really had to let him go.

I held the box tightly to my chest as I curled up into myself on the grass.

I didn't know how long I lay out there for, but I must have eventually fallen asleep.

I woke up briefly when Dash carried me into the house, but fell back asleep before he put me into my bed. It might not have been healthy, but I stayed in bed for the rest of the day, crying my heart out.

Dash stayed with me the whole entire time.

I had made my mind up and finally came to a decision. I couldn't wear the dress.

No, that wasn't right. It wasn't that I couldn't wear the dress, but that I wouldn't wear it. It was incredibly beautiful, and I appreciated Rain giving it to me. It was something I would cherish for the rest of my days, but it felt wrong to wear it myself.

I knew Rain well enough to know he wouldn't be mad at me. Otherwise, I probably would have worn the damn thing just to make him happy even if it would have made me miserable to do so. Sadly, I didn't think there'd ever come a time when I wasn't that little girl on the inside trying to impress my dad and make him proud of me.

Unfortunately for me, that left me without a dress and with no idea what to do with my mother's. I did know that I didn't want to stuff it back into its box and cover it up in tissue paper, never to look at it ever again.

That wasn't going to work for me.

Neither was not having a dress. Thankfully I had a boyfriend who could sort out all this shit for me and he was always more than happy to take the wheel for me.

Damien to the rescue. Again. I was lucky that man loved me, otherwise I'd probably end up getting a bill in the mail for his time and expertise.

He'd shown up not fifteen minutes ago with some type of store mannequin, along with several garment bags. I loved him for it, because he'd taken some heat from Quinton for leaving in the first place and told him to mind his own damn business when Uncle Quinton demanded to know where he was going and why.

Old habits were hard to break for that man.

I always found my boyfriends even more attractive when they told Quinton to stick it where the sun didn't shine and then went and did their own damn thing.

I sat back, not even bothering to help, as I watched Damien manhandle the mannequin and get the dress onto it. The thing had no head but was surprisingly not creepy at all. He got the dress on and in place, and set the whole thing up in a well-lit corner of the room.

I... liked it.

It would be on display for me to see every time I came in here. It wouldn't be shoved in my face at all times, and it wouldn't be on display for everyone to gawk at all the time. It was tucked away in my closet, and it wasn't like I was throwing raging parties in here and inviting the whole crew to come hang out.

"Thank you," I murmured in a hushed voice. I didn't think I was capable of speaking any louder at the moment because my emotions were threatening to choke me to death.

That shit was turning into my new normal.

Fuck, my eyes stung with unshed tears I absolutely refused to let fall. I was not going to cry over this dead woman anymore. I knew that sounded callous and horrible, but I needed to give my energy to the people who were in my life now and no longer focus on the dead people in it.

Like my mother.

And Vivian.

And even Marcus of all people.

I needed to let that shit go and move on with my life. It was time and all a part of growing up and becoming the adult I now claimed to be.

Damien gave me a soft, loving look as he brushed his hair off his forehead with the back of his hand. It was well past time for him to get a haircut, and I didn't think I'd ever seen him so disheveled before. He usually prided himself on being very well put together.

This was my fault.

My bullshit with the Council and then Quinton forced him to stay at the big house and had sort of derailed his life for a while now. I had the sudden urge to apologize to him, but I knew that wouldn't go over well.

"It's a beautiful dress, but you're right, it's most definitely not you. I couldn't even imagine you wearing this Barbie beast dress for anything. I saw that picture of your mother hanging on the wall in your bedroom, and she was absolutely gorgeous, very much like you. This dress was clearly all her though, and it looks like it was made specifically for her. You need your own dress, something that was made just for you, something to call your very own. And I've got just the thing. I'm going to blow your mind. Prepare to be amazed."

He was out of his goddamn mind if he really thought I looked like my mother. I knew I looked like the girl version of Rain, and I was more than okay with that. Rain was a good-looking guy. Both Isobel and Romero thought so. I was sure plenty of other people did as well when he wasn't looking at them like he wanted to murder them.

I was wise enough to keep my mouth shut. Arguing with these boys usually only got me a headache and the need for a time machine. Not fun, really not fun.

He held up the first garment bag and hung it up. The zipper was at the bottom of the bag, and he had to bend way down to start to unzip it.

What he revealed wasn't anything like the princess dress in the corner. In fact, they weren't even on the same level, that was how different they were.

I loved it.

“Where did you get this?” I asked in a hushed voice filled with awe.

“I made it. I made all of them.”

My mouth dropped open and words escaped me. He had to be joking, or maybe I hadn't heard him right. Since when did Damien make clothes? Was this something he'd always done, and I'd just been too self-absorbed to notice before?

What else didn't I know about him?

I felt like a terrible girlfriend. Well, not girlfriend anymore, but the girl he was engaged to.

“No you did not,” I blurted out, hopeful that he'd tell me I was right and he'd just been joking before. I wanted him to tell me that there weren't a bunch of important things about him that I didn't know. I wanted him to tell me that he hadn't purposely kept this part of himself a secret from me. What else was he hiding?

He eyed me cautiously, like he was worried my head might explode all over his pretty dress.

And it was pretty. Pretty in a sort of boho gothic way. Was that even a thing? Whatever, it so was now.

It was mostly black with part of the skirt in the back being a beautiful mulberry color I thought would look lovely with my skin tone. The sleeves were full length and would go all the way down just slightly past my wrists. They were also see-through, with delicate black stitching in the shape of viny flowers. The bodice was black, form-fitting, and showed absolutely no skin. No, the skin was left to be on display in the back. The majority of the back would be exposed, save for a few thin ribbons that crisscrossed and tied into sweet little bows right above the skirt. The skirt was full length and would sweep the floor while I wore it, even with how tall I was. There were several layers of fabric, making it look full and flowing. The front was all black, with the mulberry overlaying the full skirt in the back.

Now this was absolutely a dress for me. “Can I try it on?”

Holy hell, I’d never been so excited about a dress before in my whole stupid life.

“You really like it?” he asked shyly, hesitantly.

Damien shy?

Who the hell was this man?

“Um, no.” I shook my head, and he blinked at me slowly, looking like he wanted to cry. “I don’t like it. Like isn’t a strong enough word for what I feel toward it. I don’t like it, I effing love it. Damien, you’re incredible. I almost don’t even want to see what the other dresses look like because this is the one. This is it, it’s mine.”

I was blown away by his talent and skill. Why had he been hiding this from me? I wanted him to make all my clothes for me from now on.

He blushed at the compliments, and I swore my eyes about popped right out of my head. This was a whole new side of Damien I’d never seen before. Who knew?

“The store next to Fortunes just went out of business about three months ago, and I’ve had my eye on the building. Jules thinks I should go for it, but I don’t know. He’s the only one of the guys who knows about my designs and my dreams. Right now, it’s almost like my dirty little secret, and I don’t really want it to be anymore. It’s never been my intention to hide it from them, but...” He shrugged as he trailed off, looking uncomfortable.

I actually understood what he was trying to say. In a group as large as ours, it could sometimes be nice to keep something to yourself in order to maintain your individualism. It wasn’t meant to be a secret, but it was just something you wanted to be all *yours*.

I got him even though I felt like he should have had an easier time of this than I did. He was just one in the large group. I was one, but one with an intimate relationship with each and every single one of them.

“I can’t do it in our house anymore though, because there’s no room for



it. The house is too small, and I've started keeping all of my clothes that I wear here in my room, and the ones that I'm working on in my closet at home. I've run out of space, and I've started taking over Jules's. Trust me when I tell you this has not been making the man happy."

Oh, I believed him. I just thought it was funny. Sometimes they were like an old married couple, and when they bickered, it was hilarious to me. I didn't think he'd appreciate hearing my thoughts on the matter, most men didn't enjoy being laughed at.

"So what you're saying is you really need the space so that you have room to work and room for all your stuff. There's room for you to do it here, but you don't want that because you'll have people all up in your business all the time. What I don't think you're understanding, though, is that by moving it into the building right next to the shop, they are all going to be all up in your business there too."

I thought that was obvious and not something I should have to tell him, but here I was.

Boys.

I sighed as I shook my head.

"Right. So I hate to have to say this to you, but I'm going to have to be the one to say this to you. You're going to have to talk to Quinton about this."

He opened his mouth to interrupt me, but I held up my hand to silence him before he could even get started. I hated to have to lecture him, but Quinton needed a champion, and I felt like I was the one best suited for the job and probably the only one outside of Tyson who wanted it.

"You're going to hurt him if you don't tell him and then just buy a whole building behind his back. Now I know that sounds ridiculous, but that's just how he is. He likes to know everything that's going on with all of us, his family. He thinks he's our leader and in charge of all our happiness and well-being. He's already going to feel like shit because he doesn't know about

this. And I'm not saying this to upset you, but this is going to be like a slap in the face to him. Please, just let him know what's going on. You don't have to listen to what he has to say about it, but you do have to be honest with him. Him and the rest of the guys too."

Quinton, even when he wasn't with me, was the absolute biggest pain in the ass I'd ever have in my whole freaking life. This was part of the reason why I argued with him all the time, even when he hadn't done anything to provoke me. I just knew he always deserved it for whatever reason.

I expected Damien to argue with me or tell me to stop taking up for Quinton the A-hole. I expected everything but what I got from him.

His face softened sweetly, and he stepped away from the dress and moved into me. He wrapped his arms around me and pulled us together until we were pressed tightly against one another. He cupped my cheeks with his hands and his warm eyes met mine.

"You're right," he murmured as his eyes dropped to my lips and they grew hungry. "You're always right when it comes to Quinton. I shouldn't keep things from him, but he's just so damn overbearing at times that I find myself rebelling against him as if I were a naughty child and he's my stern, disappointed daddy. It really makes it hard to share or even want to share things with him sometimes. He's a hard man to deal with at times, but I'm glad he has you in his corner to stand up for him when we are all tired of his lame ass bullshit. Thank you for always looking out for him when the rest of us are too damn stubborn or fed up to deal with him properly."

Yeah, that wasn't what I thought he was going to say at all, but I definitely liked hearing it. It also kind of made me sad at the same time, because prickly Uncle Quinton gave so much of himself to all the people he loved, and it bothered me to not see him get all of that back in return.

It was easy to take a person like Quinton Alexander for granted because if you were important to him, he would go to hell and back for you without so much as a complaint, and even if you dicked him around, it wouldn't matter

because to him, love lasted forever. And by forever I meant until the day he took his last breath, and even then he'd probably look out for you from the afterlife until you joined him there. I knew that if I somehow ended up somewhere he wasn't, he would find me and drag my ass back to where he was.

I knew the others would do the same for him, but it was less obvious than with Quinton.

"I don't want to talk about Quinton anymore," I told Damien. I just wanted to be here with him in this moment with the two of us. We didn't get to spend enough time with just the two of us as I would have liked. I had nothing against Julian, I loved him just as much as I loved Damien, but some one-on-one time was very much appreciated every now and then.

"I don't want to talk about Quinton anymore either."

Finally, we were on the same page about everything.

"Do you want to see the other dresses anyways?" he asked.

No, I did not want to see the other dresses. What if I fell in love with another one? It wasn't like I could wear two dresses, I only needed one.

I shook my head, and he grinned at me with his eyes twinkling mischievously.

"Want to make out in your closet?"

Uh, heck yeah I wanted to make out in my closet with him. I wanted to do way more than make out with him, but just not in my closet because... "Carpet burn on my ass is not fun."

He laughed happily. "You can be on top."

I shook my head as I sighed sadly. "It's not fun on your knees either." I knew this one for a fact as well.

Damien was not to be deterred. Clearly, he had a one-track mind, no aversion to carpet burn, and an almost unhealthy need for my pussy.

I loved it.

I loved him, and I couldn't wait to show him just how much.

He leaned in, and his hands went to the backs of my thighs. He lifted me off my feet and carried me over to the counter in the center of the room. He placed my butt gently on the countertop and released me.

Well, he'd just solved my problems with carpet burn.

"Kiss me," I murmured as I tugged on his shirt, attempting to pull him back to me. He had promised me a hot make out session, and I was more than ready for it.

"Oh, I plan on it," he said as he reached for the hem of my shirt. He dragged it up my body, and I lifted my arms to help him out. He dropped the shirt to the floor, and his eyes dropped to my white lace see-through bra. "But I didn't say anything about kissing your lips."

Okay then. I thought we were going to make out, but I liked the sound of this even more. A happy shiver ran down my spine, and my nipples immediately hardened. Of course he noticed, and his eyes darkened. He liked what he saw, and the desire in his eyes made me squirm on the countertop as wetness pooled between my thighs.

He grabbed the top of my leggings and my panties. "Lift your ass up and help me get these off."

I placed my palms flat on the countertop and lifted my ass like he wanted me to. He quickly dragged my clothing down my hips and over my ass. I dropped back down on the counter, and he dragged my clothes down my legs and freed me of them. He tossed those down onto the floor beside my discarded shirt. He didn't bother removing my socks from my feet, and my lips tipped up in a small smile at seeing the bright yellow fuzzy socks on my feet. It looked funny on my mostly naked body, and I didn't know why he had left them on.

Maybe he thought they were cute?

He didn't mess around as he lifted my legs, placed my sock covered feet flat on the countertop, and spread my thighs wide.

I felt like I had never been so exposed before in my life as his eyes

dropped to my bare sex.

He looked like a crazed man who'd just locked eyes on his prey. I was the prey, and I was about to be eaten.

Yes, please.

Damien sank down to his knees before me and wasted no time burying his face in my pussy. I lay back on the counter, not caring about the clothing I felt beneath my back and head. Clothes Dash had probably painstakingly folded neatly and left for me to put away myself in my drawers. I'd make Damien clean it up after we were done in here since the mess would really be all his fault.

He ate at me as he slipped two fingers inside my pussy and began thrusting them in sync with the way he lapped at my clit with his tongue. I made a whiny, needy sound as my back arched, and I greedily reached for the light blond hair on top of his head. I fisted my fingers in his hair and held on, probably yanking a little too hard, but I wasn't going to let go unless he complained. And right now, he couldn't talk to complain because his mouth was too busy doing such better things.

He did something with his fingers, curling them inside me, and if there had been anyone else in the room with us, I might have found myself embarrassed because of the noises I kept making. Instead, it was just him and me and the orgasm I felt starting to build inside of me.

My toes curled.

My back bowed.

My lips parted in a silent scream.

My fingers tugged at the blond locks of his hair.

And I came all over his face with his fingers buried inside of me and my hips thrusting up as I rode my orgasm out until the tingles had faded and my body was spent. I lay back, limp like a dead thing, as I released his hair. Now I slid my fingers gently through the soft strands, an apology of sorts for my rough treatment of his poor scalp.

I almost wanted to thank him for the gift he'd just given me, but I didn't want to insult him. Men were funny when it came to their sexual prowess, and the stupidest thing could set them off, insulting their delicate sensibilities. I had enough of them to have learned this a very long time ago.

Damien had other ideas, and he'd yet to get himself off.

He stood up before me and wiped the back of his hand across the shiny, wet lower half of his face. He wiped my juices away, and I found the whole thing amusing because he used the hand that still had two very shiny fingers that had just been up inside my pussy.

Damien didn't seem to notice or care. His eyes greedily ate up my body as he ever so slowly started unbuttoning his pristine, long-sleeved, white button-up shirt that probably cost the same amount as the average person's weekly salary.

All of his clothes were designer and likely stupid expensive. Even his underwear.

Still, he had no problem dropping his shirt to the floor as if it meant nothing to him, because it likely didn't.

He toed off his loafers and kicked them aside, out of the way. I lay there in silence as I watched through half lowered lids as he unbuttoned his slacks and pulled the zipper down.

Most women might offer to help, but not me. I knew what this was, and he didn't want my help. Oh no, this man, this beautiful specimen of a man standing before me, was putting on a show that was just for me. All for me. He knew just how glorious his body was to look at, and he wanted my eyes only on him like how he'd looked at me. Like how he was still looking at me.

I wondered if he tried to command this type of attention when he and Jules were together, alone and being intimate. I wanted to know the answer to that question almost as much as I knew I needed my next breath to live.

The two of them had been very careful with me thus far, careful to mind my feelings, and they tiptoed around their relationship sometimes. It drove

me fucking nuts.

Maybe sometimes all a girl really wanted was to watch her boyfriend get his dick sucked by her other boyfriend. Where was the harm in that?

They both acted like if I were to see their cocks touch in a penis kiss that I might never want to ever look at either of them again. The whole thing was ridiculous and made me want to slap the shit out of both of them.

For now, I was trying to have patience with them because all good things were supposed to come to those who waited... or whatever. Patience was not my strong suit, and my time with it was running out.

“Are you even paying attention to me right now?” Damien hissed, and my eyes snapped right back up to his.

Oh boy.

Someone was not happy with me in the slightest. His eyes promised retribution for allowing my mind to wander while he was placing his body on display for me.

He felt slighted.

And I felt like an asshole.

How was I supposed to tell him that my mind had wandered away from him to the images in my mind that I'd conjured up of him with our shared lover? With any of the other men, I would have had no problem bringing it up because we'd all agreed on how much we believed that secrets didn't make friends. They were both being stupid, but in time, they'd both learn their mistakes, I was sure of it.

“Of course I'm paying attention to you, Dame,” I said in a voice meant to soothe him as I sat up in a rush. “You're standing right in front of me, and you're mostly naked. How could I not pay attention to you? You're the only thing I see right now.”

I hated to say *right now*, but facts were facts, and I had a whole lot of men in my life. Though none of them were ever far from my mind for very long. How could they be when each and every one of them owned their own piece

of my heart and my soul?

His nostrils flared as he stared down at me with a haughty look on his face that I had not seen directed my way since the very beginning, not since before I realized they were Brothers of the Flame. Hell, maybe he'd even looked at me like that after I knew what they were and what I was to be to them, but perhaps I'd blocked it out of my memory. Stranger things had happened since then.

"I know one way to make sure I'm the only person on your mind."

He grabbed me roughly by the hips and pulled my ass until it was halfway hanging off the edge of the counter. My feet slipped and fell off, my legs dangling over the side. Damien let me go to shove his briefs down his legs in a rush. His cock sprang out, thick and very, very hard.

I reached for it immediately, almost as if I could not help myself and simply had to touch it. I had just about wrapped my greedy fingers around it when he rudely pushed my hand away.

"Oh no you don't, you little minx. I am glad to see your eyes on me and finally focused, even if it did take my cock to get you there."

Oh boy.

My pretty boy really did not like the thought of me being able to zone out when he was taking his clothes off, and I couldn't say I blamed him. I'd hurt his precious feelings, and now I was going to pay for it.

I was ready, more than ready, and oh so very willing.

He rubbed his cock through the slickness between my legs, coating it before lining it up with my hole.

He didn't hesitate to thrust his hips roughly, burying himself all the way inside my pussy from stem to root.

He set a fast, brutal pace as he grabbed my thighs, lifting my legs up and pressing them against my chest, folding me in on myself. He leaned over me, pressing his chest into the backs of my thighs, and pinned me to the counter.

He had me trapped right where he wanted me, and I couldn't move while



he fucked me like a madman, grunting with each jerk of his hips. The room was filled with the sounds of our skin slapping together, his grunts, and the needy, hungry noises coming out of my mouth.

I clutched his arms, holding onto him, my fingernails biting into his skin. As he pounded into me, a thin layer of sweat covered both our bodies, though I didn't understand why I was sweating when he was doing all the work.

It didn't take long for that familiar tingle to start again and my toes to curl in. My orgasm blew through me, and the inner walls of my pussy clamped down on his cock, gripping him tightly. His thrusts stuttered as he ground out, "Fuck, honey. Your pussy is so tight around my cock, I can't hold myself back any longer. It's like you're strangling the fuck out of me, and now I have to come or I might pass out."

I didn't mind, we could come together. I liked it like that.

His hips stuttered to a stop, and I felt his cock jerk inside of me as he came, filling me up with his release. His finger tapped my clit, and just like that, I erupted alongside him.

He pressed his sweaty forehead to mine and closed his eyes. "You drive me so damn crazy it's stupid, and I lose my mind around you every time. Only you bring that out in me."

I was glad Julian wasn't here to hear his words, because they might have hurt his feelings. It might have made me a terrible person, but I loved hearing them. They made my heart sing. I was sure they had things just between the two of them that I didn't want to hear either for fear of the same thing.

I never wanted to do anything to hurt any of them, ever.

I loved them all equally but individually.

And I liked knowing they loved me just the same.

"I want you to get cleaned up, and then I want to see you in your dress."

I glared at the bossy man. "You better at least kiss me first and then tell me you love me, or I'm not doing anything you want me to."

He smirked at me like a fallen angel. "I think I can handle that."

He wasn't wrong.

First, he kissed me, wet and deep and with plenty of tongue. Then he promised to love me forever and ever.

Then we took a shower and got cleaned up together. After, of course, we got a little bit dirtier in there.

And, just in case you were wondering, the dress fit me perfectly. Just like I knew it would.

I had absolutely no part in the setup whatsoever. The guys had wanted it like that because that was what I told them was going to happen. They wanted the whole thing to be a surprise to me. I hadn't exactly wanted to participate, so I'd let them be.

They didn't think I was lazy, and they weren't trying to leave me out. I had zero reason to get involved with it, and it felt nice to give over control of something that was my choice this time.

They were big boys, so if they wanted me or needed my help, they'd let me know.

I just didn't like the thought of them thinking of me as fragile or treating me any differently than they usually would have.

I'd gone through something a whole lot not fun, and most people would probably seek therapy for it afterwards. I dealt with things my own way, and it wasn't like I hadn't been through several other horrible things in my short time here on this earth. Obviously I hoped my luck would change, and I'd never have to go through something terrible again, but I wasn't stupid. Shit happened, and some of it sucked. That was life. You just needed to keep going and not allow the bad things to beat you down.

My guys had a hard time understanding that because they wanted nothing but good to fill my life. I got it, because I wanted the same for them.

Anything else was unacceptable.

Eventually we'd settle into something that worked for all of us and they would stop being this way with me. Either that, or I'd have to kick their asses and they'd just fall in line like the good boys I knew they could sometimes be.

The only dark spot in this for me was Binx, and that would stay with me forever—*he* would stay with me forever.

“I'm probably the worst person to be in here helping you.” Rain's hand landed gently on my shoulder as he spoke.

He was wrong. I thought he was the perfect person to be here with me in this moment. I'd rather he be here with me than anyone else.

Romero snorted. “Speak for yourself.”

Okay, so I loved that Rain was in here with me. Romero? Not so much. So I supposed he had the right of it.

Romero hadn't been invited to join my private party here in my bedroom and bathroom today. He'd obviously been invited to join in the day as a guest, but for whatever reason, he'd followed Rain up here like he'd had some right to be here or something.

I didn't have the heart to ask him to leave.

This day was important to his son and likely important to Romero because of that. I wouldn't ask him to leave just like I wouldn't ask my own father to leave.

Romero Flynn didn't have to like women all that much because of his history with them, but I'd be the closest thing he'd ever have to a daughter. That, and there was some part of him that gave a shit about me because I'd been the one to rescue him from his living nightmare.

We weren't exactly friends though. Romero didn't have friends, and I wasn't exactly jumping through hoops to try and make him be my friend. And that worked just alright for me.

Just maybe he was here because he wanted to be my friend.

And wasn't that a terrifying thought.

I turned to Romero, who was casually sprawled out on my bed, and forced myself to meet his eyes. "Are you sure you wouldn't rather be outside with your son? No one is forcing you to be here with me right now, you know."

Okay, so I wasn't going to ask him to leave, but if he was going to complain, then I'd give him the opportunity to bail if that was what he needed. I wasn't a total asshole. Or maybe I was, who the hell knew anymore.

Romero sat up on my bed and threw his legs over the side. The man was lucky he didn't have his shoes on while he was on my bed like that. We'd be having serious words then. I took pride in my things in order to keep them nice. Growing up with next to nothing would do that to a girl. Something he should understand. Not because he'd grown up with nothing, but because he'd been robbed of absolutely everything by monsters for half of his life.

He'd looked far too comfortable to give a shit.

Now he looked serious, and his sole focus was directed right at me. He was a lot like Rain when he was lasered in on you like that, and it could be something that made you want to piss your pants.

Good thing I wasn't scared of either of them. Rain would rather die before ever harming me, and I had my suspicions that Romero felt very much the same way, even if we weren't friends.

"You think I'd leave you alone at a time like this?"

"She's not alone, asshole," Rain snapped at Romero. "She has her own damn dad, and I have no plans of ever leaving her alone. You're one to talk if we are going to start talking about how our kids were raised."

Oh boy. Those were fighting words if I ever heard them. Now I was mad at Rain. Could he not go one day without fighting with someone? Of all the days I didn't need drama, today was the day.

Romero completely ignored my father, thank Christ.

“My son is out there right now with the rest of your coven. They are putting together something beautiful just for you, and that’s fucking great and all, and I’m sure you’re going to love it, but that left you alone up here with no one other than your father right after losing a man who meant a whole lot to you. He might have turned out to be a total motherfucker in the end, but that doesn’t take away from the fact you loved him and he meant something to you. The way I see it, that means you shouldn’t be alone right now and could use all the family you can get. And you and I are family, make no mistake. Even without my son in the picture, you’d still be my family. You made sure of that after what you did for me.”

Apparently he didn’t want to be my friend after all. Family trumped friends all day every day.

I sucked in a shuddering breath and held it for several seconds before releasing it. This man would not make me cry today, that was not happening. It would ruin the makeup it had taken me what felt like forever to carefully apply.

“Romero,” I croaked out in a hushed voice.

“Nope,” Rain said as he put his hands on his hips and glared at us. “We are not doing this shit today. Nobody gets to cry before the actual ceremony starts. If you want to cry then, I’m all for it, but not before. It’s not happening on my watch, you hear me?”

I laughed softly. “I hear you, Dad.”

“You do know you don’t always have to be so damn mean and bossy, right?” Romero grumbled, but he wasn’t fooling me. I saw the way he looked at Rain and the heat in his eyes.

Rain could be as mean and bossy as he wanted, and Romero secretly loved it.

For the first time ever, I found myself wishing they got together. Then again, they might just kill each other.

I wasn’t brave enough to say anything, because let’s face it, my mouth

usually had a mind of its own and I could never control it.

“We have gifts for you,” Rain told me, completely ignoring Romero. Romero looked at him like he was promising retribution for that later.

Rain would pay, he knew it, but he looked like he wouldn’t care when that time came.

I seriously loved my dad.

But... “I don’t need any gifts. Definitely not on a blessed day like today. I have everything I already need right here with me. Don’t give me anything.”

Rain didn’t listen to me. Not that I actually expected him to, but it wasn’t in me not to try. He’d given so much recently that anything else was going to make me uncomfortable. If he gave me too much, the scales would become unbalanced. What did I have to give him in return?

“That’s right,” Romero murmured quietly. “You need something old, something new, something borrowed, and something blue. Your gifts. Though the borrowed one really can’t be considered a gift because you’ll have to obviously return it later.”

Now I really was in danger of crying. These rough men who seemed like they were half dead most of the time were here for me in a way only a mother and bridesmaids normally would be. I didn’t have those and never would, they both knew it, and it was incredibly beautiful that they went out of their way to do this for me. It helped showcase just how much they really cared about me.

I would expect this out of Rain. Romero was a completely different story.

“I’ll start out with your something borrowed,” Rain said as he clasped my left hand.

He slipped a thick gold band onto my thumb. It fit me perfectly. I knew it was his wedding ring without him telling me.

Raw emotion clogged my throat. It was such a precious gift for him to allow me to wear it.

My heart raced, beating brutally against its cage. What if I lost it?

“I can’t—” I choked out.

He cupped my cheek and smiled kindly at me. “Don’t look so scared, baby girl. You won’t lose it. It’s safe with you, I have faith. You should too.”

I blinked away the tears forming in the corners of my eyes. I couldn’t afford to ruin my makeup now. There was no time for that.

I cleared my throat and pushed the emotions back down. “I’ll be careful with it. I promise, Dad.” I hugged my hand to my chest and clenched it over my heart in promise.

Rain leaned in and pressed a sweet kiss to my temple. “I know you will, baby girl. You’re my heart, and I love you. I want you to know that, from the depths of my very black soul, I love you with everything that I am. You deserve all the happiness in the world, and I’m glad you’re getting what you want today. It’s going to be perfect and everything you could dream of.”

Oh shit.

He couldn’t say things like that to me. My lip trembled, and I hiccupped on a sob. So much for not crying!

I burst into tears.

Rain ruined my makeup. If anyone was going to do it, I was glad it was him and not some asshole being a tool.

“Talk about an epic failure,” Romero muttered as he forcefully shoved Rain out of the way. He pushed a tissue into my hands and ordered, “Fix your face before it gets any worse. Hell, just wipe all of that shit off and you’ll be ready to go. You don’t need it. You know you’re pretty as a picture without it.”

And that was supposed to make me stop crying? He couldn’t say sweet things like that to me on today of all days.

Romero usually wasn’t so sweet to people. Maybe I was just now realizing that he was always kind of sweet to me. I should probably pay more attention to him in the future.

My makeup didn’t need that much fixing. I bent down so my face



hovered over the little round mirror on the counter and wiped away the mascara running down my cheeks. I touched it up and tossed the tissue into the garbage beneath the sink.

“No more making me cry,” I warned them. Had they forgotten Rain said no crying until the actual ceremony?

“Well,” Romero drawled, “how about we make no promises and see how it goes?”

I whipped my head around and jabbed my finger at him, almost poking him in the chest. “No. Nope. That’s not how this is going to work. I’m tired of crying, even when they are happy tears. Tears suck. I’m so over tears.”

And that was no lie.

“Okay, fine.” Romero waved my words away. “Rain covered your something borrowed, but technically that can be your something old too. But the twins gave this to us to give to you.”

He produced a deep jewelry box and held it out to me. I took it from him with shaking fingers and flipped the lid open. My breath caught in my throat at all the sparkles inside.

“Wow.”

Romero took the box back from me and carefully removed the beautiful bangle bracelets. They were gold, thin, delicate-looking in the extreme, and had diamonds going all the way around the entire outside of each bracelet. There were eight of them, I counted.

“They wanted these to be your something old,” Romero explained as he began slipping them on my wrist one by one. “It’s something their dad bought their mother for Christmas one year and then started buying her a new one every year after that because she fell in love with it. I wouldn’t be surprised if those boys decided to carry on this tradition with you and you got a new one each year after this.”

*Deep breaths, Ariel Kimber.*

I couldn’t believe Addison and Abel had given me a gift so precious.

They had both adored their mother so much that they'd been completely wrecked when she and their father had died. Because she hadn't been a witch and had been excluded from the community, both boys and their father had worked their asses off to keep her protected and safe. It turned out to not really matter in the end, and that was what made this gift all the more insane to me.

I didn't think I'd be able to give any of my mother's belongings away as gifts. Even to the ones I loved most in this world.

"This is from that freak, Julian," Rain grumbled as he shoved another jewelry box into my hands. "It's your something new and something blue. If you ask me, he cheated you out of getting an extra gift by combining the two in one. But that's just my opinion."

I ignored my dad and flipped the lid open. I eyed the bracelet inside. It was a delicate white gold chain with a bunch of blue gemstones dangling off of it.

"It's blue lace agate. For hope and unity. For a bright future with all of you together."

How thoughtful and sweet of him. And finally a gift that made me want to smile instead of cry. I wished he was here so I could hug him. It was perfect and I never wanted to take it off.

Rain helped me put it on my wrist opposite the one my bangles were now stacked on.

With that over, there wasn't much else for me to do but wait—wait and let my nerves get the better of me. They were off the freaking charts, and I couldn't remember a time when I had been this jittery before.

If I had been allowed caffeine today, I probably would have rattled my way right off of my seat. I'd been forced to drink water and ginger ale all morning, but as the afternoon wore on and the hour grew later, Rain had allowed me to drink champagne while snacking on a cheese and meat platter he'd forced on me. I had told him I was too nervous to eat, but Rain wasn't

taking no for an answer, and I had been forced to choke some food down anyways.

I was happy about it now because I didn't want to pass out halfway through the ceremony. That would be a total buzzkill, but boy would it be memorable, to say the least.

I stared at my reflection in the mirror and couldn't help but think I hadn't done half bad. My makeup was way heavier than I normally wore it, but it looked good and definitely not slutty. I'd stuck with what I knew and kept it simple. Shiny, light pink lip gloss that had pretty little silver sparkles in it. Mascara in my lashes and a thicker layer of eyeliner than normal. Silver eyeshadow covered in a dusting of silver sparkles drew attention to my green eyes. My cheeks were pink but still shimmered with a light layer of gold dust.

I looked magical, and I'd never worn this much makeup before in my life.

I had spent a long time curling my hair to perfection. I had two thick braids on each side pulling the top front part of my hair back and away from my face. They were pinned together at the back of my head, and the rest of my hair was down and curled beautifully. I had tiny white flowers weaved into the braids, giving me a very sweet version of a crown.

My dress fit me like it was made for me, which it was. I hoped Damien made me more clothing in the future because he was so damn good at it.

Though he might not ever make me anything again when he found out I decided against wearing shoes for the night. He'd had several very fancy expensive pairs sent to me in the last couple of days, but none of them had felt right. We were doing this outside, and I wanted to be able to feel the grass beneath my feet. I hoped he would forgive me, and I would eventually find the time to wear all the shoes he'd sent me.

Just not today.

I had no idea what the guys were wearing, but I knew no one outside of Damien would have any issue with me showing up barefoot.

Besides, it was not like you could see my feet beneath my dress, and

given how beautiful my dress actually was, nobody wanted to look at my damn feet anyway.

Rain's phone chimed and he pulled it out of the inside pocket of his suit jacket to check the screen.

That was right. Rain, my surly, angry, hate most people's guts dad was wearing a suit. Black on black. He looked like a very well dressed, high-class assassin or perhaps more like an arms dealer.

I thought he looked fine as all get out and I knew—because he told me—that he'd taken Romero out to pick his outfit as well. They both wore the same exact thing.

I wasn't going to lie, Romero looked fine as all get out too.

There was a knock on the door, and I started to sweat. If I was going to make a break for it and run, now was the time to do so. I knew I wanted to spend the rest of my life with them, but that didn't mean today didn't slightly intimidate me.

This was the biggest commitment I would ever make in my whole entire life. I had a right to be a little nervous.

Isobel stuck her head inside the room. She didn't even so much as glance in my direction. She was too busy undressing my dad with her eyes to notice me.

Instead of being annoyed, I chose to be amused. She wasn't going to put a damper on my day by being a perv.

I didn't like the new way Romero was looking at her. It didn't fill me with glee.

"The guys say they'll be ready in half an hour," she informed Rain.

"Great, thanks," Romero practically purred. "We'll see you out there, sweetheart."

*Sweetheart?* What in the actual fuck was going on here?

She backed out of the room without bothering to look at him or me, and I finally let it get under my skin. She could have at least told me she liked my

damn dress!

What an asshole. Seriously.

I scowled at the closed door and almost wished she would come back so I could throw my hairbrush at her stupid head.

She was clearly blinded by her lust and laser focused on it and nothing else. I was over it in a really big way.

“Jesus, baby girl.” Rain laughed. “If looks could kill.”

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath so as not to turn my death glare on him. It wasn't his fault Isobel was obsessed with him. He couldn't help it.

“Everything is going to be fine, Ariel,” Romero said in a soothing voice. “I have a really good feeling about this.”

Oh good! Romero had a good feeling about this. That just made everything *perfect*.

Someone tugged on my hand and my eyes flew open. Rain grinned down on me. “Let's get out of here, baby. We've got half an hour. We'll take your 'Vette out for a ride. It's the best magic for your soul right now, and it'll make everything alright in your world. You'll see.”

Rain didn't give me the chance to tell him no or resist him. He pulled me out of my chair and dragged me out of my room. I looked to Romero for help, but he just smiled and shrugged at me. No help there. Great.

Rain dragged me out of the house and into the garage. Thankfully we didn't run into anyone because they were all out back getting things ready.

Rain ushered me over to the passenger seat of my car, and I allowed him to buckle me in. I hoped the car didn't break down and I was expected to walk anywhere, because I wasn't wearing any shoes.

Rain fired the car up, put down the windows, and hooked his phone up to the stereo. A couple seconds later, DMX and Machine Gun Kelly blared through the speakers. Rain put the car in reverse and floored it out of the garage and down the driveway.

Okay, so my hair got a little windblown and ended up looking kind of

wild. But my heart felt lighter than it had in a really long time as we flew down the road at an insane speed. My mind cleared, and I sat back in my seat, enjoying the ride.

Rain was right, it was good for my soul.

It also didn't hurt that his smile was so big it looked in danger of splitting his face wide open.

Really though, in the end, it was Rain Kimber who was the best magic for my soul. He was everything.

The sun had set, and night had fallen. The weather was perfect for spending the evening outside. It was warm, but thanks to the sun having gone down, it was not overwhelmingly hot.

The stars were out, and due to a lack of clouds, they were shining brightly in the sky like the perfect backdrop overhead.

We couldn't have dreamed up a better night to have chosen to do this. Someone somewhere must have been looking out for me, because things didn't usually go so well in my favor. I wasn't complaining, but I didn't miss the opportunity to tap my fist on the tree on the way past.

Knock on wood. Yes, I was superstitious like that. This witch couldn't afford to be stupid anymore.

Rain and I were gone just a little bit longer than the half hour Isobel had given us, but neither one of us cared. We hadn't needed words between us, but it had still felt like the absolute very best form of therapy I could have ever received.

Rain was the smartest man I knew, hands down.

Isobel had been in the house waiting for us to return, and she'd been freaking out like a crazy lady. Rain tried to calm her down, but even he couldn't control her. Not that he ever could.

It was not like they were going to start the ceremony without me. Waiting

an extra fifteen minutes wasn't going to kill them.

She followed Rain and me through the house and out into the backyard. All the while, she berated us for taking off without giving anyone a heads-up, and didn't we know we couldn't be doing that kind of thing on a day like today?

Like I didn't know that today was supposed to be a special day. Told you she was a crazy lady. I just wished she'd go back to ignoring me.

Rain entertained her nonsense and argued with her softly as we walked arm and arm through the woods and down the path. I tuned them out because I needed to, or they'd both drive me insane.

I was surprisingly calm and no longer anxious or nervous in the slightest. I was in the zone, and I was more than ready to get this party started.

As I walked through the woods, it was like my feet knew exactly where we were going, and I didn't even have to think about where I stepped. So much had happened in the clearing that I just knew they'd do this out there. It was our special spot, and despite being kidnapped out there and Finn attempting to taint my tent, it would always be a special spot.

Now we just needed to wash away all the bad and replace it with something good.

"I need to call someone and let them know you're back." Isobel's words finally penetrated, and I couldn't help but laugh at her. They already knew I was here. I'd felt the tug on the link I shared with Dash. He knew the moment I returned home.

Isobel didn't need to know anything about the link I shared with my ginger man. Outside of my men, it was no one's business, and I wanted to keep it like that. I felt like I lived my life under a microscope and everyone knew every stupid little thing. It was nice to be able to keep something private for once.

We made it to the clearing, and I stopped dead in my tracks. My breath got lodged in my throat and tears suddenly prickled my eyes. A-fucking-gain.



It seemed like today was the day for crying happy tears. Those were the only kind that should be acceptable in public. Somebody ought to find Finn and tell him that. Not me, of course, because then he could just toss my own tears right back in my face and nobody needed that.

It might ruin all of this perfection, and what I was seeing in front of me *was* pure perfection.

My boys had outdone themselves in the best kind of way.

As I looked around the clearing, I knew without a doubt this was exactly where I belonged. I had made a home here with these men, a real life for myself. They made me incredibly happy, and that was something I never thought I would be able to find in my life.

Yeah, sometimes they gave me a headache and made me want to throw things at them, but what was life without a little bit of passion? Probably boring, that was what.

I had lived a life full of abuse and heartbreaking loneliness. Then they found me, and my life was completely derailed in the best kind of way.

They had taken their time and worked their asses off to prove their love to me. They made me feel like I was worth it, because to them, I was worth everything. Vivian had spent so much time treating me as if I were worthless, and she'd worked so hard and been so good at it that even I had believed it for a while.

My guys made everything right in my world and they just made me happy. Each and every single one of them.

Which was crazy. What girl got the love of not just one incredible man, but seven of them? A lucky one, that was who.

The clearing had been transformed into something magical where dreams come true.

There were fairy lights strung up in almost every single tree surrounding the clearing. The tent was covered in fairy lights as well. The flaps were open, and I couldn't see inside, but there was light pouring out of it.

My eyes were drawn to the arbor in the center of the clearing. It was covered in fairy lights as well, but it also had white flowers all over it. There were white candles on the ground near the arbor, and they were in varying sizes and heights, every single one of them lit, the wicks burning brightly.

An aisle had been made out of white candles with more white flowers scattered on the ground. It started where we stood and went all the way to the arbor, only stopping directly in front of it.

My path to them was lit brightly, the way laid out in front of me. All I had to do was walk it.

“Isobel, go,” Rain urged. “I can take it from here.”

Honestly, I had forgotten she was standing on the other side of him. I had lost sight of pretty much everything but what was right in front of me.

I was captivated, sucked into the dream that had been created just for me.

It would be a night to remember, and it hadn't even really started yet.

It was a foreign feeling to me, because it wasn't one I often felt in my life, but I imagined this was what lucky felt like.

“They did all this for me?” I whispered in a voice that shook with my raw emotions.

Rain chuckled as he patted my arm gently. “I think you're underestimating just all the things that these boys would do for you. The list is endless. Still, I swear to you, my list is even longer.”

That made me laugh, but I didn't doubt the truth behind his words for a second. They were all crazy and I loved them for it. Make no mistake, I was crazy too, and the list of the things I would do for them was likely just as long.

It was either Isobel's big mouth or they must have just noticed me on their own, because they all came out of the tent to stare at me. I felt their eyes rake over me from head to toe from all the way across the clearing. The phantom touch of their eyes was a hot, heavy, hungry thing. It made me feel awkward feeling that touch while standing so close to my dad with my arm

through his. That look seared heat right down my spine and straight to my core. Yup, not something a girl needed to be feeling when she was this close to her father.

The guys headed toward the arbor, and instead of standing in a single file or something like that, they moved around the arbor in a sort of half circle.

Romero stood on the other side with Baxter, Brighton, Isobel, Simon, and Trenton beside him in their own form of a semicircle. I was happy to see them and only them here tonight for this. Family only. Private, exactly what I wanted. This moment wasn't meant to be one for people to gawk at or watch like a side show at the circus. It was just for us. People could join us later, just not right now.

I was glad that they seemed to understand the importance of this.

“Well,” Rain drawled, “what are you waiting for, baby girl? Your future is standing right in front of you just waiting for you to step forward and claim it. It's too late for you to turn tail and run away from it. These boys will chase your ass down and drag you right back here. There's no point in fighting it.”

He sounded like a proud papa bear, but it wasn't me he had pride for—it was them. I couldn't get behind my dad approving of my men dragging me around places if I didn't want to be there, but I guessed that was just Rain's parenting style.

I eyed Brighton and couldn't exactly say my parenting style was going to be all that different from my dad's. That boy didn't know it yet, and I was sure when he figured it out, he'd think differently, but his luck had changed the moment he met my coven just the same as mine had.

Wasn't it funny how the chance meeting of someone else could change the way your whole entire universe ran?

And we'd found ourselves here. There was no other place I'd rather be.

“Baby girl?” Rain turned us so he blocked the guys from my view and all I could see was him. I figured they couldn't see me around Rain either. Just how he wanted it. He was shielding me. His concerned green eyes swept over

my face. “You know I didn’t entirely mean that, right? If you want to run, I’m all for it. Just know that you’re taking me and Baxter with you. I’ll always have your back first. You’re my daughter, and if you need me to say fuck everyone else, then I can do that.”

Oh Jesus, he needed to stop this crap, because I so did not want to cry again.

“I know, Dad. I always know. And I love you too.” I sucked in a shuddering breath and forced myself to relax. “I’m not going to run. I know where my place is, and I belong here with our family. Though I would like to thank you for leaving Isobel behind if we were to go on the run. I love the woman, but there’s only so much of her that I can handle, and right now, it’s in small doses.”

His shoulders shook with his laughter. “She’s a handful, I know it. But she’s ours and she loves us. She deserves our love and respect in return. Don’t be like Romero and hate her just because she’s got the hots for me. It’s petty and not becoming of either of you.”

Good fucking God.

I did not need him cracking jokes about Isobel and Romero’s interest in him. We were not going there. If he wanted to have this conversation tomorrow, then sure, I’d be down for that, but not tonight.

“Shut up, Dad,” I grumbled as my lips twitched. “Maybe Romero will take care of her in a fit of jealousy, and he’ll put us all out of our misery.”

“Don’t joke,” he growled.

Who said anything about joking? I very wisely kept my mouth shut. I had been doing that a lot lately.

He arched an eyebrow in a show of arrogance. “Shall we?”

Suddenly my palms were sweaty and my heart beat overtime inside my chest. I was ready, but in reality, I had no idea what to expect out of what was to come next, because I had been stupid enough to ask to be kept in the dark.

I had been calm, the car ride had mellowed me out, but now that calm

was starting to fade and fast. It wasn't necessarily panic that was taking root, but it was something that kind of scared me, just in a different way.

What if I messed up and said the wrong thing? I hadn't practiced what I wanted to say to them. It was easier for them, they only had one person to say something to. I had seven different people to commit myself to.

What if I disappointed them? That would be horrible, and I would never be able to forgive myself. I knew they would forgive me in a heartbeat because that was love, but it would likely haunt me forever.

I could not mess this up.

I shook off my nerves and tugged on Rain's arm. "Alright, Dad, I'm ready for you to walk me down the aisle, so to speak. You're only going to get to do this one time. Be grateful for it, because I hadn't ever thought I would do it once. I had always planned on being a lonely old maid. My oh my, how the times have changed. Now come on, old man, my destiny awaits, but it's not going to wait forever."

He swept his free arm out grandiosely in front of us. "After you, baby girl. I already told you I would follow you anywhere."

And he did. He walked beside me down the path lit with candles and strewn with pretty flower petals. He followed me all the way to the arbor where my men and the rest of our family waited for us.

It was showtime, and all of a sudden, I was scared out of my freaking mind.

I also could not wait.

I stood underneath the center of the arbor all by myself, shaking on my bare feet. Rain had walked me to this spot, kissed me on the cheek, gave every single one of my guys a death glare that would have sent weaker men running, and then he'd gone to stand right next to Romero.

I was left standing alone in a really pretty dress with no idea what to do with myself or how to proceed.

Goodness, why had I told them I wanted nothing to do with the planning and left everything up to them? How bloody stupid was I?

I fidgeted, my fingers twitching, and I ran the fabric of my skirt between my fingers. It felt nice and all, but it wasn't enough of a distraction to make me feel any better.

Ugh, this was pure torture. Thankfully Quinton stepped forward to save me before I changed my mind, said to hell with this shit, threw dirt in their eyes, and peaced *the fuck* out of here for good. Which was actually something I considered the longer I stood here by myself.

Quinton stepped right up to the plate before I could bolt. Bless him, he always did have the best timing.

It also seemed right that he was the person to start this off. It was his idea, after all. He always took on the mantle of leader for our coven, so it was also very much right that he got in there and led by example. That was how real

leaders led.

He stepped under the arbor with me and grabbed hold of my hands in his. I immediately felt at ease with his hands on mine. He soothed away all of the panic, and the urge to run had completely disappeared from my body.

It was then that I actually noticed for the first time what he was wearing.

His feet were bare, like mine. He had on black slacks with a white, long-sleeved button-up shirt that wasn't tucked into his pants. The sleeves were rolled up almost all the way to his elbows, exposing the flame tattoos licking their way up his arms. The shirt wasn't buttoned all the way up to his throat. The top few buttons were left open, exposing his skin, and if he shifted just right, I might even be able to catch sight of the tattoo above his heart of my name.

I glanced around the semicircle that was my men. They were all dressed exactly the same as Quinton. Each one of them looked absolutely delicious in their attire. I hadn't known what I'd expected them to wear, but it sure wasn't this.

They all looked relatively relaxed and very comfortable in their own skin, definitely so in their clothes. They made me so very happy that I had decided to wear this dress that Damien had made just for me instead of my mother's dress. There was no way that beautiful monstrosity would have fit in here.

But this dress I was wearing was absolutely perfect for this night and for the way they were dressed.

Quinton's lovely brown eyes stared down into mine. They were warm and tender, and my heart melted into a puddle with just one glance.

"I have the paperwork inside the house that you'll need to sign in order to make this official, but we can do that later. I had to con an ordained minister into signing the damn thing without actually being present for this, and maybe I strong-armed him a little bit. But don't you worry about that. I messed with his memory, so thankfully that traumatic event isn't going to stick with him. I also already made Rain sign it as our witness. Now it's just

waiting on your signature.”

He grinned at me devilishly, and I just knew I wasn't going to like what he said next. “I've got your signature down, I've been practicing, so if you think you're getting out of making this official, have no fear, I'll just go right ahead and sign that bad boy for you... *wife.*”

Dear Lord.

This man really was just too much at times, and he drove me flipping nuts.

The people around us openly laughed, Rain and Tyson being the loudest. This was just the kind of high-handed behavior my dad could get behind, and Tyson sure loved to support his uncle.

I squeezed Quinton's hands and held his gaze. “Quinton Alexander, you are the biggest pain in the ass that I will probably ever have in my entire life. I just hope you know how lucky you are that I love you, because a lesser woman would not put up with this nonsense from you.”

I shook my head in disgruntlement as I dropped his hands and took a step back. “Dad,” I called out, and he was suddenly at my side. I held out my hand to him, and he placed the box I'd given him earlier in it. “Thank you.”

I had thought long and hard about how I wanted to do this. I'd found the store online and picked out what I wanted. Rain had gone and picked them up for me because the stupid place didn't do shipping, which was obnoxious in this day and age.

The guys had given me a ring, and I only thought it was fair if I did the same for them. But I didn't think they needed something as fancy as mine, just something that marked them as taken for the whole world to see. I went with wide black bands, and I had the undersides engraved with cursive lettering that read, “Till Death Do Us Part.”

I performed a little magical mumbo jumbo on them, and once they slid on one of those fingers, that sucker was never coming off. They'd either have to cut their finger off to remove it or wait until I died for the magic to break its



hold.

But I wasn't going to tell them that. I would let it be their own little special surprise.

Since Quinton was the closest, I'd do him first. "Give me your left hand, please."

He held out his left hand to me, and I plucked one of the rings out of the box. I slipped the ring onto his finger and couldn't help brushing my fingertips across the top of it lovingly.

I bent over his hand and placed a soft kiss on top of his ring and heard him suck in a sharp breath.

I dropped his hand and stepped back. I had things to say, but they would come when I could say them to all of them.

I made my way around the arbor, stopping in front of each of them.

Tyson held out his hand without making me ask for it. His smile was so big and bright as I slipped his ring on his finger that I imagined it hurt his face. I didn't think I had ever seen him look so happy before.

Dash openly cried when I slid his ring on his finger. Happy tears on Dash's face were a beautiful, miraculous thing to behold. I reached up and swiped one of the tears up with my fingertip. I popped the finger in my mouth and sucked off the salty moisture. Tears of joy... fucking delicious.

Damien didn't make me ask for his hand either. He bounced on the balls of his feet as he plucked the ring right out of my fingers and slid it onto his own damn finger. He practically vibrated with smug arrogance, and I couldn't stop the laugh that bubbled out of me.

Julian stood as still as a statue while I slid his ring onto his finger. His eyes were so hot as they watched me that it felt like a physical touch. I bent over to kiss his ring, like I had Quinton's, but Julian had other thoughts. He grabbed hold of the back of my neck and jerked me forward until my body slammed into his. My mouth dropped open, and he swooped in to press his lips against mine. He kissed me fast and sweet before stepping back and

winking at me.

I heard Rain grumble something unfriendly, and I wanted to laugh. If any of the others had pulled that move, Rain wouldn't have cared, but because it was Jules, Rain thought he had a right to be upset.

“Best thing anyone's ever given me, slugger. I'll never take it off.”

The joke was going to be on him if he tried.

The twins stood side by side as they waited for me. I didn't know which one to go to first, and I didn't want them to think I was picking favorites because I didn't have one when it came to the two of them. They looked at each other knowingly, and they both nodded at the same time as if they were agreeing silently to something.

Addison stuck his hand out to me first, and I slipped his ring on. As soon as he had it on, he pressed his palm flat against his chest right over his heart. I slipped Abel's ring on his finger, and he immediately mirrored his brother with his palm pressed flat against his chest right over his heart as well.

“We love it,” Addison swore.

“Just like we love you,” Abel finished for his brother.

My salt and pepper twins were taking this more seriously than I'd ever seen them be about anything before. I appreciated that.

I squared my shoulders and turned to face them all. The easy part was over, now came the part I knew I was going to struggle with. I grappled with my emotions often, and there was no lying and saying it hadn't been a serious struggle to get here. But I wasn't really one for making grand speeches about love. I had no problems telling them that I loved them, but this was very different from that. This was a one-time thing, and I absolutely could not afford to get it wrong.

I fisted my hands in the fabric of my skirt as my eyes went from one man to the next.

My eyes stopped on Quinton, and I cleared my throat. “Uh, just so you know... I promise *not* to obey you. But I *will* absolutely love you in sickness

and in health for the rest of my days, even when all I really want to do is punch you in the face.”

Everyone but Quinton laughed, and my cheeks heated. I didn't know why they were laughing, I wasn't joking in the slightest.

Quinton opened his mouth, probably to say something unfortunate, but I raised my hand, stopping him. I wasn't done yet, and I didn't want interruptions.

“For richer or poorer,” I said as I looked around at the rest of them. “But, please, for my benefit, can we never do the poor thing? Because I've already been there and done that. It wasn't necessarily fun, and now I kind of like having nice things. I'm a bit spoiled now, and I like it.”

People laughed again. This time I shrugged it off. They could laugh at me all they wanted, I knew it wasn't because they were making fun of me. They were all here because they loved me, and that was all I needed to focus on.

“Till death do us part, all of us. But what's more” —I eyed Tyson— “I promise to always have faith and trust in you. I'll be there to help guide you through any dream. I'll be your best friend, always.”

My eyes moved to Julian next. “I'll hold your hand through any scary movie, and I'll never complain when you make me watch the stupid mushy ones that make you cry.”

I eyed Damien who still looked as smug as he could get. “I'll let you dress me up like your own personal doll whenever you want, and I'll even let you pick out all my clothes for the rest of my life.”

I tugged on the link to Dash in my chest so he knew it was his turn now. “I'll hold your hand in the dark when the nightmares become too much. Hell, I'll even let you do the same for me. And, if it would make you happy, I'll leave my shit all over the place so you can pick up after me because you're a crazy man who enjoys that kind of thing. And I will never treat you like how any of the other women in your life before me have treated you.”

My salt and pepper twins were last, and my eyes shifted back and forth

between them. “I will never pick a favorite between you, and I will always love you both equally. I’ll even fuck your brother for you while you’re already with me because that’s how you need it to be.”

Both of the dads were outraged and spitting out vile curse words that I was choosing to ignore. Whatever, this was my show, and I could go about it any damn way that I saw fit.

Though, to be fair, I had kind of stolen the show from my guys. Whatever they had expected or planned for tonight, I was sure it hadn’t been this.

But they certainly weren’t complaining, that was for sure.

My guys all moved closer to me, pressing in. If I didn’t finish this last bit now, they were going to pounce, and I wouldn’t get a chance to.

“Because that’s love. And that’s all I have to give you. Now it’s yours, all yours. Forever.”

“Forever,” Dash said as he reached for me.

“Always,” Quinton vowed as he pressed into my back.

Damien and Julian were holding hands. They both grabbed my right hand with their free hand and held on tight, including me in their little triangle of love. No words were needed to be spoken because that said it all.

Tyson inserted himself beside his uncle and he laid his cheek on my shoulder. “Always and forever,” he repeated softly.

My salt and pepper twins copied Damien and Julian, and they grabbed my left hand, holding it between them.

“Thank you for being our family,” Addison whispered as he caressed my fingers reverently.

“This is the best moment of our lives,” Abel whispered, sounding identical to his brother.

“You’re perfect,” Quinton whispered into my ear for only me to hear. “Thank you for always taking such good care of our family. Fuck, baby, but I love you. I couldn’t love you more if I tried.”

A tear escaped my eye and very slowly made its descent down my cheek.

They didn't need to give me fancy words, I didn't want them. I already knew just how much each and every single one of them loved me, and it was greater than the stars in the sky.

They held me close in their arms while I cried, and I couldn't help but think it might have been the best night in my life as well.

Even though I had completely hijacked it from the guys.

And it wasn't over yet.

Isobel was drunk.

I wasn't sure if Rain was too.

They were dancing together, and Romero couldn't take his eyes off of either of them. I would have been concerned for Isobel if Romero wasn't looking at her with just as much lust as he was looking at Rain with.

They were three psychos who did not need to get together. Two I could handle. Three was likely to burn the whole fucking place to the ground, leaving nothing but ashes and rubble in their wake.

The whole thing was concerning, but since I had a good buzz going myself, and I was happier than I had been in a really long time, I decided it could wait for another day. Or maybe I could get myself something that would completely wipe this nonsense from my mind forever.

I was choosing to remain happy because I didn't get to be this happy often, and really, they weren't hurting anyone and they were happy too. And, let's be real here, they hadn't had that much happiness in their lives either. They deserved this as much as I did.

Finally, though, it seemed Dash had taken notice of his father's fixation, and when he didn't have his eyes on me, they were on Romero. He looked slightly confused but mostly concerned. Boy, didn't that make me feel a whole lot better about the situation.

The guys had a lovely setup for after the ceremony, and everyone had been invited to it. Everyone showed up and, to my utter happiness, Raven's coven had been invited and they were all here.

I hadn't had the chance to speak with them yet, but it meant the world to me that they were here. I knew they had only been invited on my behalf because if it were up to the guys, I wouldn't ever be allowed to be around another coven again.

What surprised me more was that Finn had also gotten an invite and he actually showed. His two boys were with him at his side, but they were also very much separate. It wasn't anything obvious, but I could tell they were with Finn but they weren't actually *with* him. Good for them. Still, I wanted to corner them when Finn's back was turned and offer them a place to stay at the house next door that was very much away from Finn.

After my last conversation with Finn, I hadn't expected I would see him again for a good long while.

At least I had hoped.

Just my luck.

So far, he'd stayed away from me and kept his distance, and I hoped it stayed like that.

The guys had set up tables out here. They were long, rectangular, and had comfortable high-backed chairs pushed up to them. They were covered in white gauzy tablecloths. All the tables were set up with fancy-looking plates and silverware, along with wine glasses, champagne flutes, and all the good stuff. I had assumed they'd come from one of Quinton's storage units, but the man himself had told me without my asking that Rain had shown up with them. Apparently they belonged to my family, and Rain had no intention of taking them home with him after this. No, they were mine now. I had no idea what he expected me to do with them, but I was happy to keep them.

There were flowers and candles everywhere, covering every table. The whole thing was lovely but not over the top and in your face. I loved it.

There were small fires in low to the ground barrels with pretty cushions strewn all around them on the ground.

A table had been set aside with buffet style pans set up on it, and it was all ready to go, self-serve style. I didn't know who'd made the food, because it had been ordered from some catering company, but I did know that they'd only been called after Damien had offered to cook everything.

A bar had been erected beside the food table, and this I did not understand because over half the people in attendance were underage, myself included.

But I got it when Raven's coven took advantage of it.

Then the dads and Isobel.

Then the majority of my coven started imbibing as well, so I said to hell with it and went for the bubbly. Champagne was my absolute favorite, and I was finding it went well with all occasions. Breakfast. Lunch. Dinner. Dates. All the good stuff.

I didn't know who put the music on, but The Devil Makes Three played through the clearing. That was when the dancing had started.

At first it had just been Isobel out there by herself. Then Damien and Julian joined her, but they kept separate and danced intimately with each other. I had a hard time taking my eyes off of them. Right here, but out in the open and in front of everyone, they were being true to themselves and didn't care who was watching.

I loved every second of it, and given the way the rest of my guys were watching them, I could tell they loved it too.

Today was a day for love, so when Isobel dragged Rain out to dance with her, I decided to ignore them and go back to drinking my bubbly and watching all the happy people around me.

A lot of the boys had taken up the cushions around the fires, and they were given all the fixings for s'mores and sticks to roast the marshmallows on over the fires. It was the most I'd seen them relaxed since meeting them in that horrible basement filled with despair.



I held out hope for them that maybe with enough time here without anyone abusing them they might find the chance to heal. Hope wasn't really something I knew much about, so I'd keep my fingers crossed too, just for the hell of it. I could be a superstitious fool.

"We're going to need to do something about this before it gets too far," Dash said as he sat down in the empty seat beside me. I followed his line of sight and saw he was talking about this situation with the dads and Isobel.

I wanted to laugh, but I didn't because he was dead serious and laughing at him would be mean.

I decided to share some hard truths with him. "Your dad has been making eyes at my dad since the moment he got here. Rain doesn't let it bother him, but then again, Isobel has also been making eyes at him since she got here too. So he's had some time to get used to it. When your dad decided to start looking at Isobel with interest is news to me. Tonight's just the first time I've seen *that*."

I sat back in my chair, lifted my glass to my lips, and drained that sucker dry. I desperately needed a refill. Or a whole freaking bottle.

Dash looked like he'd either sucked on a lemon or he'd taken a bite out of a turd. I wasn't sorry in the slightest. Why should I be the only one having to worry about this all the time?

The good news was Dash appeared to be even more disturbed by the entire thing than I was. That made me feel loads better.

"Ariel," he muttered irritably. "My dad is celibate. I think he vowed to stay that way after I was born."

My lips tipped up in a tiny smile that I couldn't avoid.

Celibate, he'd said. I snorted. I wondered if he was just fooling himself and how much longer that farce would last.

Like he knew my thoughts, Tyson showed up with a brand-new bottle of bubbly. He placed it on the table beside my empty glass. He picked up the empty bottle on the table and leaned in to press his lips to my jaw. "You and

me, girl, we're gonna dance soon. Maybe after you finish this next bottle and you're nice and loose."

He nipped at my jaw playfully and then he was gone.

Clearly he hadn't really been around me when I had been boozing it up before, or he'd know that another bottle of bubbly might actually put me to sleep. I didn't need to be sleeping anytime soon, there was naked goodness to be had tonight and I didn't want to miss out on the fun. Nobody had made me any promises about tonight, but damn it, I was a girl who knew what I wanted and I was going to get it for myself.

I poured myself another glass, using one of the clean ones around the table. Just one more, and then I'd cut myself off.

I spotted Quinton by the bar with Raven and Finn. Raven had a red plastic cup in his hand. All these fancy glasses on the tables so we could be classy enough to serve drinks in red SOLO cups. The whole thing was vastly amusing because Quinton stood next to him with his own expensive bottle of bubbly in his hands, having forgone a cup entirely. Finn had a bottle of beer in his hand that was currently raised to his lips, and he had a small, weird smile on his face.

It struck me then that everyone was relaxed and having a good time. After so long of living under the cloud of the Council, we were now finally able to breathe easy, and doing it on a day that could have been stressful and extreme.

We had all needed a day like today.

A good day.

No, an absolutely beautiful day.

A day we would all remember, or at least myself and my coven would.

I moved here as a broken girl with only an evil woman to call my family.

Now look at everyone I had to call my own, all the incredible, truly amazing people in my life who loved me. There wasn't much more a girl like me could ask for or want.

I never thought to even hope to be happy because hope was the devil. Yet here I was, happy, and it was almost hard to believe.

“Do you ever feel like you’re living in a dream?” I asked Dash as I scanned the crowd. My eyes caught on Brighton and narrowed.

“Every single day since you’ve come into my life. Today more so than all the rest.”

My heart melted into a puddle on the floor.

I turned to face him, and he was already there waiting for me. His lips brushed against mine, and I nipped his bottom lip with my teeth.

He groaned as he closed his eyes. “I fucking love your sweet mouth.”

I just fucking loved everything about him.

“Let’s go dance before I take this too far and you end up on your back on this table with my face buried between your legs.”

Yeah, as much as I loved the sound of that, the kids didn’t need a show and my dad would kill him.

That, and sex in front of other people who weren’t my men wasn’t really something that ever interested me. And, given recent events, it likely never would.

I pulled away from him and nodded my head toward Damien and Julian. “I’ll meet you out there. There’s something I need to take care of.”

Brighton had a beer in his hands, and he needed someone to take it away from him and deliver a nice little talking to that he’d likely ignore but still needed all the same. I had thought Quinton of all people would have gotten that in hand, but apparently tough love wasn’t something big brother Quinton was capable of dishing out.

I did not appreciate that the job of getting that kid under control fell to me, but here we were, and we were a family for real now, so I had every right.

Tomorrow I’d give both Quinton and Tyson a piece of my mind about it.

Tonight, I would let them live it up and handle that little baby Alexander

my own damn self.

## RAIN KIMBER

“*I*’m so drunk,” Isobel sang in a happy voice that was very different from her usual voice. It was lighter and probably what she’d sounded like before the Council had gotten hold of her and did their damage.

I was happy she was happy, but I wasn’t interested in being around her while she was drunk anymore. The girl was handsy, and I’d had to pry her grabby hands off my ass twice now just in the last fifteen minutes. It wasn’t my idea of a good time.

I was too old for her. Too fucked up and emotionally unavailable. Still too devoted to the memory of a dead woman.

And no matter how much I told the girl in front of me no, she didn’t seem to care. In fact, it just seemed to spur her on more.

I admired her dedication, really I did, but enough was e-fucking-nough.

With Romero’s eyes finally off my ass for once and on Isobel, I had hope that maybe he’d take her crazy ass off my hands. If they started fucking each other, maybe they’d leave me alone and I could be in peace by my fuckin’ self again.

“You’re drunk too,” she slurred. “And as much as you won’t admit it, I know you want me. A girl has needs, Rainy. We should fuck.”

Kill me now.

She was wrong but right at the same time. I wasn't drunk. I'd been drinking water over ice and passing it off as booze. This wasn't the setting for me to drink and let my inhibitions go in. My daughter needed me to keep a clear head for her tonight so that *she* could let loose and enjoy herself.

But my dick definitely got hard for Isobel sometimes, as much as I hated it.

I needed to get her *the fuck* away from me. And right goddamn now.

I grabbed her arm, probably too roughly, and dragged her ass off the makeshift dance floor.

And that was another thing. I danced with her. I didn't dance. I didn't have a good time, that wasn't me.

I was afraid I was giving her the wrong message in a really big way.

And now I was just fucking done.

"Rain, what are you—"

"Take this," I growled as I shoved her down onto Romero's lap.

"What am I supposed to do with her?" he asked in surprise.

If he had to ask me that, then I was in more trouble with these two assholes than I had originally thought.

I walked away from that hot mess, and I didn't bother looking back.

They both wanted to chain me down, but after a long time of roaming on my own, the only person I wanted to be chained to was my daughter.

My daughter who currently had her finger in Brighton's face, that kid's beer in her hand, and her mouth was running. The kid looked bored, but he didn't fool me for a second. He did this shit for attention, and Ariel was just the person to give it to him.

I couldn't wipe the smile off my face if I tried.

She was happy, truly happy today, and my heart hadn't felt this light in years.

I sat my ass on the ground at a lonely fire with my back to the woods so I could watch the action happening all around me.

Baxter was making friends with boys for the first time in his life. My boy had a hard go at life so far, and I worried him living with me wasn't always the best thing for him, but I was far too selfish to give him up.

Tonight, both my kids were happy.

Months ago, that was all I would have thought I needed in order to make me as happy as I could possibly be. Now I felt like maybe something was missing, and that pissed me off.

I blamed Isobel.

And I sure as shit blamed Romero.

As my daughter would say, fuck my life.

I watched her dance with her men and laugh for hours.

I did it wishing her mother was here to see it, which was the stupidest thing I could have done, but once my thoughts went down that path, I couldn't drag them back out.

I stayed out here until everyone drifted away and Ariel was dragged into that stupid tent for reasons I absolutely did not want to know.

Baxter had planned a sleepover with Trenton and Simon, which was really their nice way of babysitting him without him thinking he was being babysat. The kid was insanely independent, and he didn't think he needed looking after because he was so used to being the one to have to take care of someone. Luckily for me, he idolized Trenton and Simon, so he was none the wiser.

I had no idea where Isobel had gotten off to, but I decided it was no longer my responsibility to look after her. She was a big girl, she could find her own way home if that was where she wanted to be.

My daughter was good, and my boy was safe.

For now, that was all that mattered.

I had a happy buzz going that I was certain didn't have everything to do with all the bubbly I'd drunk. I was fairly certain I had danced most of that off a while ago. But I was still overwhelmingly happy.

But now it was slightly different because there was a little nervous flutter in my belly, and I wasn't sure what to do about it. I also didn't understand why exactly I was nervous, but I was.

Perhaps it was because this was my first night as a married woman. Good grief, that sort of made me sound like an old lady. Like maybe now was the time to hand in my cool card and learn how to knit or something.

Gah, that was not the future I had envisioned for me. There'd be no little wifey waiting at home with an apron on with dinner in the oven. Unless we were talking about Dash, because he actually was the perfect wife.

They led me to the tent and that nervous flutter turned to dread. I'd forgotten to tell them Finn had contaminated the space with his presence and unapologetic bullshit.

Fucking Finn. I thought with how I felt about him, he'd always find a way of getting under my skin. Just thinking about him was obnoxious to me.

"What in the—" My breath caught in my throat as I stepped into the tent and tears filled my eyes.

The sight before me had robbed me of speech.



Either they just knew, or they'd changed things up to something nice for me. Whatever the case, I didn't care because the end result was *this*.

And this, like everything else they pulled off for me today, was incredible and took my breath away.

These men surrounding me, they really loved me. That was what all this effort they put into today told me.

All of the candles had been cleared out of here and lights had been strung up, covering the entire ceiling. The bed had also been removed, for which I was grateful because I certainly didn't want to lie where strangers had.

That was something that always weirded me out about hotels. How did you really know they changed the bedding every time after somebody had slept on it? You didn't, and that was skeevy.

The floor was covered in blankets and pillows that looked soft and inviting. I wanted to crawl into the center of them and surround myself with all the hard, hot bodies of my men.

It almost looked like a fancy fort in here. I had never been in a fort of any kind before, but I had read about them in books.

I cleared the emotion from my throat. "Where did the bed go?"

"Next door, but you don't need to concern yourself with that."

Julian was the only person who laughed at Quinton. He was braver than the rest of them.

Normally this behavior from Quinton would have set me off, but I wasn't letting him push my buttons today. He might get off on our fights, but it drove me freaking nuts.

Not today, sucker.

He grumbled unintelligibly under his breath when he didn't get a response from me. He could be so childish at times that it was downright ridiculous.

However, I was glad the bed had been handed off to some other poor fool. They should have offered the stupid thing to Finn, but then again, he

could be living behind a dumpster as far as we knew, the sneaky prick.

That was it, no more thinking about Finn. He was putting me in a bad mood.

Tonight was no night for bad moods. Good vibes only in my tent from here on out. Maybe the guys could help me come up with a spell that would make it so that no one else who wasn't us would be able to enter the space. Now why hadn't I thought of that earlier? It was brilliant.

Damien approached me as he slowly unbuttoned his shirt. My pretty boy, always putting on a show for me. I'd never get tired of it.

I watched him with a hungry stare that he probably got from most women just walking past him on the freaking street. I could get jealous just thinking about it, but I knew there was no point to it. He had eyes for me, he had eyes for Julian, and that was it. I didn't even think he knew other people existed unless he was looking down on them.

Damn, but I loved him a whole lot.

I cocked an eyebrow at him in challenge. "Are we playing this game again, Dame? I know you think I always end up being the loser, but it never really feels much like losing to me because I always end up getting exactly what I want out of it."

And wasn't that the honest to goodness truth?

The look he leveled on me was so hot it sent heat straight to my core, and I actually felt myself get wet.

Julian wrapped his arm around Damien's middle, placing his hand on our man's hip beneath his open shirt. "I'd love to know the types of games the two of you get up to together." He sent me a look that rivaled Damien's. "I imagine it's the kind where you end up getting fucked. Those are the only kinds of games he likes to play."

What other kinds were there? I frowned at him. I didn't want to play any other kinds of games with them. Mine always ended up with me getting orgasms.

They both laughed heartily at me, and I relaxed, knowing my orgasms weren't going anywhere anytime soon, if ever.

They looked so happy together, so carefree and in love, whether it be with me or with each other. I couldn't stop the words from pouring out of me. "You two should have your own ceremony, and you guys so totally ought to get legally married too. Tie yourselves together in as many ways as possible. Nothing would make me happier for both of you."

I meant every single word. As committed to me as Damien was, Julian was the same. He was my dark horse. I never knew what he was thinking or what he'd do next, but I did know without a doubt that he loved me, he loved Damien, and Quinton was his very best friend.

I wanted everyone that I loved to be just as happy as I was. I didn't think I could get much happier, but if anything could do it for me, that'd be it.

They both stared at me, blinking rapidly. I felt bad because they were no longer smiling. Outside of blinking, they almost seemed frozen.

What had I done wrong? I swore I never wanted to do anything to hurt them.

My heart seized and threatened to crack in several places. This was horrible.

Someone wrapped their arms around me, and I was pulled back into a firm chest. The arms were entirely covered in adorable freckles, and I knew I was in the arms of my loving ginger. As tense as I was, I still leaned back into his heat and silent support.

"Quit being dicks, guys," one of my salt and pepper twins growled darkly in a rare display of what sounded like pure rage.

No, I silently screamed. Not today. They weren't allowed to fight with each other today. It was against the rules, my rules.

I could write a goddamn handbook.

Ariel Kimber's rulebook for men—how not to give your lady a headache.

Or something like that. Though, I was fairly certain that if it came with a

dick, then it most likely came with a headache attached more often than not too.

I had seven of those suckers and two more who were currently waitlisted.

But now wasn't the time to be thinking of them either. They had no business in the tent with us on this night. This night didn't belong to my bodyguards. As uncomfortable as it made me, I knew they'd eventually get their own nights with me in the future. This just wasn't one of them. Just thinking about them tonight made me feel incredibly disloyal to these men I had just vowed to give my love to for the rest of my life.

Funny thing was though, not a single one of the men in this room would ever think me disloyal for my thoughts on my bodyguards. In fact, I thought they were all very much ready for me to get my head out of my ass when it came to them and stop trying to run from my feelings. If I was being absolutely honest, we'd all be incredibly relieved when I decided to be open and honest about my feelings toward the brothers.

"Seriously, listen to my twin," the other twin snapped menacingly. "You're both freaking our woman right the fuck out, and we're going to have to kick your asses if you don't fix this and do it like right the fuck now."

Ah, now I could tell the difference without having to see them to know who was speaking. The first one to speak had been Abel, the second had been Addison.

I almost patted myself in victory because I was finally learning how to tell their voices apart, and the key to it was their personalities.

I didn't think I had realized before then that my salt and pepper twins always came to my defense no matter what. Jesus, but they were both made just for me.

They made me feel a little bit better, but they still didn't take away my fear in the slightest.

"Oh, slugger, no," Julian said hurriedly as he reached for me. Damien didn't look mad that Julian let him go. Oh no, he reached for me as well.

Julian cupped my cheeks with his rough hands. Damien pressed himself into Julian's side as he leaned around him. He slid his hand around my side and pressed his palm into the small of my back. He applied pressure, and I was forced to fall forward. Dash let me go immediately. I landed against Julian's chest, and Damien didn't hesitate to wrap his arm around my back and pull me in as close to Julian as I could get.

"We love you more than anything, you crazy beautiful girl," Damien whispered as he shoved his face into my neck. He kissed his way up my throat and along my jaw, tasting my skin with his tongue along the way.

I shivered deliciously as my nipples pebbled to hard points, and I reached up to wrap my arms around Julian's neck.

Fuck. I didn't care what we were talking about anymore. I was ready to get my happily ever after on, naked style.

"He's right, sweetheart," Julian agreed as he pressed his lips into the opposite side of my neck. "We don't need some kind of ceremony between the two of us. It's never been something we've wanted because we always wanted it with the girl of our dreams. We were prepared to give each other up if that was what she wanted, but we got you, and you love us just as we are. You've never once even questioned us being together. You embrace us for who we are, flaws and all. Christ, Ariel, we both love you so damn much. You're the most beautiful person we've ever met, and it means everything to us that you've never asked us to be anything or anyone that we aren't. You're absolutely, without a doubt, perfect for us. Just perfect in general."

I wasn't perfect, I was far from it actually, but I did believe I was right for them and they were made for me. I also didn't want them to change for me, ever. They took me as I was and loved me despite my flaws and my faults. That was what love was all about, and I was here for it, here for every single second I could get with them, every ounce of love I could possibly soak up from them like some kind of emotional sponge.

"Tell me you love me," I murmured huskily before pressing my lips to

Julian's in a fast, hard kiss.

"Always," Damien whispered as he kissed his way up my throat and gently nipped my earlobe.

I shivered again, and my nipples were so tight and hard they were almost painful. They begged to be touched, pinched, and sucked on.

My panties were wet and sticking to my sex. I should have skipped them altogether, but I didn't want to accidentally leave a wet spot on my beautiful dress that might potentially stain, even though I had zero plans of ever wearing the thing again.

A wicked idea struck me, and an evil grin took over my face. I shifted to the side, not entirely out of their reach, but gave myself enough space to maneuver my arms and shift the skirt of my dress up around my hips.

"Hold this," I asked both Damien and Julian when I had my skirt up to mid-thigh. I was sure they thought I'd lost my mind, but I felt emboldened by my new status with them and didn't care if they thought I was a little crazy.

We'd been together a while now, so if they didn't already know that my quirks could be, well, *quirky*, then they ought to find themselves a new life partner who wanted to be collared and leashed. That sure as shit wasn't me.

They each grabbed hold of my dress and thankfully didn't ask me any questions. I so totally loved them, both of them.

I slipped my hands under my raised skirt, hooked my thumbs in my panties at each hip, and dragged them down my thighs. When they got to my knees, I let go. They fell down to around my ankles, and I carefully stepped out of them.

I tapped both my boys on their hands, and they let go without hesitation, allowing my skirt to fall down my legs. I crouched between them and pinched the corner of the front of my panties, avoiding the wet spot, and picked them up.

I stood back up and sought out Quinton with my eyes. I held up my panties as if they were newfound treasure and something to be desired. From

the heat flaring to life in his eyes, I knew I'd hit my mark.

“For your collection,” I said in a voice full of lust. Then I threw my panties right at him.

He stood there frozen in shock as my panties sailed through the air and smacked him in the face. He jerkily reached out and caught them before they could fall to the floor.

“You're welcome, *husband*.”

His eyelids lowered to half-mast, and I swear I saw a scarily possessive look in them beforehand. It caused more wetness to dampen my sex.

What could I say? I was a total sucker for Quinton Alexander's inner psycho. I couldn't wait for him to fuck me and call me wife with his dick buried inside me right up to his balls.

Disturbingly, he raised my panties to his nose and inhaled deeply. My core clenched, and I could hardly believe my reaction to his crude gesture.

He stuffed them into his pants pocket and smirked at me.

Yup, that totally backfired on me, but it still felt a lot like I hadn't lost either.

Tyson laughed. “You dirty fucker.”

Quinton shrugged carelessly. “She started it.”

That wasn't exactly the truth. He started it in the very beginning when he stole my panties and did who the hell only knew what with them. It was a mystery that I didn't think I'd ever get the answer to. It used to drive me nuts, but now I knew I had to let him have his secrets.

“Nuh-uh,” Julian grumbled as he grabbed hold of my jaw and turned my face back to him. “Not today. He doesn't get to steal the show and suck up all of your attention today. Today, he has to get over himself and learn that he needs to share you with the rest of us. That's just the way it is. Stop trying to spoil him. He's turning into the biggest brat in our group.”

I gaped at him. I had never thought of Quinton as a brat before, but I definitely spoiled him. It was my job to.

Julian's mouth came down on mine, and my lips automatically parted. His tongue slipped inside, and he poured every ounce of his love and feelings for me into the kiss. I tried to give it back to him and show him I cared just as much as he did.

He groaned into my mouth and pressed the front of his body into mine. His erection pressed into my stomach, and it was my turn to groan loudly into *his* mouth. He was just as turned on as me.

"Let's get this dress off of you." Damien pulled on the ribbons at my back, untying them. His fingers toyed with the buttons at the back of my neck, and I felt each one as he freed them.

He pushed the material off my shoulders, and my dress slid down my body.

It was times like these where I was happy I'd gotten used to them being naked and me being naked as well in front of all of them at once. It had taken some time for me to become completely comfortable with my body being on display in front of seven men at once, but I no longer felt self-conscious.

There was a certain kind of power in being the sole focus and center of attention for all these men, and when I took my clothes off, not a single one of them could tear their eyes off of me.

My scars could suck a big fat dick. They had no place here, and I won that round.

With the help of Damien's and Julian's eager hands, my dress pooled around my feet on the rug. I wasn't completely naked. I stood between them in nothing but a black, lacy, see-through bra that pushed my tits up to an incredible height, giving me the most amazing cleavage I'd ever had in my whole entire life.

Even I was impressed by my breasts at the moment. From the heated looks I received from the men around me, I knew I wasn't the only one. Thank goodness for that.

"Let's get rid of this as well. You're always beautiful, but nothing is



better than when you're completely naked." Julian's fingers slipped underneath the strap of my bra and slid it off my shoulder. I felt the clasp in the back as it was snapped open by the ever so helpful hands of Damien. They tore my bra off, and it was unceremoniously tossed to the side. I had no idea where it landed, and I couldn't care less.

I had more important things to focus on at the moment.

Like Julian's erection still pressed into my lower stomach, and Damien's pressed up against my spine.

The feel of them, the heat they gave off, the sheer size of them, and their impressive hardness like steel rods made my mouth water. I wanted them both, and I wanted them right now.

No more waiting.

No more playing the nice girl and letting them take the lead and then taking from them what they wanted to give me.

I was taking what I wanted tonight even if it meant I had to take them all firmly in hand.

I dropped to my knees between them and reached out to grasp the button on Julian's pants. I got the button undone and the zipper down with them both standing still as if they were frozen in shock or something. I thought I had taken them by surprise.

I shifted to the side on my knees and reached for Damien's pants as well. I freed his button, and the zipper went down.

"Both of you take off your shirts," I demanded as I curled my fingers inside the waistband of each of their pants and underwear. Well, Damien wasn't wearing any underwear, but Julian was. I pulled their bottoms down as they got busy unbuttoning and removing their shirts until finally the three of us were completely naked with me kneeling between them in the center of the tent.

I looked around at everyone else watching us with hunger in their eyes. "The rest of you better take your clothes off as well. It seems only fair, and I

don't want to have to ask you again. I'm okay with begging sometimes, but I can promise you tonight will not be one of those times. If anyone is going to be begging tonight, it's going to be the whole lot of you."

I meant every single word. Maybe they believed me because they instantly started shedding their clothes.

Hell yes.

No one girl needed this much dick in one night, but I was going to try and play with each and every single one of them.

I was one very lucky girl.

I licked my lips as I reached out with both hands and wrapped my fingers greedily around both Julian's and Damien's dicks.

They hissed out sharp breaths as their hands reached out for me. Julian cupped my cheek as Damien slid his fingers into the hair at the back of my head, and he fisted my hair in his tight grip. They both looked down at me as if I were the only thing they could see in that moment.

I pumped my fingers up and down their lengths, making them both grunt in unison. They needed lubrication and wetness. They needed me to put my mouth on them.

I kept pumping my hand on Damien as I leaned forward and licked the precum from the tip of Julian's cock. It was weird how each of them tasted slightly different.

I licked my way down Julian's cock, and the noises he made had me rubbing my thighs together, seeking friction, seeking something I wasn't going to find because I felt empty and I knew what would make me feel better.

Thankfully there were seven people around me who were more than ready to give it to me.

I looked up and caught Damien's eyes. I didn't need to say anything, the pleading in my eyes said it all.

"Don't play games with me anymore. Open your mouth."

I did as I was told, loosening my jaw and opening my mouth. I allowed Julian to take control of the situation. Sometimes he could be needy and liked for me to take control because he needed me to show him how much I cared, and physicality went a long way with him. But there were other times where he liked to be bossy, and I could tell from his tone and the possessive look in his eyes that tonight was definitely the night for me to just relax and let him take over.

I could do that for him.

His hands slipped into my hair, and he used his grip to tilt my head just so, and then his cock slid past my parted lips and into my mouth. I swirled my tongue around the underside of his cock and hollowed my cheeks, sucking on him while he used his grip on my hair to move my head up and down. He was gentle with slow strokes that had him bumping my throat then slowly retreating.

I felt hands on the backs of my thighs, pushing my knees apart. I knew by his touch that it was Damien behind me, fulfilling my silent demand for him to fuck me.

His cock glided through the wetness between my folds, rubbing against my clit. I moaned around the cock in my mouth and closed my eyes as I tilted my ass up.

“Eyes back on me,” Julian growled as his hold tightened on my hair and he picked up his pace.

My eyes snapped up to him at the same time Damien nudged my opening with the head of his cock and drove inside in one long, powerful thrust that buried his cock all the way inside my pussy.

“Fuck,” he groaned, sounding as if he were in pain. “This pretty pussy is so good. So fucking tight. The heat you give off goes straight to my balls.”

“Love her mouth too. I love seeing any of her holes stuffed full with my cock.”

Their words spurred me on, and I pushed my ass back with every thrust

Damien made. His hips slapped against my ass with so much force that I was pushed forward onto Julian's cock even more, and my eyes watered when he hit the back of my throat and stayed there.

"Swallow," he ordered in a commanding voice he had never used on me before. "You wanted me enough to vow to love me forever. I think that means you can take my come and not waste it, because that's all yours too."

Mine and Damien's.

It was almost like he could read my mind, because he grinned evilly at me. "Don't you worry, I'm going to give it to him too. While you're being fucked by all the others, I want you to watch me fuck him. I'm going to take his ass, and while I do, we're both going to have our eyes all over you."

I felt his cock pulse in my mouth before his come filled my throat, and I had to swallow several times to get it all down before I choked on it.

Damien's fingers pressed against my clit, and he whispered an urgent, "Hurry up, beautiful. You know I never come before you do. Don't take that away from me on today of all days."

His fingers did it, but I was pretty much there already just thinking about Julian with his dick buried in Damien's ass. I kind of thought it might be the other way around, but what did I know?

My cunt clenched down on his cock and spasmed around him as my orgasm rocked through me. Damien's hand fell away from my clit, and he gripped my hips almost painfully as he rode out his own orgasm.

Julian pulled his cock free from my mouth, and I rested my forehead on his thigh as I reached up to grab hold of his hips. His hold on my hair had held me up, and without it, I needed something to keep me from falling forward on my face.

I didn't get to stay there very long.

Damien slid his hands around my hips and up my belly. One stopped just below my breast and over my ribs. The other one moved up between my breasts and didn't stop until it landed against my throat. He gently wrapped

his fingers around my throat, digging in, and my upper body was lifted up and backwards.

My back met with Damien's sweaty chest. His hand slid farther up my throat so he could grip my jaw and turn my head toward him. I met his beautifully light brown eyes right before his mouth crashed down on mine. The kiss was slow and sweet, and told me just how much he'd enjoyed what we'd just done.

I wondered if he liked the taste of Julian's come on my tongue. I bet he did.

Julian dropped down to his knees in front of me, and his hard chest brushed up against my erect nipples. His semi-hard cock pressed into my stomach, and I grabbed hold of Damien's hand at my ribs and dragged it down to Julian's cock. I forced Damien to wrap his fingers around the base of it, and I placed my hand over top of his. I curled my fingers in and squeezed. They both moaned.

I wanted to laugh and then maybe suck Damien off while Julian fucked me.

Damien broke the kiss and then Julian was there, pressed up tight against me.

Round two sounded like a great idea to me, especially if it meant I got to watch them be together and participate in their love for each other.

"Yeah, that's enough of that," Tyson grumbled harshly. "The two of you can fuck each other, but you don't get to monopolize her entire night. You've been giving Uncle Quint shit all night to keep him in check, and now here you are, getting out of control." He shook his head as he reached for me.

I wanted to laugh. Someone was very impatient. Not that I could blame him.

He was on his knees beside me, entirely naked and completely unfazed by the two cocks surrounding me.

Tyson grabbed my wrist and pried it off of Damien's hand around

Julian's dick. He pulled my hand away, and I sighed unhappily but knew better than to fight it. Not that I was really losing out, because I couldn't wait to get my hands on my BFF, and it wasn't like Damien and Julian were going anywhere. I could play with them again later.

Damien made an angry noise in the back of his throat, and Julian laughed without humor. "You impatient bastard."

Tyson pulled me out from between them and into his chest. I immediately felt a whole lot better about this situation. Tyson's chest was hard, and the heat he gave off made me shiver in anticipation. I knew they loved the heat I gave off and talked about it all the time, but I never told them how much I loved getting that from them as well. I secretly loved it. I was very glad I had never been with a normal human in a sexual way before and this was all that I knew.

"No fair," Damien whined, and Tyson grinned unrepentantly at me.

I thought they were both being adorable, but it wasn't exactly like I was leaving Damien all alone to play with himself. I'd left him in very capable hands, he'd be just fine.

And I'd still get to watch.

Tyson wrapped his arms around my waist as he lay back on the blankets with me in his lap. I straddled his hips and leaned over him with my hair falling all around us, giving the two of us a small little piece of privacy in a tent full of people.

He lifted his hands and brushed my hair back from my face, holding it at the nape of my neck.

His eyes roamed over my face. "Are you happy?"

I cocked my head to the side and studied him. Wasn't it obvious? Why did he even feel the need to ask me that?

"Are you crazy?" I murmured before pressing my lips to his.

He kissed me back, his tongue sliding into my mouth to tangle with mine. I sucked on his tongue and his hips jerked beneath mine, his hard cock

trapped between us, pressing against my lower stomach.

The noises coming from behind me caught my attention and I broke the kiss so I could look over my shoulder to see what I was missing out on.

Damien and Julian were both on their knees facing each other. They were kissing, and their erections were pressed together with each of them gripping the other's cock and rubbing them together.

It was the hottest fucking thing I had ever seen in my entire life.

Tyson's body shook beneath me with his laughter. "You're such a dirty fucking girl. Turn around, but don't get off my lap."

I did as I was told and sat down on his lap with my back facing him, watching the show Damien and Julian were putting on right in front of us.

Oh yes, Tyson Alexander was my bestest bestie for a reason.

Tyson's hands went to my hips, and he lifted me up slightly. I knew what he wanted without him having to ask, so I reached down between us and took hold of his cock. I positioned it just so and sank down onto it.

We both moaned loudly as his cock filled me and I was seated on him fully.

I had just had an orgasm a few minutes before, but I knew it wouldn't matter. Tonight, I was being greedy, and I'd take every single one of them that I could possibly get until I could physically take no more.

I started to shift my hips, rocking against him until I found a rhythm and angle that hit that special spot inside of me every time I came back down on it, and I ground my clit against him. I quickened my pace, and he sat up behind me, letting my hips go.

Tyson wrapped his arms around me. He cupped my breast with one hand, his finger and thumb rolling my nipple between them, pinching me ever so slightly. His other hand snaked its way down the front of my body and found my clit.

He strummed it as his lips met with the crest of my ear, brushing against all the metal studs there. They were all black and silver and went with not

only my dress but my makeup as well.

“That’s right, girl. Fuck yourself on my cock while we watch them fuck each other. I’ll take good care of you.”

He moved his hands from one breast to the other and began playing with that nipple while he kissed my throat. He bit down gently but sucked on my skin, without a doubt marking me.

I couldn’t help but wonder if he liked watching them together as much as I did, or if maybe he simply enjoyed watching me as I watched something that turned me on so much that there was no way he could miss it since it made me ride him even harder, faster, and he was receiving the benefits from it.

Tyson groaned. “Fuck, I love you.”

I loved him too. So very much. If I could have moved faster, I would have. It wouldn’t be long at this pace before I ran out of breath. Maybe I should have slowed down. Yeah, maybe not.

I sped up, chasing my orgasm. There was no stopping me now.

Julian had Damien on his back with his legs up and over his shoulders. Julian had him folded up as he was bent over Damien, and they were kissing.

The position made me want to laugh because Damien loved to fold me in half, and he pulled that same exact move on me as often as he thought he could get away with it. Now seeing the same thing happening to him, I understood why he liked it so much with me.

Quinton stepped up beside Julian and placed his hand on Jules’s shoulder. The kiss broke, and Julian stared up at Quinton with a smug smile.

I thought it was weird that Quinton was interfering with their intimacy, but that all cleared up when Quinton held out a bottle of lube to Julian.

Good freaking grief.

The man really did think of everything, and he took care of us all in any and every way that he possibly could.

Tyson gripped my jaw and turned my head to the side. He kissed me. His



mouth was harsh and demanding, making me stay in this moment with him as everything but my connection with Tyson drifted away.

I wrapped my arm around the back of his neck, and we both shuddered out our releases together as we came.

Our kiss ended with our foreheads pressed together and our heavy breaths mingling. My body was covered in a light sheen of sweat, as was Tyson's.

His eyes burned brightly with the fire that raged within us all. I was always careful to keep mine hidden from sight and shielded, but Tyson's was never far from the surface, and strong emotions always brought it out.

I had a feeling I knew exactly what strong emotions he was feeling, because I was pretty sure I was feeling exactly the same things.

Love, it was even more powerful than hate at times. I'd be terrified of the power it gave him over me if I didn't already know he'd rather take his own life than ever harm me even in the smallest of ways. They all would. It was just one of the many reasons I felt so safe to be able to love them in the first place.

Lips pressed against my chest, right between my breasts, making my whole body shiver. I knew from the facial hair that scraped across my skin that it was Dash in front of me.

His beard gave off the only kind of carpet burn that I didn't mind receiving. Though, that didn't mean it didn't still leave me feeling raw in places, but only a miracle could fix that. I loved his big ole beard, but I was really happy none of the other guys sported facial hair.

Tyson lay back with me in his arms and rolled over until we were on our sides and facing each other, taking me away from Dash's loving touch. I squirmed in his arms, restless and wanting more.

Always wanting more of them.

What was the matter with me tonight?

Tyson traced my bottom lip with the tip of his thumb. "You're perfect in every way possible. So beautiful. You've made us all lucky in love. Not just

tonight, but every night since you've come into our lives."

So many sweet words were on the tip of everyone's tongues tonight. It was almost more than I could handle, and I didn't know how to be the girl who easily accepted such love and devotion from the men in my life. But I guessed since we were in this for the long haul, then maybe I needed to figure out how to learn how to handle it, and, given the look in Tyson's eyes, the sooner I got that figured out, the better.

"Ty," Quinton barked out. "I need you to go up to the house and get what we talked about earlier. Better to do it now before you wait too long and you're too tired to want to do it later. Go."

Tyson groaned before he started cursing his uncle to hell and back in a vicious tone that made me very happy it wasn't directed at me, because he sounded like a dick.

"What do you need him to get?" I asked curiously as I looked over my shoulder, seeking out Quinton. He wasn't far, not that he ever was.

Quinton refused to meet my eyes, and instead his lust filled gaze was glued to my ass in a way that I knew he'd been watching it for a good long while.

Dash was on his knees beside Quinton with his cock in his hand and he, too, stared at my ass with lusty, greedy eyes.

I knew I should have never let Quinton stick his dick in my ass! He'd become obsessed with it ever since. If he wasn't as equally obsessed with my pussy, I might start to feel some type of way about that, but he seemed to love both equally.

It was all very flattering, to say the least.

Tyson squeezed my waist gently as he pressed his lips to my shoulder in a sweet kiss. "Don't worry about it, love. I'll be back before you know it and way before you find the chance to miss me."

I watched him as he got up and moved away from me. He was careful as he stepped over limbs and made his way through the bodies of our coven

members. He slipped his pants on commando before exiting the tent.

He took a piece of my heart with him, and I wasn't happy about him leaving me so soon after I had promised him everything.

I had a feeling I was going to be just a little extra clingy with all of them for a while after this.

Quinton sat down behind me and pulled me between his legs. Dash crawled up beside me, and I looked around to see where everyone else was.

Damien and Julian were locked in a passionate kiss that made me worry they might pass out from a lack of oxygen as Julian rode Damien in slow, easy strokes.

It almost hurt to look away from them, but I managed it. I found the twins lying side by side on their stomachs. Their elbows were on the blanket below them, and both their chins rested on their fists. They were mirror images of the other save for the hair and eyes. Both of their gazes were on me, and they were hungry and heated in their intensity.

I glared at Quinton over my shoulder, only to see him watching Damien and Julian as he lazily trailed his fingers down my stomach toward the slit between my thighs. He watched them with open curiosity and sadly no excitement. Bummer.

Dash wasn't paying attention to them at all. He was too busy watching Quinton's fingers as they parted my thighs. I expected him to go right for it, but he surprised me when he spread my thighs open wide and held them like that.

Everyone had quite the view of my spread pussy, which wasn't exactly comfortable for me because I was leaking at least two different people's come, not to mention my own wetness.

Nobody else seemed to think anything was wrong with it.

In fact, Julian and Damien paused their kiss to turn and stare at me. If I wasn't blushing before, I certainly was now.

"Jesus," Damien whispered. "So fucking pretty. Look at that pussy."

“I see it,” Julian murmured. “Fuck, I don’t think I’ve seen anything prettier.”

Oh my goodness, I needed them to stop talking about my vagina like that. I squirmed in Quinton’s lap, and he laughed at me, the dick.

I glared at him over my shoulder, and when I looked back, I blinked in shock because Dash was suddenly kneeling between my legs. I tried to close my legs, because I felt too exposed with his eyes on my most private of parts, but Quinton refused to allow it and held them open.

Dash lunged forward, and his face was right in my pussy. He wasted no time, and he was hungry, ravenous even, as he ate me. He slipped a finger inside of me, then another one, and he curled them, hitting my G-spot. My back arched, my toes curled, and I cried out as I chased after yet another orgasm.

“Move your hands,” Quinton growled. “Get your fingers out of her.”

*Umm, no, don’t do that.* What the hell was the matter with him?

Dash grunted as he pulled his fingers out of me, and I whined at the sudden loss of them.

Quinton didn’t let my thighs go as he lifted me and pulled me farther back into his lap. He dropped me down onto his cock and filled me up with it so I no longer missed Dash’s fingers.

Dash followed me as his hands replaced Quinton’s on my thighs so he was holding me open instead. He licked and sucked my clit as Quinton tightened his grip on my hips and he moved me on top of him while he thrust up from beneath me.

If Dash was uncomfortable with being up close and personal with Quinton’s junk, he didn’t show it. He was all about me.

Damien and Julian had their cheeks pressed together as they watched us. Addison and Abel sat up, sitting side by side, and they were both slowly jacking off. There was so much sexy man meat on display that I didn’t know where to look. My brain was starting to fizz out.

One of Quinton's hands released my hip, and I felt him probing at my ass with a finger. I felt something wet drip down the crease of my ass before he spread it around on my asshole. I didn't tense as he pressed his finger inside. Instead, I focused on Dash's tongue as it flicked against my clit and Quinton's thick cock as it filled me up.

Quinton slipped another finger inside, and it was too much for me, I came as my mouth opened on a silent scream.

"Fuck, I can't wait anymore," Dash growled, and Quinton must have agreed with him because he pulled out of me and positioned his cock at my asshole.

He slowly pushed inside, and Dash was there to distract me from the stretch as he kissed me. I tasted myself on his tongue, but I also tasted more than just me.

Jesus, it was hot.

Dash was on his knees before me, and he pushed my knees back into my chest. He pressed them farther apart as he positioned his cock at my entrance and pushed inside, all without breaking the kiss.

I didn't think they'd ever done something like this together, but they both knew exactly what they were doing. They moved me between them as if I were a living doll and I let them. I didn't have the energy to move on my own and help them.

One of my arms snapped around Dash's neck, and I reached behind me to hook my other arm around Quinton's neck. I held onto them while they fucked me.

It was almost like it was a race between them to see who could come first. Quinton won, and after Dash fingered my clit, I came in second. Dash came in last, but I didn't think there were any losers here tonight.

My eyelids grew heavy, and I rested my sweaty forehead on Dash's shoulder. I was tired, and my limbs no longer worked properly.

They both laughed at me as they laid me down on a pile of soft blankets

with a pillow beneath my head.

I felt hands caress my breasts and blinked my eyes open. Addison and Abel leaned over me, one on each side of me, as they reverently ran their hands over my body. The devotion and worship in their eyes did funny things to my heart.

They both grunted at the same time as they came. Ropes of their come splashed across my stomach, and I couldn't stop myself from pressing my hands to my stomach and rubbing it into my skin.

“Beautiful,” Abel murmured in awe.

“Mm-hmm,” Addison murmured as he watched my hands move. “You’re not wrong, twin. Fucking perfection.”

They both lay down on either side of me and sandwiched me between them with my cheek resting on Abe’s chest and Addison’s chest against my back with his thigh pressed between mine.

Both their hands gently ran over my body as my eyes drifted closed, and I felt sleep tugging at me. I heard them moving around me and felt a blanket cover my naked body.

We were sleeping in the tent tonight. I needed a shower, but I would do that in the morning with the twins. They could wash their own come off me.

“She good?” I heard Tyson whisper before something was gently dropped down onto my body. I felt them as they moved around a bit before settling in and lying down to sleep.

Quinton had made Tyson go get Ash and Bone for me. The man really did think of everything.

I had everything I needed right here in this tent with me now that my babies were here.

“We wore her out,” Quinton said in a voice that radiated smugness.

He was right, and that really pissed me off, because if I wasn't so exhausted, I'd find something to throw at him.

I had that to look forward to for the rest of my life.

For some dumb reason, that thought made me ridiculously happy.

The drawing was perfect. Then again, I thought everything my dad did was perfect.

I sat in a chair at what was now Tattoos for the Unfortunate. A name for Rain's new tattoo parlor that was housed in the space beside Fortunes for the Unfortunate. Rain had once lived in the space when he wasn't staying at the cabin, but now with Baxter and Isobel living with him full time, he'd permanently moved out of the space.

It used to be a lawyer's office, I believed. We could have easily filled the space with any of the many people we were now responsible for housing, but Rain had asked Tyson if he could use the space to open up a shop in, and now we were here.

I thought the name was ridiculous, but then I also worked in a magic shop called Fortunes for the Unfortunate, so I kept my mouth shut on the subject. Apparently we had an unfortunate theme going on around here, which I also found to be absurd, but the guys thought it was *just great*.

I would never understand men.

It didn't take Rain long to get his shop set up. I had been pleasantly surprised by it, because it was something I hadn't even known he had a desire to do. Isobel ran the front desk for him, and she did really well with it.

Romero was far from impressed with Isobel's new job, and he came in



some days just to sit in a chair and glare at her.

I had decided to find the whole thing amusing instead of stressing out about it. My dad could work out his own relationships, and I didn't need to be a part of that. Dash was staying out of his dad's business too. Either that, or he was completely oblivious to what was going on.

Rain had shut the shop down early just for me. It was another one of those father-daughter bonding moments, and I was more than happy about it. It was how Rain did sweet, and he did it really well.

“Alright, baby girl, where am I putting this little guy?”

I hadn't really given much thought to where I actually wanted to put the tattoo on my body. I'd been more interested in obsessing over the actual tattoo itself. That had been the really important part to me.

I wanted him how he'd been when I first met him, how I always wanted to remember him. Rain's drawing of a black cat with its back arched and its tail curled up in the air was a damn good replica of Binx.

I had a lot of free space to work with on my body, since I'd only allowed Rain to ink me so far, and he'd only done it the one time with the tattoo on the inside of my wrist. Maybe I should fill that arm up, and then I could move onto a different part of my body.

I placed my right hand on the table, palm flat against the surface. “Right here on my hand will work nicely.”

“Are you going to close your eyes really tight and keep your head turned away?” Rain teased me in a lighthearted voice.

He might have thought he was being funny, but I thought it was great advice. I freaking did not like needles, and there was no way I could watch this go down. I had to look away.

I didn't understand it. The actual pain didn't bother me, but the stupid sight of the needle made me a little sick to my stomach.

He talked to me while he worked to distract me from what he was doing. Just nonsense things about how Baxter was doing now that he was home.

Rain had been teaching him about his magic and just all the goodness Rain had in him to give to the little boy.

I thought I'd be jealous because Baxter was getting something I had been robbed of, but I really just loved the little boy so much I was just happy that Rain was there to give him these things.

I was learning the hard way that life was far too short to waste my energy on obsessing over things I could not change. The past was the past and could not be changed. It was the future that mattered, and if I allowed all the bullshit to get me down, then that future would likely be a lot less bright than what it actually could be.

I could learn. I might be slow at it, but I eventually got where I needed to be.

It took Rain about forty minutes to finish everything up. I didn't look at it once until it was over. The final product was everything I wanted it to be.

I had Binx inked into my skin forever. I would never be able to forget him now. It was perfect—sad, but perfect.

Other people I met would see it, and they'd think it was just any old black cat and assume maybe I was superstitious or something. Nobody would know the importance of the tattoo, and I liked it like that.

“Thank you, Dad.” I smiled at him with tears in my eyes. “I love it.”

And I did.

I loved just about everything I had going for me in my life. Things far from sucked, and I had earned some damn happiness in my life.

I planned on enjoying every second of it.

“Anything for you, baby girl.”

**T**he End.

## From the Author

Sooooo... we made it all the way to the end of book 7. It took me for-freaking-*ever* to get here but here we are. And now some of you probably hate me because I did some damage in this one. I can't help it, I write where my heart takes me and I always will.

I would like to say thank you to each and every one of you for being patient with me and sticking it out. The wait was long but I hope the ride was worth it.

I get asked a lot if this is going to be the last book. The answer is no. Trenton & Simon have a novella coming up next and Isobel has 2 books that I'm thinking are going to be An Ariel Kimber World books. Or something like that. The covers for those are really pretty. There will be a link after this where you can join my group if you want and that's where stuff like covers gets posted first.

A huge thank you to my PA Sarah Klinger for being the bestest and always being down for whatever crazy I come up with. Jess, thank you for going over my books for me and also putting up with my crazy! I would be a whole lotta lost without you. My group admins Angie, Penny, Amber... love you ladies so much and thanks for ruining certain veggies and fruit for me. And maybe the backyard too. And Rebecca, if you're reading this, girl we miss you and hope you're doing well. There's always a place for you with us.

I promise the wait for the next one won't be so long this time. Unless I drop dead sometime soon or something. Then you're fucked.

Lots of love.  
Mary xo

Other works by Mary Martel

Ariel Kimber Reading Order

Brothers of the Flame

Love Potion

Blood Magic

The Ties That Bind

Tyson (Novella)

Good Witch, Bad Witch (Short Story)

Black as Midnight

Rain (Novella)

Dash (Novella)

Unforgotten Family

Quinton (Novella)

Till Death Do Us Part

The Dollhouse Series:

No Mercy

Lost Faith

Dark Beginnings

Broken Pieces

Last Sins

Willow

Mercy Motorcycle Club:

Pretty Ugly

Pretty Complicated

Two Princes:

My King

The River Ash Wolf Pack:

Ashes

Villainous Retelling:

Vanity

Co-writes:

Zombie Queen

Gem Stone:

What You Deserve

Dirty Crown

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Mary Martel is a Wall Street Journal and USA Today Times bestselling author who has written over twenty books.

She grew up in West Michigan but has spent the last nine years living in the Northern Plains of North Dakota with her husband and two daughters.

When she's not writing, she's reading a good book, lately a reverse harem one, drinking wine, and enjoying the chaos that is life.