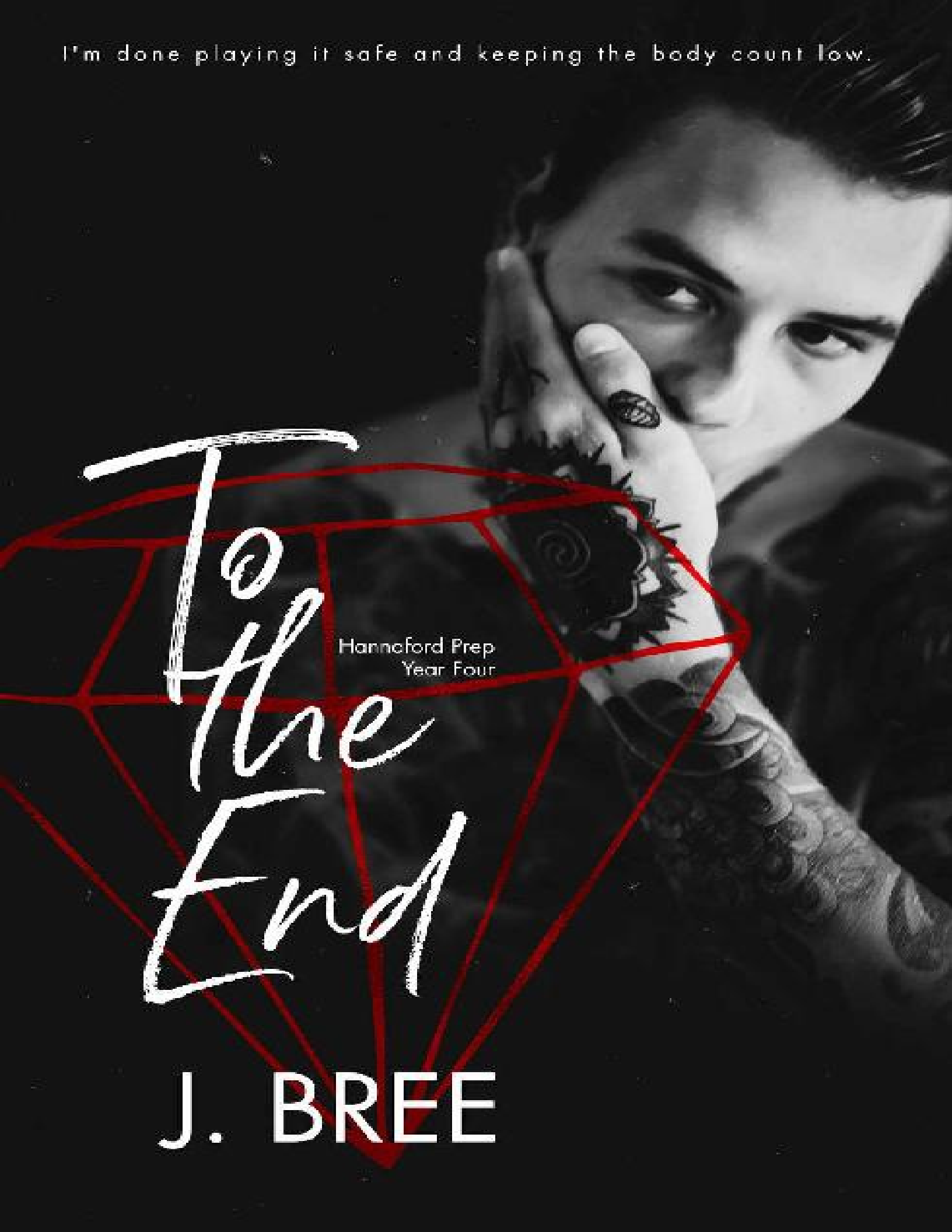


I'm done playing it safe and keeping the body count low.



# To The End

Hannford Prep  
Year Four

J. BREE

# TO THE END

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HANNAFORD PREP YEAR FOUR

J BREE

*To all of the readers who have gone on this crazy ride with me - this book is  
for you.*

*And to Lips - you walked into my head and wouldn't leave me alone until I  
wrote you. Thanks, kid.*

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## PROLOGUE

**B**laise

Star looks down at the box and I don't have to be psychic to know whose head is in the fucking thing. She looks like it's the worst possible choice and her face is blank before her eyes flick back up to the deranged serial killer at the table.

Joey is dead.

I can't say I'm sorry to see that psychotic fuck go but as Senior's eyes bore into my girl I kinda wish Joey was still breathing. How the fuck do we get out of this?

Harley knocks my leg under the table and I dip my chin a fraction so he knows he's got my attention. He traces an 'A' on the table in front of him, an old signal we've used a million times before.

He's telling me to get Avery the hell out of here and for the first time I'm torn. She's not cut out for when shit goes south like this, not physically at least. Someday that girl is going to dance on a big stage and have pompous rich dickheads falling at her feet. She can't afford to be injured but more than that.

We can't afford for Ash to see his sister hurt.

I'm fairly certain Ash is more dangerous than Senior, one-on-one. It's the damn statement about the cops that has me worried. What the fuck is Star going to do?

It's only that I'm watching her so closely that I see her pass her phone to

Avery under the table, and Floss' face stays carefully blank and her fingers move swiftly across the screen by memory alone.

“How much do you owe your buyer? Now that you can't deliver?” Lips says, her voice so fucking flat and bored I'm impressed.

The serial killer just ignores her, cutting his steak up into tiny pieces with surgeon-like precision. He takes his time, waiting until he has a piece speared on his fork before answering her. “What's in the box, little girl? Who is delivering parcels to you during my time?”

She leans back in her chair, cool and calm. “Answer my question, Beaumont. The box is none of your concern.”

He doesn't like that. Not one fucking bit.

His lip curls at her, slowly shifting into a cruel smirk that makes him look deranged. “He was very interested in her, I don't think even the *Wolf of Mounts Bay* could convince the Devil not to take what is his. Run along, go hide her. He'll only enjoy the chase.”

The Devil.

Harley's fingers twitch and I bump his leg with mine, reminding him that we'll be fucking fine.

We've survived the kinds of hell people couldn't even dream.

Why not add *the Devil* to the mix?

Lips stands, smoothing her dress down like Avery does, and we all stand with her. Even that stupid fuck Atticus.

“I'd thank you for the meal, but your company has been... lacking.” Lips says, tucking her hand into Harley's and tugging him away from the table. Avery looks up at me and I give her a curt nod.

Senior watches Lips' back like he's imagining all of the things he's going to carve into her skin and get off to and I can't fucking take it.

Apparently, neither can Ash.

“Here. Just so you know we did our best to get him here. He seems to be... otherwise occupied.” Ash sneers, and pushes the box until Joey's head rolls out.

I could fucking vomit.

I hold it in, because no one else looks sick and I'll be fucked if I'm the only one puking over this shit, and I tug Avery away from the table.

Two of Senior's bodyguards jolt away from the far wall, ready to throw themselves at Ash and Lips, and I hesitate for a second.

I shouldn't bother.



Illi palms two meat cleavers and *throws them across the room*.

Avery makes a little noise in the back of her throat and I decide pretty fucking quick that I need to keep her walking. We stalk through the restaurant at a slow enough pace that no one notices us but still cutting through the building pretty fucking quick.

Avery hums under her breath, completely distracted by whatever-the-fuck-it-is she's piecing together in that evil genius brain of hers. I'm too busy trying to look out for more of Senior's men to question her.

When we get to the exit, there are cop cars everywhere and I curse viciously under my breath, but there's also more than a hundred motorbikes with scary-ass bikers on them, starting fights with the pigs and smashing up the cars.

Right.

Lips called in a favor.

There's a biker leaning against the wall of the restaurant, watching us both intensely. He's wearing a president patch so I figure out pretty quickly he's the Boar.

Avery stares right back at him, cataloging every fucking inch of the man until I bump her shoulder with mine to distract her. I don't need her accidentally starting shit with a member of the fucking Twelve while Star isn't here.

"Does he look familiar to you?" She murmurs, and I shake my head.

"I don't exactly spend much time with dirty bikers, Floss."

She purses her lips at me, something she does when she thinks I'm being particularly stupid. I fucking hate it.

"I need to speak to Atticus. I need to look into Lips' background. We know nothing about who her family really is. Or her father."

I blink at her.

What the *fuck*?

## CHAPTER ONE

---

**S**tanding in the forest at the edge of the city limits in Mounts Bay feels different this time around.

The last time I stood here it was to compete in the Game myself. I killed two men, stabbed one through the eye and bashed the other's skull in with a large rock after I'd knocked him, but it's more than just that. Last time I was here I was desperate right down to my core. Desperate to eat, to live, to survive this hellhole.

Now I have something to lose.

Avery has her hand tucked in mine and her phone is, for once, switched off and left behind in Blaise's Maserati. There's a strict ban on electronics during the Game and nothing that will happen here tonight is worth the risk of being caught with a smartphone. Illi stands on her other side, arms crossed and the signature Butcher scowl on his features, looking every inch the nightmare that he's known to be on the streets in the Bay. Harley and Blaise stand a step behind us, muttering quietly together at the show of masculine strength before us.

Ash shifts from where he stands beside me, a sneer on his face as he stares the O'Cronin family down. I ignore them completely, pissed they're trying to get the upper hand on me like this. Liam and Domhnall keep making remarks that would get them gutted if we weren't here and doing this. But, fuck my life, we are and I have to keep my mouth shut until we know who's won.

Every member of the Twelve are present, as required, and there's a huge crowd of loyal men watching. Everyone here wears the colors they've been inducted into, everyone here belongs to someone.

The Jackal stands on the other side of the clearing. His eyes haven't left me, not even once. I know this for sure even though I haven't so much as glanced at him, because Avery's hand is tense in mine. She's watching him.

The Crow is watching the Jackal too, careful never to let his eyes land on Avery.

What a fucking mess.

The gurgling sound of the idiot on the ground draws me back to what we're doing. The Vulture needs replacing and the only way to replace the repulsive cretin is to hold the Game.

I have to attend every damn trial and watch as men, boys, and a few young girls all brutally beat and slaughter each other. It's enough to turn a strong stomach and I'm oddly proud of Avery for refusing to stay back at the Ranch she's got us holed up in, safe and secure now the Coyote has installed his security over every inch of the place.

There's shouting from the crowd and I let my eyes wander over the bodies to assess where we're at in terms of numbers. A lot of red and black. Too close to tell who has brought more muscle along.

The Coyote shifts and walks over to stand at my side. Ash glares at him, enough that I grit my teeth at him but the asshole could not give less of a fuck about protocol. The Coyote, thankfully, doesn't seem to care.

"Which one are you hoping wins? I like the kid." He murmurs, leaning into me.

I can smell Viola Ayres' perfume on him and smirk at him. She's not here. He's smart enough to leave his little captured rich girl at home in his bunker where the Jackal can't kill her stealthily.

"The kid will cause me issues if he wins, but I don't really care either way." I murmur back, lying through my teeth.

Anyone but the kid, fuck, anyone but the kid.

The Coyote's eyes flick behind us to Harley and he smirks. "Sure. I thought we were friends now, Lips?"

The fucker is playing with fire. The Crow hears his use of my name and shoots him a glare. I ignore him.

I no longer fear that man. Not when Avery holds his balls in the palm of her perfectly manicured hand.

Ok, I don't think a man like Atticus Crawford will ever be truly whipped but I know when it comes down to it, he's not going to hurt her and threatening me would truly hurt my ice queen bestie.

“How is Viola doing?” Avery murmurs, and the Coyote grimaces.

“She’d like to go home and see her sister, but the little love-spat the Wolf has going on is ruining that for her.”

I cringe and Ash gives the Coyote a look that could kill, hissing at him, “It’s not a love anything. He’s fucking deranged.”

The Coyote laughs dismissively. “You’d know all about deranged, wouldn’t you Beaumont? Where is your brother these days? Viola has told me all about your family.”

I keep my face carefully blank. No one here needs to know about Joey’s death. Avery’s eyes flick away from the Jackal for the first time to land on the Boar.

He’s watching us all.

I make a note to ask her what the hell she’s planning later. She’s become weirdly interested in bikers lately.

I’m starting to think she’s going to great lengths to get over her infatuation with Atticus and I’m so not interested in dragging her off of the back of some dirty biker’s hog.

I hear the sickening crunch of bones breaking and look down to find the fight is over. With my heart in my throat, I stare down at the victor who is panting and sweating but wholly unharmed, and fuck, we have a problem.

Aodhan O’Cronin has won.

There’s an O’Cronin in the Twelve.

The Crow steps forward, cutting the Jackal a look when he attempts to step forward as well. Oh yay, a pissing contest. Harley shifts behind me, the sounds of his body moving something my entire body is now in-tuned with.

“You’ve won, welcome to the Twelve. You’re replacing the Vulture. Who do you choose to be?” The Crow says, and Aodhan smirks. Fuck, he looks way too much like Diarmuid when he does that.

“The Stag.”

How fitting for the Irish mobster. I’m sure he’s going to be a whole new pain in my ass. When he glances my way I tip my head to him respectfully. I’m not having the little fuck try to use the bad blood between us as an excuse to stick a knife in me.

Liam and Domhnall start to whoop and cheer like fucking children, and I force myself not to roll my eyes. Avery drops my hand and steps back, preparing for whatever violence is about to come thanks to their antics, because the look Ash gives them is pretty fucking telling.

The dinner meeting with his father seems to have burned away what little restraint he had and now he's eager for blood.

I don't want to wait around to see how far he wants to take it, so I catch his eye and tilt my head until he gives me a curt nod. The groups splits off and Harley carefully directs me away, making sure to act as though he's shielding me and being a bodyguard rather than what he's really doing, which is pushing me around to get me the fuck away from his family before Liam or Domhnall try to knife me.

Of course the mobster fuck can't just let me leave without starting shit.

"Wolf."

Harley freezes and shifts until he's blocking me from his cousin completely. I give him a look and duck around him, ignoring the vicious curse he murmurs under his breath. Illi takes my side immediately and Ash steps up to my other side, his icy stare sending little shivers down my spine.

Fuck, he's hot when he goes all Beaumont-killer on someone for me.

Aodhan ignores the wall of muscular threat and meets my eyes, unflinching. "I don't want to start my time amongst the Twelve with conflict."

I barely contain the snort at his words and my eyes flick to his father. Domhnall smirks at me and I quirk an eyebrow at him. "There's more conflict amongst the Twelve than there has ever been before. Your family's issues are small in comparison."

The other members of the Twelve have all stopped to watch us. I feel the unease settle in my gut at having another fucking threat to worry about.

Aodhan's eyes trail over Harley, taking in his size and the vicious look on his face and the tattoo Domhnall and Liam forced on him as a kid. He glances back at me and flicks out a hand as if he's cutting through the bullshit surrounding us.. "As I said, I don't want any of the conflict to be about me. What is it going to take for you to let go of what my family has done to... yours."

He's damned fucking right that Harley's my family, my boyfriend, mine.

I cross my arms. "While your father and grandfather breathe, I will never let it go. Your uncles too. Every last O'Cronin involved with what happened to Iris. Loyalty is highly valued in the Twelve and what they did to one of their own, it just doesn't sit right with me."

The loyalty isn't the half of it. What they did to Iris, when they killed Éibhear in front of Harley, they put themselves on this path. I've tied their

hands for now but someday, when we have less on our plates, I'll give them exactly what they deserve.

Aodhan glances back to Harley and my golden god smirks at him, saying in a low tone, "You're not going to give the Wolf that, are you? You're not so fucking desperate for friends within the Twelve that you'd get rid of the spineless, manipulative cunts."

Aodhan smirks and shrugs. "You underestimate me, cousin."

Then he reaches back to palm his gun from the holster at the base of his spine and-

And fucking shoots his father. Right between the eyes.

Liam O'Cronin gasps, his eyes peeled back and a stupid look of disbelief on his face, and then a second bullet comes out of Aodhan's gun and lands in his temple. There's brain matter fucking everywhere and I wince when I hear Avery take a large step away from the mess. Blaise moves with her, still covering her, and for the first time the Crow's eyes flick over to the object of his infatuation.

The Jackal is still watching me.

Fuck me, this situation couldn't get any worse.

As if to prove me wrong, Ash and Illi both draw their weapons of choice, and I grab Ash's wrist to stop him from actually shooting Aodhan.

I wait until everyone has taken a breath, and then I raise an eyebrow.

Aodhan looks at me and I see the shift start to take place in his eyes. The shifting from who he was, into who he is now amongst the Twelve. The Stag is born here in the blood soaked dirt the same way the Wolf was.

He smiles at me, a baring of teeth that isn't all that threatening. Not to me. "Are you satisfied, Wolf, or should I send you the heads of all of my uncles? Say the word and I'll do it."

My blood turns to ice and Ash's eyes narrow.

It has to be a coincidence. It's a term of phrase, right?! I glance over my shoulder to find Avery staring at the Boar again and, fuck me, I need to ask her what the hell is going on there.

"If you think killing them buys you my friendship, you're wrong. I'm not entirely sure why you want it so badly in the first place. Finding your feet and building up your name takes time, and connections. You should be cozying up to the Jackal or the Crow." I say, and I keep my voice calm and level.

There's no warning the guy away from the Jackal, the sadistic fuck would use that against us, but I can't have him trying to fucking bond with me.

Harley would lose his fucking shit over it.

“I don’t want to be friends. I want to know that you’re not going to climb in my bedroom window and slit my throat while I sleep. I also want to know that my cousin is going to stay the fuck out of the family and leave it all to me. Keeping you alive and happy will get me both of those things.”

Harley snorts and says, “I don’t want your pathetic excuse of a family or business. Stay the fuck away from us and I’ll do my best to forget you exist.”

I nod. “That’s a fair trade. Harley has already dropped the name, he isn’t looking to take over... whatever the fuck it is you lot do now.”

Aodhan smirks at me and nods. “We have a wide skill set, Wolf. And despite your reluctance to be around me, I’m happy to help out if your... situation doesn’t clear itself up soon.”

Fuck.

Right.

I stare him down until he finally nods and leaves, without so much as a glance at his father or grandfather's dead bodies. I wait until the mobsters that are still breathing leave the clearing before we start to move again. I want a shower, ice cream, and several great big orgasms to get over the events of tonight. Maybe even ten of the suckers. I give Ash a sly little look under my lashes, all coy as if I know how the hell to flirt, and he smirks back at me.

Yay.

As he opens the car door for me and just as I grab his arm to climb in he stiffens and curses under his breath.

“Should I expect to see Luca with you at your next meeting? Have you added him to the rotation of men you’re spreading your legs for?” The Jackal says, and I take a deep breath.

When I turn to face him it’s as if the whole clearing pauses in fear. I don’t recognize any of the guys he has with him tonight. He’s probably killed everyone I’ve ever met in the inner circle of his crew after Luca’s betrayal.

I’d be dead if the Crow hadn’t planted him within the ranks of the Jackal’s men, and it’s clear the Jackal still hasn’t figured out he was a spy to begin with.

I raise an eyebrow at the Jackal and say, “Whoever spends time between my legs is none of your concern. I’ll see you at the meeting, Jackal.”

Then I turn my back on him and slide into the car.

After a moment, Ash slides in after me and the smug look on his face makes my chest tighten. We will not bow down to any of our demons. Not

anymore.



## CHAPTER TWO

---

Avery's ranch is exactly what you would imagine a Beaumont's ranch to look like. It's over the top, looks like a fucking palace, and I'm kind of afraid to touch anything. Blaise laughs at the faces I pull every time I bump into the furniture, but I mean, is there anything in the damn place that doesn't cost the same amount as a small country's tax assessment? Jesus.

The part that makes it a home, a real one, is the photos that line the walls of the staircase. The freezer full of cherry ice cream and the garage with millions of dollars worth of cars Ash protects like they're his children. The recording studio in the pool house and the boxing ring in the gym. Yeah, this place has a freaking pool house and a gym.

It's set up perfectly for the whole lot of us and the look of pure satisfaction on Avery's face when she sees us all around her dining table every night makes my chest ache in the best possible way.

I kind of assumed we'd be playing musical beds every night but Avery hadn't lied to me when she said she was custom ordering me an orgy sized bed. I blushed like an idiot but after the mess our dinner with Senior had been it's a relief to go to bed every night knowing they're all safe, and breathing, with me.

I still wake up shaking with dreams of Harley dying because of Annabelle's obsession.

Doesn't matter that Illi handed me a jar with one of her hands in it. He's a sick and twisted man, but I love him like a brother and I'll take that fucking jar with me everywhere I go until I get over the damage of nearly losing Harley.

The night before the next meeting, I wake up in a cold sweat and shaking.

Ash is curved around me and the second I open my eyes I find Harley still asleep beside me, looking peaceful and unaware of the random bouts of panic his near-death is still fucking causing me. What an asshole.

I look around and Blaise is nowhere to be found. A quick glance at the clock shows it's 4am and not a normal hour for him to be awake yet. He's more of a late afternoon riser.

I wriggle out of the bed, careful not to wake the other two, and creep around the house until I find him smoking a blunt out by the pool. I watch him for a second and take in the lines between his eyes, the dark circles and the way his mouth is turning down at the corners, and I sigh. There's only one person left in contact with him that has this effect on him.

His fucking mother.

I walk over to take the seat next to him and he murmurs happily at me, the smile he gives me a little forced and a whole lot morose. I can feel the pity party brewing already. Great.

"What are you doing out here?" I murmur, and he flicks the ash from his blunt. I try not to let the smell bother me but he gives me another sad smile and puts it out on the ashtray.

"Sorry, Star. I can't sleep."

Fuck.

We're a bunch of fucking insomniacs.

I shift to curl myself into his lap, enjoying the little grunts he lets out as my ass wiggles against his *very* interested dick. It's been a while since I've had any of them alone and I'm not quite ready to use the orgy sized bed for the exact purpose I'm sure Avery got it for, so this little moment to ourselves is not only perfect but it's like a drug to me. Yes, fucking *please*. I give myself a second to clear the hormones out of my brain.

"Has something happened?" I mumble into his chest.

He sighs, tangling his hands into my hair, scratching at my scalp in a way that has my toes curling. "My mom wants me to go see her and Blaire. I'm not sure it's a good idea. I'm not exactly a safe person to be around anymore but... I miss her."

I nod and press my forehead against his chest. I still don't like the woman but fuck, she's his mum. I guess as long as she's not trying to kill him I have to deal with whatever he wants to do.

Blaise tugs at my hair until I look up at him and see the lecherous smirk he's giving me. "Wanna suck me off to help me get back to sleep?"

I snort at him but, uh, *yeah*. That's exactly what I want.

"Maybe if you're good I will. If you're *extra* good I might even swallow."

The smirk on his face triples in size and he leans down to whisper in my ear, "You love my come, Star. You're greedy for it, you'd never spit me out."

I mumble about *arrogant, smug assholes* as he stands, still pressing me into his chest, and walks us both back into the house. He doesn't stop until we get to his room and he kicks the door shut, way too loud and I'm cringing at the thought of it waking Avery. The last thing I need is for her to come looking for blood and finding me blowing Blaise.

We might both get stabbed.

Blaise lowers me to the ground and chuckles at me. "Stop looking so fucking scared, Avery is on the other side of the building and if the other two hear us the worst that will happen is they'll come find us. We're very good at sharing you, Star."

I glare at him but the little shiver that runs through me only has him laughing harder. I shove at his chest a little but that only distracts me more. The ink running up his neck has been added to and now there are little stars curling behind his ears and a few little ones on his temples. It's fucking hot, and completely unfair because now there's zero chances of me looking at him without ruining my panties.

"Fuck, *that's* how I want you looking at me. I want you looking at me like you're fucking desperate, Star." He drawls, tugging me over to his bed and I straddle his lap again.

If I were any good at flirting or foreplay I'd give him a sultry look and use a coy voice to say "I am," but that's just not something I have in me, so I kiss him instead.

It doesn't matter how long we've been doing this, making out and grinding all over each other, Blaise still kisses me with his whole damn body. He curls around me, covers me, and groans into my lips until I forget myself.

I pull his shirt off and yank my own off so I can press myself against him, rubbing at his chest and arms like a freaking cat in heat. He grins at me and flips me over so I'm underneath him on the bed. The second his dick rubs against my clit through my panties I realize three vital things: we're alone, we're horny, and I'm no longer a scared virgin.

I grab the waistband of his boxers and yank them down, far enough that I can stroke his dick and, fuck yes, this is what I want. Blaise groans into my

lips and breaks away, panting and thrusting his hips up into my grip.

“Do you want a blow job, or do you want to have sex? Both?” I whisper, blushing so fucking hard but whatever. I manage to say the words so it’s a win.

Blaise freezes, then props himself up to look down at me with a smirk. “I knew it. It was Harley, right? He fucked you first? Ash would’ve broken you.”

Well, *fuck*, why is *this* a conversation he’s insisting on having? And right now, of all fucking times!

I clear my throat. “Why the hell are we talking about this? You already know it was Harley. He wouldn’t have lied and Avery wasn’t exactly quiet about it.”

He scoffs at me and moves to kiss down my throat. “Other than gloating about the party at the docks, Harley doesn’t talk about what you guys get up to. He did suddenly become less of a grumpy dick so I guessed.”

I squirm, more at his words than his tongue, and try once again to get him to *shut the hell up*. “Does it matter? Can we go back to the orgasms now? I’d really like to cuddle and nap afterwards.”

He licks a stripe down my belly until he gets to my panties and then blows on my skin. Fucking seductive, evil dick. I bite back a moan.

He peels my panties off and whispers against my pussy as he begins to lick and suck at me, “It matters, Star. I’ve changed my mind, I don’t want you to swallow my come. I want to see it dripping down your legs.”

Holy.

Merciful.

Lord.

“I don’t ever want to know where you learned to talk like that.” I gasp out as he sucks at my clit and hums under his breath. I can feel how wet I am, I can feel I’m coating his face, and I groan when he slips two fingers into me.

“I’m naturally talented, Star. I thought you’d know that by now.” He says, and he pumps his fingers into me mercilessly and I come with a tiny little scream I hope no one else hears.

I need a second to coax my soul back into my body, but when I can move again Blaise climbs up to sit against the headboard and pulls me back into his lap. I bite his lip while he moves me, lining up and lowering me down slowly until I’m impaled on his dick. It knocks the breath out of me, he’s still too fucking big and even though I’ve had sex with Harley a few times I’m still

fairly new at this. His eyes stay focussed on mine until they roll back in my head. Fuck, I love this.

Blaise doesn't treat me like glass. He doesn't wait before he's grabbing my hips and moving me up and down his cock until both our legs are shaking, a stream of encouragements and filthy words falling out of his mouth faster than I can make sense of. "Fuck, yes. Move your hips, Star, fuck, yes. Just like that. Perfect, a fucking perfect pussy for my cock."

I can feel the orgasm building in me again, and my movements grow desperate. Blaise grunts and slams his hips up into me, his head rolling back, and I kiss and lick my way up his throat, sucking on every star he's itched into his skin for me. I come again, clenching around him and biting his shoulder so I don't wake the whole fucking house up, and he grunts, slamming his hips up into me as he comes too.

When I climb off of his lap, his come does run down my legs.

I fucking love it.

My brains must be completely fried, because when he snaps a photo I don't even care, I just preen under the possessive look in his eyes. Once I've caught my breath, I clean up in the bathroom and then settle into his arms in the bed.

"I'm never letting you go, Star. You're mine." He whispers against my hair in a sleep soaked voice.

I yawn and press a kiss to his chest. I don't want to think about anything that might ruin my sleep. I don't want to think about how he might not have a choice.

The demons stalking us might take me out.

The final Twelve meeting for the summer is being held on neutral ground.

Well, it's technically neutral because the Vulture is dead but taking Illi back to the place where he watched his future wife get sold to her rapist isn't going to be pleasant, and I find myself getting wound up over it. I hate the auctions. The entire building stinks of death, despair, and perverted men. Even after months of disuse I'm sure it'll still fucking *reek*.

I must wear my unease like a neon sign because everyone stays three feet away from me all day, the guys all going down to the gym to work out and

Avery sitting in front of the TV with her phone for hours.

When I finally come out of my fog and join her, I cringe at the movie that's playing.

Dirty Dancing.

Fuck.

"Men are swine." Avery says around a mouthful of pancakes, more chocolate syrup and whipped cream than anything else. Right. Best friend duty is calling but how the fuck do I fix this?!

"What's he done? I can lightly stab him. Nothing permanent but enough to ruin his day."

Avery sighs and cocks her head, tucking her arm in mine. "You're the best. We're still... *communicating* daily, but I'm keeping it all strictly business. He's just told me I'm forbidden to come to the meeting tonight. Forbidden. Like I'm a fucking child, or a puppy, or... something else pathetic."

Atticus Crawford, the Crow of Mounts Bay, is a fucking dumbass.

"So stabbing? Because that sounds like he needs to shed a little blood and gain a little perspective. I could hold him down while you bleed him? Well, Blaise and I could. I wouldn't trust the other two. They'd make it permanent."

She smiles and shakes her head. "I'm not a pathetic girl. I don't mope and moon over boys."

I nod, except I'm also very aware that that's exactly what she's doing. However, I'm not a dumbass so no amount of torture could get me to utter those words out loud.

"I'm coming tonight." She says, her tone firm and I nod again.

"There was never a doubt in my mind. Someday he'll figure it out, Aves."

She sniffs just a tiny bit and says, "I'll be gone by then. I'm not waiting for him to figure out I'm not a child. I'm not the little girl in the pretty dresses he used to like."

I steal a forkful of pancakes and say, "You should throw a knife at his head, like Illi taught you. That'll teach him."

The lessons Illi had been teaching all of my family were fucking amazing to watch. He's not exactly a natural teacher, but the guys all respond well to his arrogant ribbing and he treats Avery with the same level of respectful patience as I imagine he had back when he'd first taught me. She was a quick study, and now she's a danger with a knife. Atticus better watch out.

She scoffs at me and I see my cold, cruel, perfect Beaumont back in her eyes again. “Why are you so intent on hurting him? Should I be worried about the first argument you get into with those stupid boys?”

I scoff at her and steal more food. All of my stewing has brewed up an appetite. “I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about, I fight with them all the time.”

The front door opens and the guys all walk through, bickering and snarking at each other like they always do. I turn back to the TV, intent on ignoring them but Avery’s eyes narrow dangerously.

“Do the three of you ever do anything *productive*, or are you just going to spend the summer beating each other up and glaring at crime lords so Lips has to go into damage control to save your miserable asses?”

Ash scoffs at her and sits on the couch with us, sliding his palm along my thigh in a cruel and calculated move. Cruel to me, because I can’t control my reactions, and calculated towards his sister, because I think he’s done with her moping. It works like a fucking charm.

Avery’s eyes drop down to glare at his hand and when she looks back up at him I almost cringe at the look of pure disgust.

Ash smirks at her. “Maybe you should stop moping about that spineless fuck Atticus Crow and find someone worth your time?”

I move to get up, and away from their war, and they both hold me in place. Well, *fuck*.

“And who exactly do you suggest I date then, Ash? Who would meet your impossible standards?”

Blaise sprawls out on the floor in front of us and winks at me as he says, “Maybe you should date girls instead? Ash probably won’t give a fuck about a girl getting up in your pussy.”

Avery arches a brow at him and says, “If I were going to fuck a girl, it would be Lips. Don’t tempt me, she would drop you idiots for me in a second.”

I bite my lip to stop myself from smiling but the girl has a point. Blaise doesn’t seem to agree. “Star loves my dick Aves, she’d never give it up for you.”

I blush and stand, brushing off Ash’s hand and grabbing the empty plate. “That’s more than enough bullshit for me for one day. How about we get ready for the meeting? I don’t need you guys getting pissy right before we leave. We’ll already have Illi to deal with.”

I sigh, thinking again about what the fuck to do about the Butcher's reactions to being back at the auctions. I know the Jackal has picked that building on purpose to torture his old friend because he's a fucking sadistic dick like that.

The retaliation I have planned for him will be enough to keep Illi level.  
I hope.



## CHAPTER THREE

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**B**laise drives us down to the auctions in his new Cadillac, and I sit in the back between Ash and Harley. It's quiet in the car, everyone's a little on edge, but I enjoy the time to think and plan and prepare.

When we pull up to the warehouse I direct Blaise on where to park and we find Illi waiting for us, leaning against his own Camaro. Harley mumbles under his breath in appreciation and Ash scoffs at him, the tense air broken by a freaking car of all things. I slip out behind Ash, a hand in his because he's pretending to be a gentleman for the night, then I tuck my arm into Avery's in a show of support.

The Crow will already be here, in the building checking the Jackal hasn't planted explosives I'd guess, and I don't want Avery feeling anxious about it. I'm not sure this girl can actually feel such a thing but Atticus is fucking ruining her.

"Can we get this bullshit fucking over with? I have other things to do." Illi snaps, and takes the lead. That's breaking protocol and something I'd bitched the boys out for at dinner to remind them. Harley raises an eyebrow at me and I shake my head.

This place is fucking evil.

We walk after him, up to the door where one of the Jackal's men is standing watch. Illi sneers at him and I gently nudge Avery behind me.

It's about to get bloody.

"The Jackal has put a limit on how many men go in tonight. Pick one, the rest can stay out here." The chump says and I stare him down.

My voice is cold and flat as I reply, "The Jackal doesn't tell me what to do. Move or die."

The chump startles, and looks between the Butcher and I with panicked eyes. “You can’t kill me, I’m with the Jackal! He gave me an order, I can’t-”

“Die it is.” says Illi, and he swipes one of his cleavers from its sheath. The chump shits himself and scrambles back, slapping a hand onto a hidden earpiece and shouting about being murdered.

It’s not murder, it’s taking out the fucking trash.

Avery winces and turns around at the sight of blood, but the boys all watch with varying levels of interest as Illi shows them exactly how he got his name. The chump screams through the first arm but is out for his leg. There’s blood fucking everywhere, and it feels like it’s coating the inside of my nose by the time he stands again.

“Fuck that egotistical, sadistic, spoiled fucking sociopath.” Illi snaps, and I nod my head.

“Well, if that isn’t a statement, I don’t know what is.”

Ash rolls his shoulders back and flicks a hand at the mess. “Is that not going to get you into trouble? And here I am being on my best behavior.”

Illi wipes his hands on his shirt, a pointless move because there isn’t much of him that isn’t covered in the gore, and snaps, “If that fuck D’Ardo has a thing to say about it I’ll fucking gut him as well. Fuck playing nice, kid, let’s get this over with.”

I shake my head at him, hesitating before grabbing his hand and giving it a squeeze. “You can wait outside if you want. Or head home. I’ve got this under control.”

He scoffs at me and drops my hand. “Like fuck.”

Great.

It’s going to be one of those sorts of nights.

We walk in and the smell is as bad as I’d thought it was going to be. The cages are all still hanging everywhere and the seating still looks like someone has taken a cum-bath on them. When Avery gags and covers her nose, Ash tucks her under his arm.

The meeting is held on the fucking auction stage because the Jackal really is a sadistic fuck.

We’re the last ones to arrive. Harley pulls my chair out for me, and kisses my neck right before I take my seat because he can’t help but push things. Fuck it, this night is already going to be a shit-show, why not fuck with the Jackal a little more.

I ignore the scoff out of the Coyote and when I turn to give him a look I

catch Viola's eye. He's brought her with him.

Fuck.

She walks over to stand with my family and they accept her without question. Good. The Coyote may not have an army but he comes in handy and I already have a great deal of work I need him to do. The less diamonds I have to part with the better.

"She wants to talk to you before you leave tonight." he murmurs into my ear and I nod, meeting the Crow's eye across the table and giving him a nod, nice and big where the whole fucking table can see it and see the lines being drawn.

"Shall we begin? I'm sure we all have better things to do than sit around here gossiping." The Crow says, arrogant and cold, and the Jackal sneers at him.

"I think we should begin by asking the Wolf how exactly she thinks she's going to get away with killing off my men?"

I laugh.

Fuck it, I'm so over this man's bullshit.

"Did you ask everyone else to enter this building with only one man? Did you choose this building to piss anyone else off? Have you been sending men after any other members of the Twelve? Have you pulled a gun on any other members?"

The mood in the room sours even more. The Boar's eyes bounce between us both and then settle on the Jackal, cold and fucking dangerous in a way I've rarely seen from this man.

From the corner of my eye I see Avery watching him, shifting on her feet. The others don't notice except for Blaise, who looks so uncomfortable and I cannot for the life of me figure it out.

Right.

I'm asking her the second we get in the car what the fuck is going on with her and the Boar. She would tell me if she knew him, I'm sure she would, so there's something going on with her and I'm not sure how Atticus is involved but it's clear he's thinking the same as she is. He's watching the Boar with more than his usual cold calculation.

Fuck it.

"If you're going to start an inquisition over things we are and aren't allowed to do, then I have my own topics to bring up."

The Bear scoffs. "Yes, we all know you want him to stop chasing your

pussy. We get it.”

I level him with a look too because fuck caution. “I was talking about all of the spies he has on the other members of the Twelve.”

Well, I have their full attention now.

The Jackal stares at me, unflinching, and leans back in his chair like it doesn't matter to him and I'm sure it doesn't. Whatever he has on the Bear and the Lynx won't be affected by me revealing he's got spies in their houses. The Lynx wouldn't even kill the man watching her; her son is a spoiled fucking brat.

“Name the spy in my house, Wolf, and he'll be dead by sunrise.” The Fox says, the quick smiles and playful winks absent.

Good. Fuck him.

“I'll name them all. I think it's time the Jackal toes the line. He's gotten too big-headed. I wouldn't want him setting a bad example for the Stag.”

The Stag stares around the table and I'm weirdly proud of the guy for being so unaffected by our squabbling. Growing up in the Bay, the people at this table would be terrifying legends to him and he's only a few years older than I am.

The Jackal leans forward in his chair again, smiling at me like he's baring his teeth. “Tell them anything you want, Wolf. It makes no difference to me, or how this is all going to end.”

Game on.

I tilt my head at him, with a little fuck-you smile on my face. “Do you think it would make a *difference* to everyone to know you invited the Devil to Mounts Bay?”

I think a bomb detonating under the table would have had less reaction.

“The Devil?! What the fuck is wrong with you?” snaps the Bear, and the Lynx does the sign of the cross as if that'll fucking help her.

I stare at the Jackal across the table as the exclamations and shouting only gets louder. He watches me and there must be some serious issues in the man's brain because he only looks more obsessed with me. Like I'm impressing him by selling him out. I need a little less psycho in my life.

The meeting is fucking pointless.

It's supposed to be an induction of sorts for the Stag but all he learns is that the Jackal is a power-hungry psycho and the Crow isn't up for playing his twisted games.

I don't speak again, I keep my mouth firmly shut even when I'd love to chip in, and I watch the rest of them carefully to not only see who is siding with the Jackal, but *why*.

The Fox is being blackmailed. The twitchy looks make that clear. The Lynx is hungry for power and she doesn't care who she gets it from. The Bear is harder to read, but I'm guessing he's just thinking about what is best for his business, and the Jackal needs his services on an hourly basis. I'm not sure if the Crow has such a blood-soaked legacy.

The Tiger is hating every second of this.

I'm not sure he has much use in this war of ours, but he's very useful to me in my plans with Senior so I'm fucking praying he lands with the Crow.

The Crow calls the meeting to an end and then stands to wait for everyone to leave. I move slowly, hoping to catch the Tiger, but he bolts like one of his twitchy clients. Fuck.

I nod at the Crow again, being so respectful is hard work, and I start to leave when the Lynx sidles up beside me. I give her a look but she just gestures for me to lead the way. Right. That's weird. The Coyote and Viola Ayres follow us out.

Once we're out by our cars I turn back to face her with a raised eyebrow. I don't like this woman, and I really fucking hate the smug look.

"I could be persuaded to join your side." She says, and the look she gives Harley says everything. Just this once, I wish he were a little less fucking gorgeous, because if I'm a magnet for fucked up killers and psycho rapists, then he's cougar bait.

"He's not for sale." I reply, my tone icy enough to give Avery's a run for its' money.

She smirks at me. "I admire you, little Wolf. Forcing all of these alpha males to share you. If you're not willing to lose a little pride and give him to me for a night or two, then why should I join your side?"

I take a deep breath and I don't know what the hell is in the air around here but the words that come out of my mouth are almost entirely *Beaumont*. "What little assistance a washed up, old Mafia queen could give me isn't worth an ounce of my pride or a second in Harley's company. Maybe you should find some real skills or assets to offer me and then we'll talk."

And then I turn on my heel and slide into the Cadillac before I slit the bitch's throat. Tonight isn't the time for it, but I will kill her.

I'll enjoy every second of it, too.

There's a gentle tap on my shoulder and I glance up to find Viola Ayres.

"Slide along. I need to talk."

I shake my head at her but I move anyway. Avery takes the front seat and the guys wait outside the car. The Coyote starts making terrible jokes and Viola shuts the door to block them out.

"When can I go home?" Viola says, staring at her chipped nails. She looks thinner than when we bundled her off to the Coyote's safe house. I hope he's treating her right. She doesn't look abused but she's clearly miserable.

I share a look with Avery. "Is there something going on with the Coy-Jackson? You don't have to stay with him, we can find somewhere else for you to be."

She snorts at me. "Jackson isn't the problem. The problem is that my father is dirty, bought and paid for by a certain billionaire you may know, and now my sister is in danger too. The Jackal is in contact with your dad, Avery, and it's only getting worse for us all."

I groan and slam my head back into the seat. Avery snorts at me and snaps at Viola, "You didn't think to call a little sooner? Knowing this before we came to the meeting would have been helpful."

Viola shrugs. "I thought you and Atticus were close? Jackson called him with the information. I assumed you both knew this."

Fucking *Atticus*.

Avery turns to stone in the front seat and I'm pretty sure the Crow has just tipped her over the edge. Her phone is in her hand, switched on and with her fingers flying across the screen frantically, in seconds.

I sigh and Viola snorts. "So, Jackson told me you bashed some guy's head in to become the Wolf. That's pretty fucking dark. What do you do in the Twelve?"

I roll my eyes at her. "I kill people. Ask Jackson when you can meet his mother, I'm not the only murderer you know."

I lock myself in my bathroom when we get back to Avery's ranch.

The mood in the car ride back was a little better than the way there. The guys all seem to think we've won something, that the information I've handed over has pushed the Twelve into taking our side. It's not that easy, and only Avery seems to know that.

The guys all grab their drinks of choice, and head to the pool to drink. Avery waits for five minutes before picking the lock to the bathroom door and joins me with a smirk. Evil dictator, but she's not the person I'm worried about hearing this conversation.

I can't put it off for any longer. My hands shake as I hit dial on my phone, turning the speakerphone on so Avery can listen in.

"Morningstar Enterprises, may I ask who's calling?" It's a woman's sultry tone so I'm pretty sure it's not Morningstar himself.

"The Wolf of Mounts Bay."

There's a pause and then she replies, "Please hold."

Avery gives me a look and I shrug. I had no idea contacting this guy would be so fucking formal but here we are.

"Wolf."

I shiver. Ok, yep, he sounds positively fucking terrifying with one damn word. Avery's face pales but her eyes stay fixed on the screen like she's memorizing everything that's going on.

"I've heard you were the buyer for Miss Beaumont. Her father was out of line. She's not for sale, and I'd like to discuss rectifying this... miscommunication." My voice is flat and steady, thank the sweet lord.

He hums under his breath, then says, "I could be persuaded to let her go. Is she yours?"

"Yes. She's one of mine. Whatever the cost, I will pay it."

Avery threads her fingers through mine and I squeeze her hand.

Morningstar replies, "I have some business in the Bay to attend to. I will contact you for a formal meeting then."

He hangs up and I don't feel any better; my stomach is heavy like I swallowed a pound of lead.

Why did that feel too easy for me?

I always trust my gut. I've honed my instincts for years, growing up the way I did I already could read situations other kids just couldn't process and once I joined the Twelve it was those instincts that have kept me alive. Retrieving information and removing people from the board is only possible

because my gut is always right. Even when it doesn't make sense and, after that call, I'm sure of two things; Morningstar is planning something, and we have too much on our plates to take him on as well.

Avery clears her throat and says, "There's something else we need to talk about, Lips. What do you know about your father?"

I startle out of my deep thought and look up at her. I don't like the look on her face, not one freaking bit.

"Nothing. I've never met him. My mom told me he was locked up for drug trafficking and I've just... never really thought about him. I had too much other bullshit to deal with."

Avery nods and cringes just a little. "Is there anyone who would know about him? I checked your birth certificate and the person your mom put on it... doesn't exist."

I frown at her. "What do you mean he doesn't exist?"

She sighs at me and taps away on her phone before handing it to me. I find a file compiled by one of her many, *many* contacts, and see that every attempt to track down the man my mom listed on my birth certificate has come up with nothing.

For fuck's sake.

"Why is this relevant? Does it matter who he is, if he's just some drug addict I'd rather not have another one of those in my life. My mom was bad enough." I say, but I can't let go of the phone. Why would she lie? I can feel a headache coming on.

"I hope you're not angry at me for looking into this, it's just... the note in the box with Joey's head, it said blood. The people being targeted are people who have wronged you in some way and the note sounded... protective. The person sending them is protecting you in a really disturbing way."

Huh.

Ok, maybe my gut isn't that great.

I've been so caught up on the fact that I kill people for money that it never occurred that maybe someone would kill for me. Outside of my family. I already know the guys would all kill for me, or at the very least severely maim.

"Ok. There's a few things we could try." I say, hating the very fucking thought of those things but dealing with the heads could be a quick and easy fix, and one less thing to think of.

Avery smiles at me and says, "I have a guess. It's a good one, but we'll



see what your... *things* tell us.”

I stare at her for a second and then it falls together in my brain. I shake my head at her. “The Boar is not my father. There’s no fucking way. For starters, he only moved to the state, like, ten years ago. He’s never given a shit about me.”

Avery smirks at me and stands up, smoothing a hand down her dress and looking freaking perfect in a way I’m still green with envy over. “He said he wouldn’t join the Jackal. He said it was a blood thing. Exact same wording Lips, that’s not a coincidence.”

Fuck.

## CHAPTER FOUR

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The spy in the Crow's organization had disappeared before the meeting was over. I knew there were a few of the plants that were flight risks and the Crow had called me the second he found out the guy was gone.

What a fun conversation that was.

"Avery isn't answering my calls." He says, his voice monotone and cold. Months ago, what felt like a freaking lifetime, that would have sent a shiver down my spine but, fuck, a lot has changed. I'm not afraid of this dick anymore, only slightly wary.

I make my voice sound as bored as freaking possible as I reply, "I'm not her keeper, if she doesn't want to speak to you then she doesn't have to. What do you need?"

I hear the distinct sound of his teeth grinding together and grin at myself like a smug-ass bitch. Grovel, Crawford, *grovel*.

"The plant knows about Avery. Knows our connection. I don't know why he hasn't said anything yet, but if it gets back to the Jackal-"

I cut him off. "You think I didn't know already? You think I didn't have a plan in place for that guy? Come on, Crow. I didn't become the Wolf because I'm some naive piece of ass, twirling my hair and hoping for the best."

He sighs at me. "I think I liked it better when you were afraid of me."

I snort at him. "That was before I knew you're just like every other dick out there: arrogant and self-serving. The guy will be dead by dawn. Pleasure doing business with you."

I hang up before he gets the chance to reply. Blaise raises an eyebrow at me from the driver's seat of his newest toy and I shrug at him. When picking out the new car, purely for shits and giggles because the Maserati is still in

perfect condition, he chose possibly the flashiest car possible. The Cadillac is white and I swear to god, it has diamonds in the dashboard. When I raise an eyebrow at him, he smirks and pets it lovingly.

“I thought the theme of our little family was diamonds? I love nothing more than matching shit.”

The snark in his tone is at a whole new high, and I settle back in my seat to ignore his bullshit. “How can you afford this now? Did you lie to Ash about what your expenses are? Avery will make you wish you were dead if she finds out.”

He shrugs and smirks at me. “After I bought out my contract I released my new album. I thought you would have heard it by now. Ash asked me about it over dinner the other night, didn’t you hear him?”

I stare at him, then pull out my phone to look it up. I’ve been listening to the songs on repeat for over a year so it’s not like it’ll be anything new for me, but I feel like this is something I should have known. Plus I’d like to see how well it’s doing.

Blaise chuckles at the look on my face. “Star, I’m not pissy you didn’t know, you’ve been a little busy keeping us all alive. Besides, I’m taking this as proof you’re definitely not stalking me. It’s been out for *weeks*.”

I still feel bad but I try to joke my way out of the feeling. “I have it on tap now, I don’t need to keep up with what you’re doing.”

His chuckle turns into a laugh and he runs a colorful hand through his hair, tugging on it a little. Fuck, it looks like he’s been rolling around in his sheets for a few hours, not driving me to the middle of fucking nowhere with a gagged man in the back.

Yeah.

I wasn’t lying to the Crow; the plant disappeared because I made him disappear. I’ve had too many close calls involving Avery lately so there was no way I was leaving her fate in Atticus Crawford’s fumbling hands. Although now he knows I’m out of the house and dealing with his problem, I’m sure he’ll be at the Ranch to try to force Avery to talk to him. Ash and Harley had happily stayed behind, having a knife throwing lesson from Illi, so if he does show up he’ll be lucky to leave with his jugular intact.

Which is how I have the rock god to myself... well, kind of. If you ignore the grunting and groaning in the back every time Blaise hits a pothole.

“Now you’ve asked I’ll let you know; the record is doing well. I got rid of most of the band, they were all brought in by the label, so it’s just me and

Finn now. You'll have to meet him soon. Once this fucking *war* is over, I mean. He's probably a little too delicate for this kind of thing."

I hum under my breath at him, and grab his hand. He's probably a little too delicate for this too, a little too naive and green, but he loves his family. He's utterly unflinching when shit hits the fan. He belongs with us.

"Take the next left, then follow the road to the end." I murmur, and Blaise pulls off of the highway. We're a good three hours away from the Ranch now, out in the backwoods of Cali, but the little cabin is well known to me and has everything I'll need for the job ahead of me.

I leave nothing behind.

"Is there anything left behind after you melt the bodies? Anything that could identify the dead guy?" Blaise murmurs.

I shrug. "No. The acid breaks down everything, but the Bear is the one with the access to the acid, and he's chosen the Jackal so we're not using acid today."

The guy in the back makes a sort of gurgling, squealing sound and I snort at him. "If you're lucky, I'll kill you before I throw you in the pens."

Blaise's hands spasm on the steering wheel. "Pens? Fuck, Star, where the hell are you taking me?"

I smirk at him. "Worried, Morrison? I'll keep you safe from the little piggies, don't worry."

Blaise scowls at me. "Pigs? What the fuck?"

"They leave nothing behind. I know the guy who owns the place, he owes me *quite* a few favors."

Blaise gives me a sidelong look. "Is there anyone in Mounts Bay who doesn't owe you favors?"

I shrug. "Clean people don't, but they're few and far between in my world."

One of the perks of having the guys around while I'm on a job is that I no longer have to lug around dead bodies or writhing victims, and my bad leg has never gone this long without a flare up before.

Once Blaise has the guy out of the trunk and slumped in one of the empty pig pens, I nod at Brian to get him to leave. He clicks his tongue and jeers at

the pigs as he walks away, happy enough to turn a blind eye and owe me one less favor.

Blaise wipes his forehead with the back of his hand and grunts at me, “How the fuck do you normally move them? You’re fucking tiny.”

I scoff at him and shrug. “Perseverance. You might want to go back to the car for this, it’s not going to be pretty.”

The guy starts grunting and squealing behind the gag again but we ignore him completely.

“I told you I’d come to work with you today, I’m prepared to get my hands dirty, Star.” Blaise says, and rocks back on his heels a little. He watches me carefully but I just shrug. If he’s really that keen on it then I guess we’re doing this.

I slide my knife out of my pocket and cut the guy’s gag off. He dry retches as he spits it out and coughs before a stream of begging starts up. “Don’t kill me! I’m useful to you, I can tell you things! I know about the Jackal’s plans. I know who the other spies are, just don’t fucking kill me.”

I crouch down into his face, trying not to grimace at the stink of him. Fear turns sweat into a foul smelling thing and he’s dripping with it under the hot summer sun. I tilt my head and look at him assentingly. “Convince me. Tell me something that makes it worth my while to keep you breathing. I mean, I’ve already driven all the way out here, I may as well finish the job.”

His eyes dart up to Blaise then back to me as he gulps, his voice shaking as he replies. “The Jackal is putting spies in your school. He’s cleared the board and put in his own men to get close to you. He still wants you bad, kid, and he’s desperate to kill your men and get you back. He’s fucking crazy, I took the spy position to get away from him. Look, I don’t want to go back to him. I’ll patch over! I’ll join the Crow, just don’t kill me.”

I hum at him. “Anything else? Because I already knew all of that.”

His voice raises and he practically squeals, more shrill than the pigs themselves. “He’s looking into the O’Cronins. Trying to find something about them, something to catch the kid out. Morrisons too. He’s working with Beaumont, but I think he’s planning on killing him too.”

Nothing new or useful.

And fuck, I wish it were going to be that easy. I wish I could just sit back and wait for them to kill each other. “I knew all of that, too. I’ve gotta tell you, you’re not making a good case for yourself.”

“He has a meeting with the Devil! He’s meeting with Morningstar about

you and your people. He'll be out of the state for a few weeks, he's gone to plead his case. The Devil said no to killing the O'Cronin boy but the Jackal now wants him to come kill all of the other members of the Twelve who've sided with you."

Ok. That's new.

I don't let that show on my face though, and when I raise an eyebrow the guy starts sobbing and wailing. That's all he's got and I'm still going to take him out.

Letting people live nearly cost me Harley last year.

I'll never make that mistake again.

I grab my bag and start to dig around for my plastic jumpsuit. I don't really want to strip down to my underwear and slitting throats is messy work. Blaise watches me grab it out and sighs, tugging at my elbow until I step away.

I misread him completely.

"It's the way things work in the Bay, just go back to the car and forget we were ever here." I mumble, but he grabs the ghost gun Illi got him last year and rummages around in my bag until he finds my silencer.

How the hell he knew I have one in there is beyond me because I'm too damn busy gaping at him as he screws it on.

"You're going to shoot him? I didn't think-" he cuts me off.

"I told you, I'm all in. You're mine; my girlfriend and my family, so this is our *gang life*, or whatever. Consider this my blood in."

Then he shoots the guy, his hand steady and effective as it only takes one bullet. I'm fucking *impressed*.

I don't wait around to talk about it, I just flick the gates open and let the pigs in to start their work. Blaise grimaces and climbs the fence to get away from them and I laugh at him. Happy to shoot a guy but a total fucking wuss about farm animals? He's as bad as Avery.

I scramble over the fence and he helps me down on the other side, mindful of my leg. I smile up at him, completely unaffected but the crunching and munching going on behind us.

Why the hell should I care about a spy meeting his fate?

Blaise tucks me under his arm and tips his head at Brian as we get back to the Cadillac. The cheeky fucker helps me climb up into the car and snarks something about getting me a step ladder. I do my best to ignore his jabs because I'm not about to let him rile me up.

Once we're back on the highway he slips a hand between my thighs and strokes my pussy through my booty shorts. My thighs tense and trap his hand there, the little grin he shoots me is nothing short of devious.

"Want to fuck in the car on the way back?"

Uh, yeah. I do.

## CHAPTER FIVE

---

On the morning we're due to head back to Hannaford, I startle awake in our bed. The room is still dark and it takes my mind a second to catch up to my body, because Harley's dick is rock hard between my thighs and one of his hands is clamped over my mouth while the other is toying with my pussy. I choke back the moan clawing up my throat because I can hear Blaise's soft snores and the small sliver of light from the morning sun is bright across Ash's sleeping back.

Harley feels me jolt awake and kisses my throat, whispering against my skin, "I'm being selfish this morning. I need you for myself, babe, just for now."

I shiver and nod, all-fucking-in.

I'm not sure how the fuck he's planning on doing this without waking the others but his fingers are magic and my eyes slip shut as he works me over. I've been sleeping in panties, more from habit than anything else, but the lace Ash picks out always errs on the scandalous side and Harley rips the crotch out without any real effort then he plunges his fingers into my pussy, grinding the heel of his palm into my clit until I'm struggling to stay silent even with his hand still firmly covering my mouth.

He waits until I'm right on the edge of coming before he pulls away, tugging my leg up and back until it's resting on his and he has a little room. Then he lines his dick up, rubbing it against my wet pussy lips, and bites my shoulder as he pushes in. I definitely make some fucking noise at that.

His hips pump into me, a slow and smooth rocking motion that winds me the hell up until I'm shaking. His hand manages to smother the sobs wrenching out of my chest a little so they sound like little gasps instead but I



feel desperate and mindless.

“Shh, if you’re too loud I’ll have to share you.” Harley murmurs into my skin, but I’m too far gone to listen and his dick feels that fucking good buried inside me.

It’s too much for me to take and my heart stutters in my chest as I come. Ash’s eyes snap open as the little gasp that wrenches out of my throat, and I moan softly behind Harley’s hand. He doesn’t notice Ash has woken up and his hips are relentless as he pumps into me.

I can feel my body stoking higher and higher until I think I’m going to come again when Ash slides closer and tugs my shirt out of the way so he can pinch one of my nipples. I try to hold Ash’s eyes with my own as I come again, clenching around Harley until he grunts and moves to hold both of my hips. I lean forward to give him some room to move and Ash catches my chin in his hand, kissing me firmly until I’m moaning into his lips.

I break away to try to catch my breath and Ash slides a hand around my throat until his thumb can trace over my pulse. I stare into his eyes and the look he gives me is pure, dark lust. Watching Harley fuck me has once again snapped the tight hold he has on himself around me.

He squeezes at my throat, just enough that I have to tip my head back to breathe. “Turn over.”

Harley huffs and grumbles under his breath but he helps move me around until I’m facing him, holding my hip with one hand as he pushes back in. He cups my cheek with his free hand and kisses me, dragging his teeth over my bottom lip until I’m boneless. He knows just how to touch me to make me feel both *owned* and fucking *worshipped*.

I’m lost in Harley’s lips so I miss when Ash shifts closer and palms my ass, kneading my curves and spreading them until I gasp into Harley’s kiss. He bites my lip and then moves to lick and suck his way down my throat, marking me up so there isn’t going to be a single doubt in the other students minds of what we’ve spent the summer doing together when we get back to school. Ash tugs at my hair to pull my head back and sticks two fingers in my mouth. I suck on them and wish it was his dick. I’m not ashamed to say I whine a little when he pulls them out.

Just as Harley’s kisses get to my collarbone and nips me there, Ash’s finger presses against my ass and I just about *die*.

“Tell me to stop, Mounnty.” Ash murmurs, but I can’t. I physically cannot force the words out of myself and he kisses the back of my neck sweetly,

whispering “Good girl.”

Then he pushes his finger into my ass and *sweet merciful lord* I did not expect to like it *this* much. A gasp rips out of my throat and I clutch at Harley’s shoulders while my brain whites out a little.

Ash huffs out a laugh and bites down on my shoulder again, adding another finger and alternating the pumps with the drag of Harley’s dick inside me until I’m always filled with one of them. Ok, maybe his dick would be fucking amazing. Maybe being truly shared will be the best fucking feeling and I’ll refuse to leave this bed.

It takes *seconds* before I’m coming again, a freaking record, and Harley groans as he comes too. I’m too blissed out to get pissy at Ash’s smug laugh. He pulls his fingers out and then rubs his dick between my ass cheeks. My eyes might go a little crazy at that. It feels amazing, much better than I ever thought it would, but there’s no fucking way he’s going to stick his monster cock up my ass.

Harley grunts when I clench around his softening dick, pulling out and snapping at Ash, “You stick anything else in her, you fucking better have lube.”

He kisses me sweetly and rolls out of the bed for the shower. I pout for a half second and then Ash turns me around, stripping my shirt off and shoving his boxers down his legs.

“Feeling brave yet, Mouny?” He smirks, and I scoff at him.

“Wasn’t that brave enough for you?” My voice sounds weirdly breathless.

He nods and takes my hand, wrapping it the thick length of him. “You’re right, that was very brave. If you’d given me a little warning I would have had lube and we could have both fucked you at the same time.”

I get a full-body shiver at that and his eyes go all molten. What the fuck are these guys doing to me? I’ve gone from terrified of their dicks to fucking melting at the thoughts of gangbangs. Jesus take the wheel.

Then I remember I have a handful of Ash’s dick and wriggle down the bed to suck him off because that’s something I can get behind. Yes fucking *please*.

Ash insists on joining me for a shower afterwards and I struggle so freaking

bad to focus on washing myself with him naked around me. I wonder idly if this feeling will ever wear off but I kind of enjoy how much they affect me. It's also nice to know they're just as affected by me.

When we're done I throw on some yoga pants and one of Ash's v neck shirts, the perks of having boyfriends is having full access to their clothes in my humble opinion, and then head back into our room to pack the last of my bags. Blaise is awake finally, rubbing the sleep from his eyes and frowning around the room.

"Why does it smell like sex in here? What the *fuck* did I miss now?" He snarls, and I pretend I don't hear him as I start shoving the last of my clothes back into my duffle bag.

Ash saunters out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped around his waist, smug-as-fuck, and says, "Maybe you should drink and smoke a little less before bed so when Arbour decides to wake the Mounty up with his dick you can join in too."

Blaise's arm drops and he levels a vicious glare at his best friend. "What. The. Fuck?! I thought we agreed to *not* be exclusionary dicks about this?"

Ash shrugs and drops his towel. I look back at my clothes because we have no time for round two... or three, whatever, who's counting?

"So don't be a dick. I wasn't an asshole about you guys fucking in the Cadillac without me even after I had to get in there and smell it right after."

Fuck. I'd forgotten about that.

We'd gotten back only to find Avery had a craving for Pizza. Ash and Blaise jumped straight back into the Cadillac to drive into the closest town, mostly because Ash and Avery were still at each other's throats over Atticus.

I try to ignore my blush and snap, "Can we just get a move on? We have to stop off in the actual slums before we head back to Hannaford and I'd rather we get it over with."

That gets them to shut up and start moving. None of us want to go back to my old house. I don't want to take them there and they don't want to face the reality of where I came from. It's easier to think of it all as some sad story, something that wasn't so fucking desperately dangerous.

I manage to finish up my packing without falling into a complete sulk. I meet Avery at the car and when she hands me a coffee I attempt a smile at her.

"If there was any other way I wouldn't ask you to do this." She murmurs and I nod.

“It doesn’t matter. It’s over with now. We’ll just get in and get out.”

When the car is finally packed and we’re all strapped in, I try not to stare wistfully out of the window at the ranch. I fucking love the place and going back to the snake pits of Hannaford has never been so fucking devastating. My mood only gets worse the closer we get to the Bay. The car is silent as we drive, moving through the ‘burbs and the commercial districts until we’re driving through the very worst parts of the city.

It doesn’t matter that it’s nearly been a whole fucking decade since I was last here, the only things that have changed is everything has gotten more run-down and derelict. I hate it, I hate being here and I hate my whole damn family being here, too. The shame and embarrassment crawls over my skin until I become a snarling asshole myself.

“Stop here. This is it.” I snap, and I swallow the bile creeping up my throat as I look out the window at the tiny shed-like structure I once lived in with my mom.

No one says a word as we pile out of the car and Avery hesitates for a half second before tucking her arm in mine. “I don’t give a fuck about this place, Lips. I just need to check if there’s anything here that can tell us about your birth father.”

I nod and swallow again, trying to keep my voice civil as I say, “You guys should just stay in the car. The place isn’t exactly big enough to have us all in there at once.”

Ash eyes me and then nods, leaning back against the car casually as Blaise pulls out a blunt for them both. They’re both armed and I give them a quick nod, my eyebrows hopefully conveying the motto ‘shoot first, ask questions later’ because this is possibly the worst area to be standing next to a fucking Cadillac with diamonds in the freaking dashboard. I’m kind of expecting to come back and find them being held up by rough and tumble eleven year-olds. I’d also be tempted to put money on the Mouny kids in that situation.

Harley tucks his hand in mine, ignoring my glare, and jerks his head towards the house. “Let’s get this over with. I want to get back to school in time to talk to the coach about the swim trials.”

Avery scoffs at him and I pull away from them both to jiggle the door open. It never did lock properly.

I guess we should have been at least a little concerned about squatters or a new drug addicted family living here but honestly, I’m not sure there was

anyone out there desperate enough to move in to the absolute stinking shithole.

Avery tries her best to be polite but gags anyway. Disuse and being sealed has only made the damp, moldy, *death* smell a million times worse.

“C’mon, I know where she used to hide her stash. I’d guess that’s the best place to start looking for clues.”

None of the rooms have doors, just curtains that are so old and moth eaten they’ve mostly fallen down and turned to dust. Harley doesn’t gag or pull faces, he just takes everything in. I hate it. I feel like something vital is being exposed right now that shouldn’t ever be fucking seen, like my kidneys have been carved out and put on display.

There’s still a few bags of cocaine in my mom’s old stash hole, and I pocket them. They’re stamped with the Jackal’s insignia and I know they’re the dirty batch he sold her. Might come in handy to have some dirty drugs, fuck knows what we’re going to need this year.

When there’s nothing out in the open, I rummage around until I find an old crowbar and start ripping up floorboards. Harley grunts at me and takes over like I’ve insulted him by doing it myself.

“Why the fuck did you have a crow bar but no fucking doors?” He grunts, but the boards all lift easily. The wood is rotting away.

“I don’t know. Well, I know we had the crowbar to use on people trying to break in for drugs. I once watched my mom break a guy’s leg with it. But the missing doors don’t make any sense. I guess they’ve been gone long before mom started squatting here.”

Avery ducks down and grabs a handful of papers from the floor cavity. “I think they’re just newspapers but we should take everything just in case. I’ll go grab a box, I told Ash to bring some.”

I nod, and start flipping through the papers anyway. Nothing I can see, nothing until I find a photo stashed amongst them. It’s of my mom, long before she had me. She looks so fucking young and healthy. It must have been before drugs, before the fire, before everything went wrong. Strangely, my heart sort of spasms in my chest and I feel the need to keep the photo. Fucking weird.

“She looks nothing like you.” Harley murmurs, and I startle. I didn’t hear him stop and come over.

I nod and clear my throat. “Yeah, we were polar opposites. This was before her life went to shit, back when she was still happy. Fuck this place, I

hate it so much.”

He nods and grabs my hand again. “I know, babe, but I’d rather be here and have you face this than have your past bite us in the ass.”

I nod again, I get it. Doesn’t mean I have to like it.

## CHAPTER SIX

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**W**e pick up one of Ash's Ferraris, one with a tiny back seat with zero leg space, and I ride the rest of the way to Hannaford in it with the twins, and Harley rides in Blaise's Cadillac with him. I spend the entire trip listening to them both snark each other out and doing my best at avoiding being dragged into their arguments.

"The Mounty is moving into our room this year. If you haven't figured something out to get us a little closer to you then we'll just have a rotation to keep someone in your room each night. It'll be like freshman year all over again, Floss." Ash says, changing gears and then tracing patterns into my thighs.

Avery scoffs from the backseat, extra pissy after our search of my old house came up with nothing. "Lips is as loyal as they come. She would never turn her back on the bonds of our sisterhood; she'll move in with me and then spend the whole year being woken up by one of you climbing in to drool over her."

I turn the page of my book without a word. Apparently that's the wrong thing to do, on both sides of this argument, because they both hiss at me.

"Lips, tell him you love me more-"

"Mounty, you know where you'd rather be-"

I move the book to cover my face. "I'll set up a roster and move between the two rooms. My shit is going in my room with Aves but it's a win for everyone."

Neither of them like that for an answer but at least it gets them to drop the subject. I can't say I'm not relieved when we pull into the staff parking lot and I scramble out of the car to get away from the animosity. Harley raises

his eyebrows at me but Avery's snarling starts up again and he smirks.

"Picked the wrong car, babe?"

Smug dick. "Oh, I'm sure you and Blaise would have just started the same crap with me too."

Blaise decides to be his own personal brand of helpful and jumps into the ring with Ash, snarking at Avery, "Why are you defending Atticus again? I thought you'd given up on your little crush."

I tuck myself under Harley's arm and drag him away from the spectacle. I know we only have to find a crowd for them to quit their shit, nothing is more important in this place than a united front. When we finally get past the statues and immaculate landscaping, and into the building the looks we get from the other students... pure, unadulterated terror.

Well, That's nice.

Harley pulls me in closer to his body, kissing the crown of my head and whispering into my hair, "The sheep have finally figured out a Wolf hunts among them."

I roll my eyes. "You're so fucking funny, babe. So funny."

His eyes flare when I use his pet name for me and the smirk only gets bigger. "It's true. There's a whole bunch of wolves here now. Best fucking tattoo I've got."

I squeeze his waist and tuck my face into his chest. "Maybe we should keep that under wraps for a little longer. We don't need to be dealing with any Hannaford snake pit drama this year."

He chuckles under his breath. "Well, I'm not putting up with some cougar cunt trying to fuck me this year. We're firmly a stab-first family going forward. Apparently you have the perfect farm animal disposal system."

Ugh. Gossiping freaking boys!

Avery takes the lead and we head straight up to the boy's dorms. I follow without question, because Avery Beaumont knows her shit, but Blaise isn't quite so trusting.

"I want Star in with us, not you as well. I'm not getting fucking bitched out for not washing my sheets daily or making a fucking sandwich when I'm hungry."

Avery doesn't break her stride but the look she gives him should best be described as *ball-shrivel*ing.

"Maybe if you didn't constantly have questionable stains on your sheets I wouldn't have to bitch you out and 3am is not the time to be fucking around



in the kitchen.” She snarks at him.

Blaise shrugs at her. “We can’t all sleep like Beaumonts. Some of us actually feel things and it keeps us up at night. Harley never fucking shut his eyes before Star, you never bitch him out for it.”

Avery stops at a door at the end of the hall in the boys dorm and pulls out a key. Her tone is icy as she says, “When your sleep issues stop being about the amount of blunts you smoke, and shift to being flashbacks to your loving father being murdered, then I’ll change my stance. Now stop whining, you petulant brat.”

She shoves open the door and we find a double room, slightly smaller than our room last year in the girls dorm but with more couches and a bigger TV.

“Dibs not sharing the fucking bed. I get we’ll be in rotation but, fuck, can’t we at least have our own bed when we *are* here?” Blaise grumbles, and Ash snorts at him.

“Did you pack seventy-eight boxes? This is Avery’s shit. She’s moving in here with MOUNTY.”

I cut Avery a look and she smiles sweetly at me. “Hannaford is having renovations this year and they’ve had to reshuffle where students are being housed. The boy’s room is next door. I hope the walls are thick enough that I won’t hear the orgies but at least I won’t have to see them.”

I blush and clear my throat, and for once it’s not in embarrassment over her use of the word *orgies*. I was starting to feel antsy about being away from the guys at night, too much can happen in this place, and being away from *any* of our family was going to be fucking hard. “Thanks.”

She shrugs. “I can’t have you turning into an insomniac either. This way we’re all in one spot if something happens. I was thinking about having a door cut into the wall between the rooms for easier access but, really, the ones in the hall should be enough.”

I kick my shoes off and sling my bag onto the bed, pulling out my safe and tapping my feet on the floorboards as I walk around the room, looking for the perfect hiding spot. Ash watches me carefully as he kisses the top of Avery’s head. He looks the most relieved about our room change. Being away from Avery is hard for him at the best of times, but with the war brewing in the Bay, it’s only made it more dangerous.

“I’ll make burgers for dinner. Did you order shit in, Floss?” Harley says, opening the fridge and grinning when he finds it full. He grabs a beer and

throws one at Blaise. Ash starts rummaging around for the hard liquor and I roll my eyes at them all. Starting senior year with a hangover sounds fucking awful but I grab one of my emergency whiskey bottles out and offer it to him anyway. He grimaces.

Avery scoffs, carrying the first of many, many boxes labelled 'bathroom' to start unpacking, and snaps, "The bourbon is in your room, go unpack your own crap."

Harley starts pulling out pans and says, "I'm fucking starving and Lips skipped breakfast because of our stop-off in the slums so we're having family dinner. We'll help you unpack, Floss."

She scoffs at him and I continue my hunt for the perfect hiding spot. When I find it, Blaise grabs his own knife out and helps pry the floorboard up. The diamond I gave him for Christmas catches in the light and I grin at him, my stomach fluttering with happiness. Maybe this year won't be so fucking terrible. Maybe Hannaford is the perfect place for us to get some space from the Bay.

I barely manage to get the thought out before Ash's vicious cursing interrupts us.

"Mouny. It's happened again."

I glance over my shoulder to the front door, held open by Ash, to find what's caught his ire. I hear Avery dart out of the bathroom and join Ash in cursing.

Fuck. It's a fucking box.

"Who the fuck could be in it this time?" Harley growls from the kitchen, and I shrug, totally resigned to this bullshit following us everywhere.

"Fuck knows. Grab it and get it out of people's sight, Ash. I'll call Illi for a pick up."

It's the first head that isn't immediately obvious why the person is dead.

I call Illi for the pick up and he doesn't bother to comment, and then we open it to find my third-grade teacher's head inside. When I tell the others who it is Blaise groans and slumps back on my bed.

"I fucking hate riddles! Why would anyone give a fuck about your grade school teachers? Do you? This is fucking stupid!"

Ash watches Avery as she stares at the head with a hand clamped firmly over her mouth to try to keep the smell and potential airborne germs away from herself. I mentally make note that we need to get her a face mask or, fuck it, a hazmat suit to deal with this shit in the future.

Harley watches me.

“Any ideas?” Avery says and I shrug.

“Plenty. If we’re still going on the assumption that the killer is taking out people who’ve wronged me then this woman was an absolute fucking bitch to me. She hated the entire class, hated her life, and she especially hated me. I was smart. She didn’t like the idea of one of us making it out of the Bay and my brains are my ticket out.”

Avery sighs and then startles when my phone pings. I give her a little smile and then move to let Illi in.

“Who the fuck is it this time? Tell me it’s Matteo, or Senior, I’d fucking love it if it were one of them.” He says as he gives me a quick squeeze. None of my guys bat an eyelid, completely accepting of Illi now he’s apparently paid his dues into the family.

“It’s Ms. Rickard. Did you ever have her as a teacher?” I say, and Illi frowns, rubbing his face with one of his massive scarred hands.

He steps up, giving Ash a bro nod of his head and slapping Harley on the shoulder.

“Kid. This is not a good sign. This is actually a really fucking bad one.” He says as he snaps on a pair of gloves.

I groan. “Tell me something I don’t know.”

He rolls the head around looking for some clue, some little thing that will tell us why the fuck this is happening. “You get why it’s her, right?”

I frown at him and step back up beside him to stare at the head. “She was a bitch to me. They’re all people who’ve wronged me.”

He sighs and gently lifts the head back into the box, closing it up and snapping the gloves back off. Avery immediately moves to grab a bottle of bleach and starts scrubbing.

“She put you in detention. She put you there and that’s where you very first met Matteo. You probably don’t even remember him being there, you didn’t speak to each other, but that is where he first saw you and that’s where his obsession with you started.”

I blink at him.

What the fuck?

“Some kid shoved you and you stabbed him with a pair of scissors or something.”

I tip my head back and groan at the ceiling. “Seriously? My whole fucking life changed course because I stabbed Cory Ryans? Fuck, I might hunt him down and stab him again for that shit.”

Illi laughs at me and tucks the box under his arm. “Fucking weird I remember that so clearly but yeah, that’s when it started. Then he dosed your mom, got you into foster care with him, and taught you how to aim for places that kill instead of just hurting like a bitch.”

I smirk despite how fucking angry this is making me, “And you taught me how to do both. I guess I’ll let Cory live, the fucking dickhead that he is.”

Illi shrugs. “He’s dead kid. You forget how many people don’t make it to twenty-one in the Bay. He started running with the Bear’s crew and they paid him a lot of money to do some time for something he didn’t do and then he got shanked in prison. He owed me a lot of money, I’m still fucking pissed about it.”

Then he gives us one last wave and leaves to dispose of the head.

We all watch Avery as she scrubs furiously at the coffee table, the only surface we were willing to put the head on, and after a second I catch her arm.

“Let’s go over to the guys’ room for dinner and sleep there tonight. Go have a shower and we’ll get rid of the coffee table. We don’t need it, we’ll just throw the fucker out.”

She hums under her breath and then shoots a quick look at Ash, nodding when he gives her a tight smile. Well, it’s more of a grimace but he’s trying.

Harley gets rid of the coffee table and after everyone has scrubbed their skin raw in the shower we sit down in the guys room to eat. Blaise looks a little put off but after his fourth beer he mellows out enough to go for seconds.

When we’ve all piled into bed that night, Avery in Ash’s bed and me jammed between Blaise and Ash in Blaise’s bed, I take forever to fall asleep. We just have to survive the year. Everything will be over by the end of senior year.

Or at least I hope it will.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

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**I**t becomes very clear on the first day back at class that Atticus Crawford is not taking any chances this year with our safety while we're attending school. Mr. Trevelen has been replaced by a stern faced woman who takes the time to personally introduce herself to Avery and me before our first class. She seems proficient enough and when we pass her in the hallways on our way to classes her eyes barely touch the guys.

Fucking perfect.

Avery cackles at me and tucks her arm in mine. "Are you going to stab any girls that look at Harley from now on? Just shed blood from the get-go? I feel like Illi is going to spend the year disposing of corpses for you."

I tilt my head as if I'm thinking about it but, ah, yeah. That's exactly what I'm going to do. Ash seems to scare girls off with his cold demeanor and asshole-ish nature and Blaise's rock god status makes him unapproachable to most of the girls at Hannaford.

Harley is fucking rape-bait, I'm sure of it.

When I'm stupid enough to say this over lunch he stares at me like I've greatly insulted him and Blaise roars with laughter. I feel kind of bad but I mean, *really*, he's the one that nearly died on me so he can put up with my weirdly overprotective response to that.

"Says the girl with every fucking deranged psycho in the fucking state chasing after her. Fuck, you get your enemies delivered on a platter by one of them. I'd put money on that guy wanting a taste of you." Harley snaps, and Ash gives him a look.

"Don't ruin my fucking appetite, now I'm being reminded of Joey and I need to fucking vomit."

I cringe. “Can’t get his head out of... your head?”

He looks at me like I’m dense. “I was talking about him trying to rape you, I could not give less of a shit about him being dead. I’m relieved. I only wish I’d taken a photo of his decapitated, vacant face before we left the restaurant.”

Avery sighs at him. “Can we not talk about dead bodies while I’m trying to eat please? I have three hours of dance recital prep this afternoon and I need my carbs.”

Ash rolls his eyes at her and changes the topic. “So how are we all faring in our classes so far? Harley? Are you managing to keep up?”

Harley’s face goes from grumpy to fucking thunderous, and I abandon all pretenses of eating and grab a book.

It’s going to be a long-ass year.

We’re all sharing the same classes again, except for choir and the gym classes, and the rivalry between Ash and Harley has picked up from last year as if we hadn’t even gone on break. The usual pop quizzes had been sprung on us, a way for our teachers to weed out the students who slacked off over the summer break, and they were neck-and-neck for taking out second spot. I’ve beaten them in everything so far, having actually read through all of our syllabi and started on the assignments already.

Blaise spent the summer doing the reading for our AP lit class and I’m secretly confident he’s going to be more on top of things this year. Avery also spent a few nights studying with me, but she’s more worried about our ‘extracurriculars’ getting in the way of her college applications.

She doesn’t have to worry about our safety at Hannaford. There isn’t a single teacher, other than poor Ms Umber, that hasn’t been replaced by Atticus in his efforts to keep her safe. It’s frustrating from a workload perspective, I knew what the others expected, but I do breathe a little easier and Ash is much less of a dick once he’s back on the Track team.

We just have to survive the year.

One day at a time.

On Friday, after classes are finished and Avery is at her ballet training, I head to the library to get some studying done. I need to get ahead early on, like I

did last year and it's too tempting to get distracted by one of the guys if I stay in our rooms. Blaise and Ash have joined the basketball team again now the Jackal's men have been ousted and Harley is spending all his spare time in the pool again, so there's not much of a chance at getting a few hours alone with them again but I'm weak. I might fucking beg for the distraction from the workload the AP classes have given me.

I get a solid hour in before my coffee is finished and my skin is crawling from the eyes on me. I do my best to ignore it but fuck, they're all fucking pathetic.

I sigh and start to pack up, my mind firmly in my reading for my AP lit class, when Lauren takes the seat across from me.

I startle and then give her a little smile. She hasn't tried to speak to me since I've become friends with Avery back in our sophomore year but we smile and wave in the hallways often enough that her opening words catch me off-guard.

"I was moved into the boys dorms because of the renovations as well, I'm two doors down from you guys. I noticed a weird guy leaving a package at your door, I was going to call the admin staff but I looked in the box first. What the hell is going on, Lips?"

I force my face to be a blank mask, the shadow of my smile still lingering. "I have no idea what you're talking about. The only boxes we've had delivered have had Avery's mountains of crap in them. If you found her stash of sex toys then I'd suggest you keep that information to yourself. She doesn't really like gossip."

Lauren bites her lip, rolling it between her teeth nervously. "Look, my dad's the Police Chief in the Bay. I know exactly what the Beaumont's are like. I know what Avery does for her brothers. If you want to get away from all that, away from the Bay, then you need to get away from her. Ditch Ash and Harley, and run away with Blaise. Otherwise it'll be your head in the box."

My spine snaps straight and my eyes narrow. Big mistake. Fucking huge. No one insults Avery on my watch.

No one gets away with trying to split me and the boys up. I learned that lesson well last year. No exceptions, no leeway, I'll start gutting people without question this time around.

"Watch your fucking mouth. You think you've seen something? Maybe you should get your eyes checked because there's no heads being stored in

my room. My family is none of your concern.”

Lauren rocks back in her chair at my tone, her face screwed up in confusion. “I saw the Butcher come get the box, how the hell does Avery know him? He came to the dinner last year for her, I mean, seriously Lips, get out of there before they take you down too.”

I shove my books in my bag and stand. She stands with me and wraps her hands around her chest. “Being popular isn’t worth dying for Lips. It’s really not.”

I laugh at her, just straight up lose it right in her face. When I can finally breathe again I lean in to whisper to her, “Avery knows the Butcher because I introduced them. Maybe you didn’t read the name on the box but it came to me. Stay the fuck away from me, my family, and our business. Don’t turn into Annabelle Summers, Lauren. Just don’t.”

Then I turn on my heel and get the fuck out of the library. I’m fuming, furious that Lauren’s added herself to the list of people I have to look out for.

I make it back to the rooms before anyone else and I let myself into the boys room. I need a shower, a dozen shots of whiskey, and like seven or eight orgasms to calm myself down.

I flick Avery a text before I climb into the shower, letting her know we need to discuss the conversation and then I scrub at my skin like a psycho. I use a little of everything and the smell of all of my guys slowly mellows me out a little.

I’ve dried and dressed myself in one of Harley’s sweatshirts by the time I hear the front door open. I scrub my teeth and fling the door open, expecting Avery but finding Harley. His eyes take in my bare legs and his chest rumbles in appreciation until he sees the scowl on my face.

He waits until I’m done with my teeth before cradling my head in his hands, staring into my eyes and murmuring, “Who am I beating for you, babe?”

I swallow. “When is shit going to settle down enough that I can just enjoy having you? When are we ever going to be left alone?”

He kisses me softly and tugs me until I’m pressed against his chest. “We’re going to figure this out. Now, stop trying to distract me. It’s been too long since I’ve been in a fight, I’ll send the text and fix it tonight.”

I shiver and meet his eyes again. A fight club fight? That sounds like the perfect way to spend a Friday night at Hannaford but he can’t challenge Lauren.



Before I can answer him the door opens again and Avery, Ash, and Blaise walk in. Avery doesn't make any comments about Harley being wrapped around me, she only stomps over to the coffee machine and turns it on before rummaging in the freezer for ice cream.

I pull away from Harley and peg Ash with a look. "Where's the whiskey? We need to do serious damage control and I need something to take the edge off."

Ash's eyes narrow but he goes to the bar he's set up and pours us both drinks. Blaise makes a stupid joke and Harley scoffs at him while he grabs them both beers. I try to soak it all up to calm a little more of the rage in me.

Once we're all seated and there's a giant tub of cherry ice cream in front of me I finally speak. "Lauren saw the head in the box. Her dad is the Police Chief back in the Bay and she said that she knows all about Senior."

Avery frowns and starts to tap on her phone. I already know that there's a good chance she's talking to Atticus for information and I grab my own to ask Illi for his own assessment. They get their information from very different channels. I consider it for about a half a second before sending the same request to the Coyote. Fuck it, all hands on deck.

Blaise takes a swig of his beer and says, "What are we going to do if she won't let this go?"

I cringe and take a huge mouthful of ice cream, not keen on discussing that avenue. I'll take her out if I have to but I'm also pissy she's forcing my hand. Ash watches me for a second and then pries the spoon out of my hand.

"I'm not watching you tongue-fuck the spoon tonight, Mouny. Her dad belongs to Senior. The problem is if she speaks to him about the box. He might come to investigate it to try to impress the Senior. The only reason he can afford to send his kids here is because of the dirty money Senior and his friends give him."

His eyes flick to Avery's and I can see his brain working. She can too.

"Yes, I'm well aware the Crawford's pay him too. I'm also very aware that Atticus has nothing to do with them anymore." She says, her tone is just a little too civil to be genuine.

Harley scoffs at them both. "If we walk down the hall and kill her now there'll be a fucking mass exodus. The students here are already twitchy as fuck about Annabelle and Harlow disappearing. Words out that Joey's dead. It's pretty fucking obvious it all leads back to us. If we start killing students off then we'll have the fucking FBI showing up. Senior got any of them in his

pocket?”

Ash flicks a wrist at him dismissively. “Of course he does. He has fucking senators and governors on his payroll, for fuck’s sake. FBI agents are nothing in comparison.”

I snatch my spoon back off of him and tap on the table idly as I think. Avery watches me carefully. I meet her eyes and she nods. “I agree.”

Harley huffs at us. “Wanna let the rest of us in on your telepathy? I fucking hate it when you both pull this shit.”

Avery smirks at him and sets her phone down on the table. “We need to start building our own network. We need to have legitimate people on our payroll as well as Lips’... connections. I have some but we need more. We need people that Senior hasn’t already gotten to, or people that want protection from him.”

Blaise blows out a breath and rubs the back of his neck. “I have a whole fucking list of people for you then.”

There’s a sort of stunned silence and then we all turn to look at him. He rolls his eyes at us. “Seriously? I’ve been dragged to the Kora headquarters in New York every fucking year by my parents, you think I don’t listen to the shit going on around me? My parents sent me to Hannaford to stop me from falling in with the wrong crowd. Half the board of Kora is owned by someone. My dad has spent a lot of time and energy keeping himself away from corrupt political influence and he only deals with other people that are the same. So I can give you a whole list of people who are clean.”

Avery leans forward onto her elbows and pegs him with a vicious look. “Why the fuck didn’t you tell me this earlier? I could have had them in our pockets months ago.”

Blaise shrugs. “You banned me from talking about my dad and Kora. I could probably get my mom to help with the list. She could tell us who’s most likely to break and what pressures are best... applied.”

I can’t think of anything worse than involving the woman currently holed up in an exclusive five star resort being paid for entirely by the son she’s spent eighteen years treating like utter shit but I keep my mouth shut about it.

For now.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

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The Crow's presence at Hannaford is like a wet blanket, smothering and uncomfortable. The riots in Mounts Bay are on the TV everyday, and the violence is only getting worse. The entire student body at Hannaford is edgy. I steer clear of Lauren, because I'm pretty sure I'll be tempted to stab my way out of that conversation, and focus on my studies instead. It's easy enough to do because she avoids me as well.

I start to notice that the fear in the other students' eyes only gets worse as the weeks go on. I hate it but it's a fuck-load better than the whispers I've dealt with before. Harley fucking *preens* over it, smirking in every class as we sit together. I should have known he'd enjoy being infamous for deadly reasons.

One of the perks of having the Crow's men as our teachers is that I no longer have to even pretend to be discreet when my phone buzzes in my pocket. Harley's eyes stay glued to his notes but he raises an eyebrow at me. He's intent on beating Ash but he's also super freaking nosy and overprotective of me, even when it's only Illi messaging.

*Stay at school. Things are getting worse here. I'll check in with you tomorrow.*

I sigh and flick the screen to Harley, and then to Avery when she turns in her seat to see what we've been distracted by. Her lips press into a firm line and she doesn't pay the teacher another second of attention, her hands flying over her phone screen in her lap.

I shift my focus back to my classwork and try not to think about the potential dangers Illi is facing. Luckily our AP classes come with more than enough assignments to keep my mind busy. For a month or two at least.

I start up study sessions in the evenings again and this time around the whole family joins in. Harley goes to swim practice first and Ash always goes for a run, but by the time Avery has cooked some massive, complicated gourmet meal we're all back and ready to tackle our classwork.

Harley and Blaise take three weeks to come to an agreement of who can sit next to me because Avery claims best friend rights and has a permanent seat next to me. Harley argues that we have too many joint assignments, while Blaise still needs more help than the others.

I consider chiming in but Ash gives me a sly look and says, "They're probably going to fight it out, Mouny. I know how much you enjoy that."

Avery makes a disgusted noise when I get goosebumps but I shrug her off. She's been extra pissy and touchy since we got back to school. I make a mental note to aim for the most painful points if I ever go hand-to-hand with the Crow. I think I can punch him hard enough in the dick that he'll piss blood for a month.

When we've eaten and everyone has survived the Beaumont Bullshit I immediately jump into my studies. Ash snarks at me for how far ahead I already am. I ignore him, my greatest skill, and completely focus on Blaise's homework. Possibly the only downside to our family group sessions is that Blaise struggles to focus with so many people around. The margins of his pages are full of little drawings, stars and roses, and I place my hand over his to stop him. He scrunches his nose up at me but not without looking.

"I'm not gonna survive this year." He mumbles.

I shrug at him and squeeze his hand. "You can always move to the lower classes. I mean you're not planning on going into business, you don't need to know complex algebraic equations to play guitar."

Harley smirks and says, "He's not in the classes for the education. He's just being a brat and doesn't want to sit by himself."

Blaze flicks a beer cap at him. "Maybe I'm just worried about ending up singled out like you were last year. The principal looks a little too buttoned up for my liking, that usually means she's a closet freak. You should watch yourself, rape-bait."

Harley's eyes narrow dangerously and Avery gives Blaise a severe look. "Atticus would not put anyone in this building unless he were sure they're clean."

I hum under my breath and do my best not to make eye contact with her. I don't want her to see what I think about her assessment of Atticus and his

business, but of course she notices straight away and calls me on it.

"Do you have concerns about the Crow's men?"

Ash bristles at her tone but I don't care. "I don't think that he would send anyone unless he was sure, but the Bay has taught me that you can never really be sure. I mean, I'm sure about you guys and I'm sure about Illi and Odie. I highly doubt Atticus has such a close relationship with any of these men and women. They're not family."

Avery's anger simmers down just a little and she tucks her hand into mine under the table, her own little version of an apology.

Ash stares at her for a second, and then snaps, "Crawford isn't family either. We don't trust him or his people. That's the quickest way to fucking die."

I sigh and settle back in my seat as the fighting starts up again around me. This is going to be my whole fucking year. Beaumont Bullshit over Atticus fucking Crawford.

I could stab the dick for that alone.

Ash decides that Saturday mornings are his time to spend alone with me, kicking everyone else out of my room and settling me into his lap to eat breakfast in front of the TV. He always comes with a giant mug of coffee for me so I don't really ask questions.

Avery is in the shower washing her hair, something that usually takes at least forty-five minutes, and so Ash is taking advantage of the time by feeding me French toast and kissing down my neck, grunting when I squirm and grind against his very interested dick.

Fuck, I'm addicted to him.

I'm glancing at the clock and doing quick math to figure out if we have time to get off before Avery catches us when the front door unlocks and the other two stalk in. I don't really look away from the shitty cartoons, I'm not worried that they're walking in on us, but when Ash grabs my hips to stop me from moving I frown and turn to them. Harley looks thunderous, fucking enraged, and I slide out of Ash's lap.

"What? Fuck, what now?" I say, and Blaise grabs the remote to fumble around the channels until he lands on a news station.

Senator Ayres is dead.

I sit and soak in the report, my hands shaking. Ash takes the plate from me and sets it down on the coffee table where my rage won't break the damn thing. The reporter is standing in front of a large, luxury looking office building and she's surrounded by flashing lights and uniform officers.

"Senator Ayres' murder is said to be gang related, with reports of gang activity across the state only getting worse. When interviewed, Senator Ayres' widower, Hannah Ayres, pleaded with her daughter Viola to come home. Reports say the teenager dropped out of school to run away with an older lover. Police have not yet confirmed if there is any connection between the young girl's disappearance and her father's murder."

The image shifts to the crime scene and, sweet lord *fuck*, the Jackal has lost his damn mind.

Written in blood across the wallpaper in the senator's office is a message. For the Coyote, the Crow, and, probably most of all, for me.

*The Jackal sends his regards.*

Well, fuck.

"I have other news." says Avery.

She comes to sit down next to me dressed in her workout gear. I wrench my eyes away from the TV and give her a side look.

"Lauren's dad is *owned* by Senior. I know that we already knew that but the list of things that man has done that Senior can hold over his head... it's a lot. More extensive than I thought. We need to do what we can to stay out of that man's way."

Harley scoffs and snags a piece of French toast off of my plate. "It's not like we didn't already know that. One of us just needs to go down the hall and put the fear of fucking god in that girl."

Ash's fingers drift back to my thighs, tracing his little patterns there, something he does when he's thinking. For once I don't have to fight a shiver; I'm too busy hating myself. The TV flicks through other scenes in Mounts Bay, of the unrest and riots starting up everywhere. I frown at the screen as I see a familiar building, it's on fire and hard to see but something is so damn familiar.

My phone buzzes and I grab it answering without even bothering to look, I know at this point it's going to be Illi. I'm hoping he has a lead or a plan or *something*. We need to retaliate, the Jackal can't be left unanswered.

"Have you seen it?" His voice is all fucked up. I lurch forward, my spine

snapping straight. Harley's eyes snap to mine and Ash's fingers still on my leg. I try to ignore them both and find my voice but there's something so fucking *raw* about Illi that I struggle.

My brain fills it in for me as the pictures on the screen change. The building is burning but everyone in it are already dead. Bullets in their brains. It's Illi's safe house.

Odie.

"Kid. She's in that fucking building. She's... *fuck*. FUCK!"

I can't breathe.

I can't move or think of fucking breathe. Ash jumps off of the couch and starts yelling at Blaise to grab his keys because they're heading out and Harley snarls at Avery when she tells them they can't.

That there's no point.

I can't breathe.

Harley's phone rings in his pocket and that triggers something in the back of my mind. Who would be calling him?

"I'm fucking busy." He snaps and then his entire body freezes, his eyes snapping to mine. I stare at him and I fucking *pray*. He stays silent for a second and the whole room goes quiet, then he says, "How?"

Everyone turns to face him and Illi snarls from the speakerphone, "*What the fuck is going on?!*"

Harley switches his phone to speakerphone and Diarmuid speaks, "I'm assuming you've seen the news, Wolfie."

"Don't fuck with me, O'Cronin. Why are you calling?" I say, and then I hear the best fucking sound on the planet.

Odie starts cussing him out in colorful and vicious French. Illi obviously manages to catch this down his line and snarls, "WHERE IS SHE?"

Diarmuid laughs. "I told the Wolf I'd prove my loyalty. I heard talk of one of your informants flipping and siding with the Jackal, I knew that would leave your girl open to his rage and I've been watching your safe house. You might need a new one. Oh, and you all owe me big time. She's kicked me in the dick so many times I'll be pissing blood for a fuckin' month."

I lean back on the couch and squeeze my eyes shut, trying desperately not to cry but the adrenaline is riding me hard. Harley snarls at Diarmuid until he gives up his location to Illi and my old friend hangs up to find his girl. I sigh, resigned to what I have to do.

Harley's jaw clenches but when I raise an eyebrow at him he nods. I have

no real choice here, we've strung him along for long enough and saving Odie is fucking huge. Avery sits down next to me and Blaise gives me a little relieved smile, I'm not sure he's on board completely but it's enough. I glance over to Ash and even he gives me a curt nod.

"O'Cronin, you're in. Get a tattoo, put the word out, and start paying your dues. I'll call you when I need you." I say, and Avery slips her hand into mine.

Fuck, I hope I don't regret this.



## CHAPTER NINE

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**A**sh sleeps like the dead.

It's good for nights like this, nights where I have to sneak out and take care of business, but when I'm dressed for business and ready to leave I look back over at him and all I feel is dread.

How much more would I damage him, and us, if I leave without telling him?

I blow out a breath and pray I'm not going soft. Well, not *soft*, I just hope I'm compromising on the shit that matters in a relationship without losing the edge that keeps me alive.

I slide my hand around his neck and into his hair and give it a little tug as I kiss him sweetly on the lips. He groans a little, never happy to be woken, and I try my best to smother the sound so Avery doesn't wake up and turn this whole thing into a field trip.

I wait until his eyes open before I speak. "I need to go take care of something. It'll keep our family safe."

He swallows and frowns at me. "Why didn't you wake me earlier? I'm coming with you."

I sigh and nod, motioning for him to hurry up. I don't want to lose my window of opportunity. He pulls on jeans and a black tee, then one of Blaise's black leather jackets to cover his gun and holster. I bite my lip at the sight of him in the leather; it's completely un-fucking-fair that he can look so sinfully good in a suit *and* leathers. I wonder if I can convince him to wear leather pants for me? Hoo boy.

We arm the security alarm and I shoot a text to Harley and Blaise to tell them we're heading out.

They're not happy but we can't leave Avery alone. She will always be our biggest target and to lose her would fucking break our family. When I say this to Ash, more as a random thought than anything else, he scoffs at me. "Don't be dense, Mouny. There isn't anyone in the family that wouldn't break us to lose. I won't choose between the two of you. Not now, not ever."

I try not to blush and he scoffs at me again, opening the car door for me like a gentleman and then sliding in behind the wheel.

Ash drives the Ferrari with such fucking *passion*, it's obscene. He drives it like the polished steel and soft leather is in his blood. He's not assured like Harley, or reckless like Blaise. He moves like he never wants to get out of the car. I love it and struggle not to tell him to pull over to let off some steam. Fuck, focus Lips!

I keep my eyes firmly away from him and settle back into my seat for the drive to the Bay. I direct him to the right house in the slums. He sneers at the neighborhood and I sigh.

"You didn't have to come." I say, and he shakes his head at me like I'm so freaking dumb.

"You should have told me we were coming *here*. I would've brought the Cadillac instead."

I snort at his shitty attitude and check through my stash of supplies. His eyes follow my every move, his eyebrow arching. "So it's a hit? Not a little visit to warn the idiot of who he's crossing?"

I meet his eye as I say, "He knew who he was betraying. He knew the risks. I have to do this."

He grabs the back of my neck and hauls me forward until he can whisper against my lips, his thumb sliding over the pulse in my throat. "Show me how you work, Mouny. Show me how you keep us safe."

Ash is shockingly good at moving silently.

I make a mental note to ask him where he picked it up, I'm assuming it'll go back to his 'training' with Joey, but I can't imagine that deranged psycho ever being any good at subtlety.

I use my lock picking kit to get us through the front door. Ash watches my every move, from the angle I hold the two tools to the sound of the click when the lock finally releases, and I recognize the look on his face now. He's soaking everything in and he'll have the basics down now. Good. I'm sure that will come in handy later.

We step into the house and notice two things immediately; there's music

on loud enough to drown out pretty much anything and the smell of drugs is heavy in the air. I feel a flutter panic start in my chest but I push the feeling down, roll my shoulders back, and force myself to be empty. I fucking hate the smell of that shit.

I have to glance back over my shoulder to make sure Ash is following me. His feet are as silent as mine, and I'm seriously impressed. We move through the empty kitchen, and when we walk past the lounge we find a group of Mounties enjoying their high. Some of them are unconscious, some of them are fucking, and some of them are ranting at each other, at themselves, at the ceiling.

Our mark isn't in the room.

We move past them, they don't even notice us, and we head up the stairs. The music playing downstairs is a low thrum, and it's easy to move without being detected. The first room we come to has a closed door but I can hear voices behind it. I motion for Ash to follow me. The next door slightly ajar and I move until I can see the bed. Lying across the bed, sprawled across it, is our mark. He's out like a freaking light, flat on his back and snoring like a freight train.

We walk into the room together and Ash shuts the door behind us silently. I do a quick check to make sure there's no one else in the room, no girlfriend hiding under the bed, and then I grab my device to make sure there's no extra eyes in the room. Once we are clear, I pull out my knife.

Ash grabs my arm and holds up his gun. His silencer is already in place and I give him a tight smile. I do not understand why these boys keep attempting to stop me from being the one killing people, it makes no sense. I'm the Wolf of Mounts Bay, what does one more life matter when I've killed hundreds before?

I'm not sure I can get my eyebrows to tell him that this has to be done by a knife. It's my signature kill, and we're not just here to take out a mark. We're here to send a message.

He watches me carefully and then re-holsters his gun. When I move towards the bed he stops me again and tries to take the knife from me. I roll my eyes at him and wave him away.

I do a quick check of the window and find it open already, thank fuck. I quickly slip my hoodie and my yoga pants off and hand them to Ash as he watches me with pissy eyes.

And then I slash the guys throat.

If he hadn't been laying on his back I would have stabbed him through the base of his neck. This is a much messier way to go, there's blood on the fucking ceiling, but I guess it sends the right sort of message.

Ash watches with a blank sort of interest. He catalogues everything, from the gurgling sound the guy makes as he chokes on his blood, to the jerking his arms and legs are making as the life slowly slips out of him. I don't bother watching the scene, not the way he is, I just make sure the guy doesn't roll off the bed and bump around.

The second he loses consciousness, not quite dead but safe to turn away from, I wipe my knife, tuck it back into my waist holster.

I slip my clothing on over the gore I'm covered in and when I move to the window Ash grabs my arm to stop me. I glance at the door, worried that someone is about to walk through, but Ash snaps on a pair of gloves and coats his hands in the blood. He finds an empty patch of wall, and leaves his own message for the Jackal.

*No one touches the Wolf.*

It shows just how much I trust Ash when I startle back into myself as we pull into the driveway at Avery's Ranch. I hadn't noticed we were heading here at all, too lost in my own head. Ash's hands are still gripping the wheel with white knuckles but his face is less guarded. He parks and gets out without a word.

"Why are we here?" I say but I follow his lead and get out of the car.

"I can't take you back to Avery covered in blood and if we go back to my room I'll have to share you." He replies as he unlocks the front door and disarms the code. I get an immediate text from Avery asking what we're doing at the ranch.

*Your brother insists on pretending that my work isn't bloody and that you'll break if you realize it is.*

I pocket my phone and head to my bathroom. I've left enough of my clothes that I can leave this set here. Yep, that's right, I have so many clothes now I can leave them places. Avery has forced me to buy more because she *cannot* wrap her head around the fact that I only need two pairs of jeans.

Ash follows me and then leans against the bathroom counter on his phone

while I undress and get into the shower. His eyes keep flicking over to me, like he can't help but watch as I scrub away the death from my skin, and once the blood is down the drain he sets his phone down and starts to strip.

*Hoo boy.*

There's nothing quite like a naked Ash Beaumont. He smirks at me when he gets to his jeans, arrogant as ever, and I try my best not to drool at the sight of him. I think he's brainwashed me into loving that giant dick of his, even if I am still a little gun-shy at actually having sex with him, because the second I see it I want it in my mouth. Clearly it's written all over my face.

"Don't worry. I'll let you swallow, Mounnty." He says as he steps in behind me. I shiver and try to turn around but his hands grip my hips and force me to stay still.

His tone is haughty as he whispers into my ear, "I'm enjoying the view."

Then he slaps my ass and I clamp my teeth together to stop myself from moaning. He grabs the soap and starts to wash my back. Ok, he's groping my ass and legs but he pretends to care about swiping the soap over my back as well for about a second. It's like he's drugging me with his soft touches, so unlike him but it feels amazing.

I start to wonder if maybe I should get over myself and just have sex with him. Maybe his dick really is magic and I'll crave the stretch just as much as I crave the taste of him.

"Why are you mumbling about my magic dick?" He snarks at me and I snap my mouth shut. Ugh. His stupid hands!

"Are you going to let me blow you or not? A girl has needs." I snap back and he laughs at me, the utter dick.

He bites my ear and then whispers, "I'll never stop you from swallowing my dick and I'll kill anyone who tries."

I shiver, hello damage, and I shut the water off, soap be damned. "Liar. Your sister tries all the damn time."

He laughs at me again, far too happy for a recent accomplice to a murder. It doesn't matter to me, I've killed so many it's all the same.

I wonder how many people he's killed?

Maybe not the best time to ask as he grabs a towel and wraps me up. I try not to look too desperate as I quickly dry myself and then head back to my giant bed but the snort Ash gives me says I fail. Fuck it, he knows how much I love him.

Oh.

Oh, *fuck*.

I can't think about that right now either. We don't do mushy, not when we're facing each other and the lights are on, and certainly not when we're naked.

He gives me a look. "Why do you suddenly look like you're about to jump out of the window?"

I swallow, and again, then I snap, "*You'll* be the one to jump out of the window if I say it. Can we just do this?"

He shakes his head at me, god do I feel dumb when he does that, and shoves me back onto the bed, covering my body with his and kissing me like he's trying to crawl inside my skin. I'd let him. I'd let him do anything to me. Jesus. Ok, I need to figure this shit out.

"There's lube somewhere around here, right?" I break away to mumble and he bites the spot where my shoulder and my neck meet.

"I stocked up after Harley put group sex on the table. Are you feeling brave now, Mouny?" He slowly works his way down my body, biting as he goes and my toes curl as I moan.

"Fuck. Fuck, stop, I'm trying to think." I croak, and he smirks at me.

"I don't want you to think. Tell me you're being brave and I'll let you have my cock."

He bites the inside of my thigh and I swear I see stars. Jesus fucking wept, how is that possible? He refuses to touch my pussy until I answer. When I can't form the words he teases me by blowing air onto my clit in the most torturous imitation of a touch and I groan at him.

"Fuck, yes. I'm being brave and I want your dick. If you break me I swear to god I'll fucking stab you."

He laughs at me and then fucking buries his face into my pussy like a champ. Ugh, maybe I could convince him to set up camp and live down there because it's so *fucking* good.

I come twice before he moves back up to kiss me, his face and lips still wet, and I moan into his mouth. He rolls away from me to grab lube and I almost think we don't need it. I'm dripping on the sheets. But then I glance back down at his *perfect* fucking monster dick and yeah, maybe we *will* need it.

"Stop freaking out. You know you're not the first-"

"Do *not* finish that sentence if you want to fuck me tonight, Beaumont. I'll fucking *end* you." I snap and he smirks at me.

“Jealous? Since when do you care about our histories?”

I think about punching the fucker but I don’t want to ruin the mood so I take a deep breath instead. “I care. I’m just not hung up on it. Ok, that’s a lie but I try not to think about it so it doesn’t ruin my fucking day.”

Ash nods almost absently, and slicks his dick up, giving it a few firm pumps that distract me. I’m almost jealous of him touching himself.

What the fuck has he done to me?

He stares down at me, his eyes so icy and intense that my breath catches in my chest, and he wraps a hand around my throat. My body stills, and then I turn liquid for him. I trust this asshole that fucking much.

“I’ve never wanted to keep someone before. I’ve never wanted someone like I want you. I get it, I don’t want to think about someone else touching you either, but you’re mine. I promise you no one else will ever fucking touch me again.”

Then he lines up and pushes in, firmly and without stopping until he’s all-the-fucking-way in. Even without the squeeze of his hand I wouldn’t be able to breath. It’s too much, too full, too big, and I fucking *love* it. He smirks at the slack look on my face, the way my entire body just goes boneless for him, and then he starts to pump into me in long, unforgiving strokes.

I swear, I fucking *purr* for him.

The hand around my throat doesn’t budge, and his fingers flex as he moves. There’s too much sensation for me to focus on anything except the feel of him and my own desperate need for oxygen. Fuck it, if I had to choose I’ll die right freaking here because there’s no way I’m asking him to stop.

And then he fucking stops.

The snarl of frustration I let out has him chuckling, and he tugs me to the edge of the bed, flipping me over so I’m on my hands and knees and he can push back in. I can’t catch my breath and I scramble at the sheets to try to keep myself upright but he holds my hip in one hand and grabs a fistful of hair with the other. I moan so fucking loud when he tugs until I’m kneeling, pressed flush against him and panting as he rocks his hips into me.

“Did you really think I’d stop? Did you think after waiting this fucking long to get inside you I’d stop? I’m going to fuck you *raw*.” He bites down on my shoulder until I gasp and then he slaps my ass, the cracking of his palm drowned out by my moan as I come so hard he has to hold me up.

His hips slow to a grind until my vision clears and I can see past the stars, and then he runs a palm down my spine like he’s soothing me. I shiver as he

traces the scars, the bullet hole, the crisscrosses of blade marks, the burns on my lower back, and the sharp sting of the slap on my ass takes me by surprise this time. I clench around him without meaning to, a startled reaction, and he grunts, bending me down until I'm facedown on the bed again, pinning one arm behind my back.

When his hips move again they're relentless, pounding into me as he holds me down and I have no choice but to take it.

When I come again, I clench around him again so hard he grunts and slams into me harder, snapping his hips until he comes with a low groan.

When he finally stops moving he pulls out, stroking my ass in a soft caress, his fingers playing in the mess he's made of me. It's like he's rubbing it in and I scoff at him.

"I told you, it's mine." He chuckles at me, stalking into the bathroom to clean up and find his phone.

I take a minute or twenty to figure out how to stand before I go clean up then I burrow into the blankets on the bed, sore and used and fucking blissful. When Ash has finished his call to the others, to tell them we're alive and safe, he digs around in the bed until he finds me, moving until he has me tucked into his chest where he wants me.

"We have to get back. It's not safe to be separated and Avery will lose her fucking mind if we don't get back soon." I mumble, but I don't move away from him. My eyelids are too fucking heavy, I could pass out for a month.

Ash kisses that little patch of my shoulder he loves so much and whispers back, "I'll wake you up before dawn, Mouny. Get some sleep."

I think I try to argue with him but before the words fully form, I'm out.



## CHAPTER TEN

---

I avoid Avery when we get back to Hannaford. I don't know how she found out about my other experiences, but I'm certain she doesn't know exactly what went down at the ranch overnight. Harley, on the other hand, realizes the second he looks at me.

He tucks me under his arm to walk me down to the dining hall for breakfast, Blaise messing around on his phone trailing behind us. Ash took an extra long run this morning and Avery had stayed behind to walk down with him later.

It's ridiculous but I blush at Harley's questioning look. He scoffs at me and says, "You might want to put something on that bite mark to cover it up unless you want the whole school talking."

Dear lord, no thank you.

I elbow him and ignore his snickering while Blaise roars with laughter behind us. When I shoot him a dark look he grins at me and says, "We're just happy Ash can stop being a snarling, jealous, blue-balled asshole now."

Nope.

I pull away from Harley, ignoring his grunt of annoyance at me and stalk off towards food. Their legs are ten miles longer than mine and they keep up with me easily, damn them, and by the time we get to the dining hall Harley manages to corral me so I'm back under his arm.

Harley grabs us a tray and picks out our food without any need for input from me, even somehow managing to get sprinkles on my French toast. I grin at my toes while they laugh at my enthusiasm for my food, Harley even getting a good squeeze of my ass in, then we make our way over to our usual seats.

We haven't spent much time eating in the dining hall this year but no matter how busy it is, our seats are always empty. Infamy does have some perks.

The boys wedge me between them, spreading out so their legs are touching mine and their arms taking over my space as they set out our food. It should be annoying but it just makes me feel more fucking cherished than anything else.

Maybe I'm turning into a fucking sap after all?

"If the other two don't get down here soon they're going to be late for class. There's no way Ash will get a higher score than me in Calculus if he's late." Harley gloats, and Blaise groans under his breath.

"Can the two of you lay off a bit? Who the fuck cares who gets second? The last thing the rest of us want to listen to is your bitching and snarling."

Harley stabs at his eggs and I nudge him gently, trying to stop the shitty mood from starting, "Maybe he'll be a little less focussed on his studies since... Well, you know."

Blaise snickers, "You mean he's going to stop studying all the time because he's finally getting laid? Yeah, he'll probably need your tutoring again."

Harley tips his head back and roars with laughter, so light and happy again that my chest aches to look at him. My phone buzzes in my pocket and I grab it, my heart dropping at Avery's text.

*911. Boys' room. Senior called Ash.*

I drop my cutlery and pass the message on, bolting up and out of the room without looking back. 911 means bad, life threatening. What if he's here? What if he's come to Hannaford to pick Avery up and take her? I need to call in for backup now if he is.

I call Avery as I hit the first staircase, my leg screaming at me even as I ignore it completely.

"Is he here?" I ask the second she picks up, and she whispers a quiet no. He's still talking to Ash in the background, I don't know what the hell they could possibly have to chat about.

I can't hear it well enough to stay on the phone and listen in so I hang up, grit my teeth, and sprint the rest of the way back. I get a few mildly curious looks but mostly the other students all dive out of my way, as if being in my path is truly life threatening. Well, Good for them.

I make it to our rooms and manage to get the key in on my first try. The

door swings open right as Senior says, “When I’m done getting rid of her, I’ll come find your pretty little girlfriend. I think she would look rather stunning strapped against my table. Have you fucked her like that yet, son? Have you laid her out and forced her to take you, bleeding and screaming? There’s nothing quite like it. I think I’ll enjoy watching the slum cunt bleed all over my cock.”

I try to control my breathing as I roll my eyes and step in, toeing out of my shoes to try to stop my leg from hurting quite so badly, and then I stalk over to the phone. I’m going to hang up on the useless stream of bullshit but Ash stops me. His fingers are cold as he wraps them around my wrist, stopping me from grabbing the phone and ending this stream of fucking bullshit. I give him a hard look but he shakes his head, even as a tremble of contained rage runs down his arm. He’s close to the edge, right at his breaking point, but there’s something he needs.

“What the fuck are you doing working with the Jackal? Lowering yourself to common criminals? You won’t be able to hide behind high society if you’re too busy hiding behind the Jackal’s skirts like a terrified child.”

Avery stares down at the phone like she can somehow force her father to reveal all of his secrets and his plans, just by directing her loathing there, but Ash watches me.

Senior laughs and I try not to cringe away from the sound. “You’ve forgotten your lessons, boy. The cattle in the working class do the work, that’s what they’re bred for, why should I go looking for your little slum Queen when I can get someone else to do it for me. You spent too long fawning after your sister, I’ve been too lenient. It’s time you remember who you belong to.”

The phone beeps as Senior hangs up and my eyes stay glued to Ash’s. And then all of hell breaks loose.

Ash loses his *goddamn* mind.

I’ve seen him get pissy before, I’ve seen him be overprotective and beat men until they have to be scraped off of the floor, but I’ve never seen the tornado that is a truly *enraged* Ash.

Avery watches, with a passive stance but calculating eyes as he destroys the boys' room. I stand next to her, leaning against the far wall where we're out of his destructive path, as the two of us watch him smash the furniture to pieces as if they were nothing. I'm kinda glad classes are on and there's no way he can get into a fight; pretty sure whoever he went up against right now would die. He's now leaving blood on everything he touches from the steady stream coming out of his knuckles.

As the damage bill slowly gets higher and higher I lean in to murmur to Avery, the disgust dripping in my voice, "It's pretty clear to me that money means absolutely fucking *nothing* to you people."

Avery rolls her eyes at me. "Lips, I don't think you've grasped just how much money you now have either. Between the dirty money we first invested, your earnings from the bet, and Harley paying you back with interest you probably don't need to work a day in your life either. You certainly won't need to at the rate that you spend money."

I narrow my eyes at her, no longer concerned with the bloody state of Ash's hands. "What the hell do you mean he paid me back *with interest*? What the fuck are you doing letting him pay me back at all, let alone with fucking *interest*?"

Avery shrugs as she tries to smother a smile. "You know I'm not getting involved in your *relationship issues* and I'm definitely counting this as a relationship issue. Take it up with him."

I scoff at her but any witty remark I could come up with is interrupted by the door opening and Harley and Blaise walking in. Harley has my abandoned breakfast tucked under his arm but I don't have it in me to feel . I'm too worried about the state Ash is in.

"Fuck me. What's your dad done now?" says Blaise, and Avery gives him a look that would strip the skin off a grown man.

"You know better than to call that man my *dad*. Senior called, he wanted to discuss my sale. He made it clear to Ash that he intends on doing whatever is necessary to hand me over to Morningstar. He also threatened Lips, so naturally the best course of action is to give this disgusting pit of a room a fresh start. A completely rational reaction."

I raise an eyebrow at her, assuming she's being sarcastic and, well, glass houses, but then I realize she's being deadly fucking serious. Right. I had always thought her cleaning after shit goes down was a germaphobe thing not a Beaumont Bullshit thing. I stare at her for another second and then turn

back to the mess that Ash is in. We all watch him in silence for another minute, then Harley and Blaise share a look, nodding at each other.

“Grab him, I’ll grab the bourbon to mellow him the fuck out.” Harley says, and Blaise grunts at him.

“Star can grab the bourbon, you grab his other arm. I’m not getting knocked out before we even get in the ring.” He argues, and I head for the bar, skirting around the mess, because I’m absolutely onboard with the plan to get Ash drunk.

I’m pretty sure if we don’t get him wasted before we put him in the ring he will kill someone. If only he were climbing in there with one of our many enemies and not the members of our family.

Blaise and Harley tackle Ash and get him sort of under control, though he cusses them both out viciously and I hear a few pained grunts, and Avery announces she’ll stay put, telling us she will clean it up and meet us down there later. I nod as I follow the boys out the door, knowing already that she wouldn't want to watch Ash beat the rage out of his system.

Harley and Blaise manage to drag him down towards the gym without too much trouble, probably because classes are in and there are no other students walking the halls, because I'm fairly certain if we had bumped into anyone and they so much as looked at Ash he would have beaten the life out of them.

When we get to the gym the guys finally let him go and he turns to me to grab the bottle of bourbon. His eyes still look crazed but I'm relieved to see he still looks human. I'm not sure what I would do if they were empty like Joey's always were, even before he was a head in a box.

He cracks the bottle open and takes deep gulps straight from it. Harley winces, and then tries to wrestle it off of him before he drowns himself.

"You can't get in the ring if you can't fucking stand."

Ash levels his icy eyes on Harley and says, “And you won't walk out of the ring if I haven't had something to drink.”

Fuck.

I moved to stand between them and I press the palm to each of their chests but they just keep glaring at each other over my head. I’m going to have to pull out the big guns to distract them.

"Maybe I should get in the ring with Ash. Just until he calms down enough."

All three of them look at me like I've lost my fucking mind. Fuck that.

I cross my arms and peg Ash with a look. "I hate to say it, but you won't be the most dangerous thing I've ever faced. Get in the ring and I'll teach you some shit."

He shakes his head at me, and strips out of his clothes. I'm about to snap at him for trying to use a secret weapon against me when I noticed that Blaise has their training bag slung over his shoulder and yeah, maybe it would be for the best if Ash isn't wearing his uniform for this. I don't look back at him until he has the obscenely short shorts on and he's winding the tape onto his hands.

Harley looks relieved that Ash seems to be in a clear enough state of mind to go through these motions. I think we would be in a lot more danger if he had just thrown himself into the ring. The room takes a breath.

The other two change into their sparring clothes as well and I do my best not to drool now that the pressing danger has passed. Blaise throws himself down on the mat and tugs me until I'm in his lap. Just as Ash and Harley step up the door to the gym opens and three of the Crow's men walk in.

Oh fuck.

Ash turns and takes the sight of them in. Blaise groans under his breath and presses his lips behind my ear as he whispers, "That's it, someone's gonna die today."

I struggle out of his lap and stand to face the men. The smiles slowly slide off of their faces and their heads dip at me with respect. I hope Ash is paying attention and decides to let this go.

"We were just coming down here to train, we could join you if you want some fresh blood?" The bigger of the three guys says.

I open my mouth but, of course, Ash interrupts me. "Get in then, dickhead."

Harley huffs but he steps out without a word and the bigger of the three men strips out of his shirt. I keep my eyes on them all, not trusting them one fucking bit.

Blaise twirls a strand of my hair around his finger and I glance over my shoulder at him to find him and Harley flanking me the way they do at the meetings. They both look ready to pounce, whether in my defense or for their own need for blood I don't think they care.

I wonder if they'll ever grow out of this?

The guy looks at me before he steps up and I jerk my head in the direction of the ring, giving him my approval. He nods and grabs the tape

from Harley's outstretched hand, the two of them staring each other down. It's hard not to roll my eyes. I shouldn't, the guys are behaving exactly as the Wolf's men should, but I know this is about their protective natures about me and about Avery, not about their positions in my... fuck, my *gang*.

I take a seat on the mats again, giving Blaise a curt shake of my head when he tries to pull me back into his lap. Harley takes a seat next to us both and watches the Crow's men carefully.

"First blood?" The guy says, and Ash smirks at him with the absolute arrogance of a rich kid that knows how to kill.

"Tap out or knock out, nothing less."

Oh fuck.

I don't expect it to last long, and it doesn't. Ash is ruthless, deadly, and fucking insane. It takes me a second to recognize what it is that I'm watching but then it clicks in my brain; Ash has no fear. He's not afraid of taking a hit or the pain that comes with it. He moves as if death means *nothing* to him.

Senior and Joey really have broken something in him.

Harley jumps up to pull Ash off of the guy once it's clear he's out, and the other two guys scrape their friend up and throw him down next to us on the mats.

The larger of the two left takes his turn and the last guy starts to pour water on the unconscious guys head.

"He's good. Where'd a little rich boy learn to fight like that?"

I ignore the question, I don't need friends, but Harley scoffs at him. "You wouldn't survive what he has, dickhead."

The guy shrugs. "Just trying to be friendly. We're all on the same side, why not try to get along?"

Blaise strokes a hand down my leg in an obviously suggestive way. I sigh at him but let him go. He has to shit stir, it's in his fucking blood to do it, so why not let him have his fun.

"Is the Crow your family? You fucking him? Do you make him scream your name, does he have you on your knees for him? We're not on the same anything. You're owned. You signed away your life to a fucking crime lord just so you can, what, wear cheap suits and carry guns? You're nothing."

The guy bristles, wincing a little as Ash gets his friend on the ground and just starts whaling in on him. "You think you're better than me because you're fucking the Wolf? When she's done with you she'll just slit your throats and be done with it. I know better than to climb into bed with a

member of the Twelve.”

Harley smirks and pushes my hair off of my shoulder, rubbing at the little patch of skin peaking out from my button-up shirt. I smile at him and then speak, fuck the consequences, “I get it. You needed to eat so you sold your soul and now you’re expendable, replaceable, nameless, and nothing. That’s what you made yourself when you became one of the Crow’s men. I could have done the same with the Jackal a lifetime ago but instead I crawled my way out of hell. So shut your fucking mouth and get ready to be beaten down because Ash Beaumont is going to own your fucking ass.”



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

---

The Crow stands at our bedroom door, two of his men standing behind him, scowling at us all like we're disobedient children.

Ash ignores him entirely but he holds the ice to his hands after Avery snarls at him for attempting to move it. Harley stands a step in front of them both, as if his body is a shield and he can protect them both from this man and his influence of them, and Blaise lounges on the bed as if there's nothing to worry about.

I sip my coffee at the table and do my best to ignore them all. Ok, not ignore them, but I pretend I'm not listening to the whole episode because it's not strictly Twelve business so it's none of my concern. Avery will tell me if she needs backup.

"If you're going to put my men out of commission could you at least call me before? I could have sent in expendable suits." Atticus says, and Ash scoffs at him.

"We're going back to escorting Avery everywhere if that's the protection you're offering us. Not a single one of those *men* lasted longer than a minute in the ring. If the Jackal comes down here himself we're fucked."

It's a very good point and I tilt my head as I sip at my coffee again.

Atticus doesn't rise to the bait, his anger at Ash's words tightly contained. "They all know not to harm you, they wouldn't walk into the ring with any real intentions of bringing you harm."

Oh dear.

I turn to watch them and sure enough, Ash's shoulders are so rigid I can see the fine tremble. I give Blaise a look and he huffs at me.

"Are you fucking serious? I didn't beat them because they let me, I took

them out because they're fucking *weak*." He hisses, and Blaise finally stands and walks over to him. He leans against the table and offers him backup. I'm hoping he'd also jump in between them if Ash dives at him.

Atticus rolls his eyes and stares at Avery. "Is there any real concern for your safety? Has anything happened?"

I'm so fucking proud of her, just bursting with it, when she turns to face him with cold eyes and her perfectly frigid tone, "My safety is no longer of your concern. You can discuss it with the Wolf, not me."

Atticus grinds his teeth at her and then stalks forward, ignoring the daggers the boys all glare at him with. He gestures at the chair across from me and I nod at him. Once he's seated he folds himself into what looks like the signature Avery Beaumont power pose. Hm.

When he speaks, his voice is tightly controlled and formal. "The Viper has left the Jackal's side. He has requested a meeting but I'm unable to attend. Is it possible for you to go?"

I sigh and give him a stern look, pulling myself into my own version of the power pose until I'm mirroring him. "I'm supposed to stay at school, you know. Some of us want to be more than just a crime lord. What's the meeting for and why can't you go?"

His eyes flick to Avery as she takes the seat next to mine. She ignores him but I slip my hand into hers under the table anyway.

"I have to take a meeting with my father about... the sales of girls. He's still purchasing despite my efforts to get rid of the auctions. I can't move the meeting and the Viper needs to speak to one of us as soon as possible so he doesn't get spooked and go crawling back."

Avery hums under her breath but doesn't speak. I'm sure she has plenty to say but I stick to the topic. "Where and when. I'll see what I can do."

His eyes flick around to the guys and then he speaks slowly, like he's choosing his words even more carefully. "Take the Butcher with you and leave everyone else here for the night."

My spine snaps straight, and Harley snarls at him, "You don't get to make those fucking decisions; where she goes, we go."

Atticus rolls his eyes, and doesn't bother to look at the three enraged guys plotting his death. "The Viper wants to meet at the Dive. You have to put a body in the cage to get in, you're better off taking the Butcher with you because that's his idea of a fun Friday night."

The scheming *bastard*. I somehow manage to keep my face impassive as

I shrug. “I’ll go. The details are none of your concern.”

He isn’t as good as I am at keeping his tells in lockdown, not when it comes to Avery, and his jaw ticks as he grits out from between his clenched teeth, “Avery *cannot* go. The Dive is too dangerous, what the hell is the point of keeping her away from her father if you’re just going to take her with you to the pits of fucking hell in Mounts Bay? This isn’t a sightseeing exhibition, it’s not the place for some naive girl rebelling from her privileged life.”

I suck in a breath and mentally start planning how *the fuck* we’re going to end this war without the Crow because Avery is going to slit his throat.

She doesn’t.

Instead she tilts her head at him and breathes pure ice his way, “You’re not my fucking keeper. You’re not even my friend, you are a means to an end.” She stares him down and then flicks her hand at him dismissively, “If you’re done with your power display, I’d like to get back to our family dinner.”

Atticus stares at her again, his eyes cataloging everything about her, from the color of her nails to the faint dark smudges under her eyes that are damn near permanent now. She’s not sleeping well. She’s barely eating. Even her dance classes have started to slip now she’s working so hard on gathering the information we need.

As if reading my mind, Atticus pulls an envelope out of his jacket pocket. “There’s not much, but I know who you can speak to about Lips’ father.”

The detached, cold look slips on Avery’s face a fraction as she takes the envelope. I can’t look at it or touch it, so fucking terrified of what’s in it. Atticus looks between the two of us and then says, “You need to call the Boar. Everything leads back to him.”

Fuck.

*God-fucking-dammit.*

Avery Beaumont looks fucking devastating in a pair of leather pants, a ripped band tee, and the all-white combat boots I’d gotten for the lingerie party last year. Her winged eyeliner is sharp enough to kill a man and her mood could do even fucking worse.

I choose a pair of ripped jeans that have half my ass peeking out and a

razorback tee. I put my hair up and let Avery do my makeup, mostly to try to improve her mood before she guts someone. I know she's now carrying her knife everywhere we go and, fuck if she isn't good with it now Illi's gotten some training sessions in as well.

When we head down to the cars I grab Ash's hand and squeeze it a little, still nervous as hell over how our night is going to go. He ignores it, and me, until we get to the cars and everyone else piles into Blaise's Cadillac. When I move to climb into the back with Harley he tugs me back, plastering me against the side of the car with his body and shoving his leg between mine. I shiver as he kisses me, rough and fucking dark, biting my lip hard enough to draw blood.

"You better not be doubting me, Mouny." He whispers against my lips, and I grab a fistful of the buttery-soft shirt he's got on.

"Nope. I'm just preparing myself for the entire night. I've got to be the Wolf, and you've got to focus on your fight, which means I'll watch your back. If the Jackal shows up, if he has men there, you'll be a prime target. I'm going to keep you safe while you do this for us. That's family."

He smirks at me and tugs me until he can kiss me again. We get a little too carried away and Avery snarls out of her open window, "For fuck's sake, can we get this night over with already?"

Ash's eyes narrow at her but I shift away from him and back into the car, ignoring Blaise's snickering and the eye roll Harley gives my flushed cheeks. Ash is less than impressed with their attitudes and tucks his hand into my thigh before staring out of the window, ignoring everyone for the rest of the drive.

I direct Blaise to the edge of the city, right where the air changes from smog and people, to salty air and stinking docks, and we park outside the most disgusting building on the street. Rundown doesn't even begin to describe the place.

The Dive is exactly that, a fucking dive.

The doorman tips his head at me in respect but he's not a guy I know. I try to stay away from this place if I can help it, and I know there's going to be more than a few men here waiting for their opportunity to shed some blood, whether mine or my family's, they don't really give a fuck.

I grab Avery's hand and weave through the crowd, heading to the private section at the back of the room. There's a viewing platform to watch the cage fights and a private bar, though the bar is a plank of wood on old barrels and

a bartender too fucking high to mix any drinks. Did I mention I fucking hate this place?

The crowd doesn't part for us even though they all know who I am, and the guys all press in around us protectively. I start to worry Ash won't be the only one fighting tonight as Harley snaps at a group of bikers that look even more rowdy than the last. We make it to the private section and I keep Avery close as we approach the table set up for our meeting. There's two spare seats and we sit down, Avery grimacing at the state of the cushions.

The Viper is already seated.

He flicks his fingers at me, the light catching on the diamond encrusted rings he wears. The man wears an obscene amount of diamonds, he's fucking dripping in them, and even sitting here in the dirtiest, most fucking filthy pit in all of Mounts Bay he's not worried about being mugged. He's that confident in his boys, and his own fighting prowess, that he wears his wealth with unaffected ease.

It's gross.

"I thought you'd leave your pretty little girlfriend at home for this one, Wolf. She doesn't have the stomach for this kind of thing. I supposed she's a good lay for you, to make up for these things." He says, but his eyes stay locked on the cage.

There's two of the Jackal's men fighting already, I know them both well enough to know exactly how it's going to end. The Viper does too so I know he's choosing not to look at me on purpose.

"You're putting one of your pretty boys in the cage? I thought you'd bring the Butcher."

I shrug and motion at one of his men to bring me a drink. They move without complaint, which is a nice change. "The Butcher is busy taking care of... other tasks for me tonight. Beaumont is going to fight, I'll sure you'll get your money's worth."

The Viper turns and eyes Ash. "Beaumont? Jesus. Has he ever even left his castle before? I'm not going to give him an out, not even for you, Wolf."

I side eye the fuck out of him. "Even for me? You've never given me anything easy. You're only here talking to me because the Jackal has you running scared. What did he say to you? What's he holding over your head that it worries you this much?"

The Viper grimaces, and waves his men away. I sip at my whiskey, slowly because I need my head.

“I have a kid. I keep her out of this life, but somehow the Jackal found out. Probably his fucking spy, the gutless fuck, but now he knows. I’ve sent her to go live in another state but that hasn’t kept his men from turning up at her fucking house. I need the Crow to take her in. His place is the safest. He gave you permission to speak on his behalf or what?”

All this war has done is reveal everyone's weak spots, the little snippets of secrets they've guarded carefully but not quite well enough. The Coyote and his girl, now the Viper and his daughter. I wonder how much more will come out before the Jackal has been taken out. I refuse to think about the chances that we don't win. I can't.

I give the Viper a curt nod, and the bell rings out over the cage. I'm not sure the body they drag out is still alive but it'll only make it easier for me if there's one less of the Jackal's men out there.

The Viper jerks his head at Ash and he stalks down to the cage, Harley following to watch his back. Blaise stays with us, leaning against the railing and looking out over the voracious crowd as the jeering and shouting starts up. I watch as Ash strips down to his training shorts and I take a second to remember he's fucking good in the ring. He's the best option. When he straightens up and I see him in his full, almost-naked glory I take a deep breath and try to focus on my conversation with the Viper but it's a freaking challenge.

I'm sort of glad there aren't many women in this place.

“We'll take the girl. We'll have her as insurance so you don't change sides.” I murmur, and the Viper shrugs.

“I chose the Jackal because I don't need some fucking suit coming down here and cleaning the place up. I like my fights. I like the gambling, booze and the easy women. Not everything in life is clean and I don't need The Crow's black and white fucking moral system spilling over into my world. He needs to remember who the fuck he is.”

He gulps down his own murky glass and lifts the empty glass for a refill, then turns to look at me again. “I thought that school had changed you. I was wrong, I'll admit that. You can take Mira and keep her in that showy fucking castle of the Crow's, you can call me for anything, but he can keep his nose out of my business. I'm not cleaning this place up and I'm not going to stop sending my men after dickheads that don't pay their debts. If you're with me on that, then I'm with you on everything else.”

Another of the Jackal's men climbs into the cage with Ash, and I try to

contain the icy dread in my gut. I know Ash is good. I know he's fast. It doesn't matter that the guy is older, brawnier, more street smart. Ash Beaumont has survived hell. He can survive this too.

"Your boy wins this, maybe he should come here more often." The Viper murmurs, and I cock my head at him. The Viper never extends invitations; this is a fucking big deal and tells me more about his loyalties than any other part of our conversation so far.

"He'd probably be up for that. He's not as clean-cut as he looks. If you have money on this fight I hope it's on him." I mutter back, and the Viper grins at me, his gold tooth shining at me.

"Sounds perfect for you kid. Sounds like he's just what you need."

The noise from the crowd gets louder, amping up for the fight and the room becomes predatory. There isn't a whole heap of faith for the stunning and very obviously rich guy in the ring but I wasn't expecting any different. There's a reason Ash is the one fighting and not the lost O'Cronin heir.

Someone calls out, "Ten grand on the pretty boy. It's a night for gambling." and Blaise startles, his face all fucked up. He turns back to us and his face is pale as fuck. I frown at him as he rubs his eyes, but he only gives me one of his lopsided grins.

"I think I fucking smoked too much before we came. Usually I'm better about it. I could fucking swear I just... never mind. Too fucking high for my own good."

Avery sighs and stares at him like he's the densest man on Earth and I nudge her leg with mine under the table. He's only watching over us for show, I can take care of anything that goes down by myself.

The bell rings and my attention snaps back to the ring. The Jackal's guy lunges at Ash, big mistake, and Ash darts out of his path, swinging as he moves and smashing his fist into the guy's skull. Ouch.

Avery's eyes drop down to her hands, but there's no other signs that she's hating this. She never could stand to watch her brother fight and, after years of being forced to watch him endure Joey's torture without being able to fight back, I don't blame her.

I, however, am enjoying the ever loving shit out of it.

The room slowly grows quite as Ash efficiently, and fucking brutally, beats the shit out of the Jackal's guy. It's probably because the Jackal's mark is in the centre of the guys chest, like a badge of honor, and Ash is taking all of his rage out on him. He gets him on the ground and just whales on him, the

guy never stood a chance.

“Yeah, he can come back here any time.” The Viper says, and I do my best not to smirk like a smug-ass bitch but fuck it if I’m not one.

The sound of the guy’s cheekbone breaking as Ash knocks him out is loud enough that Avery hears it and flinches, then the bell is ringing and Harley steps in to try to get his cousin to stop pounding the guy. Blaise roars with laughter, and the Viper’s men eye him with a faint sort of respect. Clearly the lesson of underestimation has been learned.

I signal for a refill, more to keep my hands busy than anything else, when Avery’s leg tenses against mine. I glance up to find another of the Jackal’s men approaching our table. I give her the tiniest shakes of my head; we’re fine. I know Cole and he’s not someone I’m particularly worried about. Blaise scowls at him but doesn’t say a word. He’ll have no idea who he belongs to and he’s a hell of a lot less cautious than Avery is.

Cole stops in front of us, crossing his arms and speaking to the Viper as if I’m not even here, “I spoke to the boss about you being here with her. He’s not happy.”

I narrow my eyes. He always was a spineless fuck but I didn’t realize he was this stupid either. Avery stares at him with her icy stare and every last one of the Viper’s men turn to face Cole until he’s the centre of attention. He starts to sweat a little but I’m sure he’s more afraid of the Jackal than he is of me.

That’s his first mistake.

The Viper turns to me, jerking his head at Cole, and snaps, “Division breeds disrespect. This is why we need this over with *now*.”

I squeeze Avery’s hand under the table in warning, then I say, “We’ll have to make an example of this sort of thing, make sure the others know to stay in their fucking lane.”

Then I move.

Cole doesn’t see it coming, none of the men do, only Avery and the Viper are unruffled as I shoot up from my seat, grab a fistful of Cole’s hair and slam him face-first into the table. Blaise lurches forward but stops when I shoot him a look. He gets it, he understands from that one look what’s going on, so I know he can’t be that high.

Cole knows how to take a beating and fuck, he’s here to get in the cage and earn some green, but he’s so sure his place with the Jackal will keep him breathing tonight.



That's mistake number two.

I lean forward and whisper in his ear, "Thank you for sending this message to your boss. I think he needs the reminder."

"Whatever it is, I'll pass it on." He mumbles, and I chuckle at him.

"Yes, you will."

The flash of white as his eyes widen is the last sign of life I see from him before I stab him in the base of his skull, conscious of the fact I didn't pack a spare change of clothes. My hands and forearms end up covered in blood but it's less intense than an arterial bleed. I let go of his hair and let his body slip to the ground. The Viper grunts at his men and a couple of them move quickly to dispose of the body.

"Make sure he gets back to his boss safely. No point drawing lines unless the psycho fuck gets the message." He says, and his men all make noises of agreement.

Once they've moved out the Viper holds his drink up in a salute to me and says, "Your boy is good. Bring him back sometime soon and we'll headline him. Good money in it."

I keep my mouth shut about how very little we need the cash, and instead I take my own shot. I hold my hand out for him to shake and he doesn't hesitate. "I'll send Mira to the Crow in the morning. I look forward to being on your side, Wolf. I look forward to seeing what you'll do to him."

I nod and stand, moving away from the private table and down to meet with Ash. His fists are a bloodied mess and his cheek and lip are both busted but there's a dark glee lighting up his eyes.

"How was that?" He snarks, and I smirk at him.

"Decent. We could make a lot of money here together, if you're ever in need."

He scoffs and slides his leather jacket back on without his shirt. He's pulled his jeans back on and in one word, he looks fucking *edible*.

Avery elbows me. "You're drooling, Mouny."

I blush a little but shoot her a grin. "Can't help it. Nothing better than a little blood."

She finally cracks a smile, shaking her head at me entirely. I tuck my arm in hers and frown at the guys, all of them gravitating towards the bar. "If you want a drink then we can go someplace else. I have a friend with a bar that's less... Jackal-filled."

They nod and we head out.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

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**A**sh and Blaise get fucking hammered.

We go to an old favorite of mine on the other side of the docks, where Illi has friends and I know we'll instantly have backup if we need it. Harley slowly drinks his beers but he's experienced enough that they barely take off the edge, and Avery sips at a margarita for an hour before declaring herself done. I have another whiskey and then stick to planning quietly in the corner booth with her. When the bartender comes over to ask if we need him to extend his hours for the night I wave him off and collect my wasted family. Harley grabs Ash, leaving Blaise to Avery and I.

Once we're out in the cold night air, he tucks his face into my throat and breathes me in. I huff at him and he starts to ramble mindlessly, "You're so perfect Star. You're everything."

Avery rolls her eyes and ducks under his other arm, propping him up and helping take the weight of him off of my bad leg. "You're so fucking wasted you wouldn't know who you were professing your undying love to. You were just telling Ash you'd be lost without him."

Blaise looks over at her with a frown. "I don't love anyone else, Star is fucking it for me. She's everything. I see her face every-fucking-where I go. Why do you have to be such a bitch about it? I'm with Ash; we should fucking gut Atticus for being such a miserable cock to you. Maybe you should fuck him and see if that cheers you up."

He's not even making any sense, just blurting out random crap, but Avery is not in a forgiving mood. "Why are you all so fucking hung up on who's in my bed? I kept my mouth shut about the revolving fucking door during freshman year."

Aaaaand now I wanna puke.

Blaise frowns at me and gives me his most morose eyes. "I'm sorry Star."

I shake my head and smile at him. "I know. It doesn't matter. Let's just get you back before you need to puke."

He groans and mumbles sweet nothings at me until we get to the car. Harley eases Ash in with a surprising amount of care, but Avery just drops Blaise entirely. He stumbles and body checks me into the side of the car. Harley growls at him, and Avery, but I'm barely winded. It's fine. Totally fine.

Avery shoots me an apologetic look and huffs, slipping into the front seat and crossing her arms. I slide in and wait for Blaise to collapse in behind me. I get the seatbelts on Ash and myself, then lean forward to Avery and whisper, "You should tell Atticus we had a great night. Tell him Ash won his fight, the Viper is on our side, and we had a great night drinking with Illi's friends."

The corners of her lips tip up, but she still doesn't look like my badass best friend. Fucking Atticus.

The drive is quiet, thank fuck, and Harley drives much less erratically than Blaise. When we get back to Hannaford Harley manages to carry Ash back to the rooms on his own, and Avery and I stumble underneath the weight of Blaise once again. When I wince as we finally make it up to the top of the staircase Harley snarls about the drunken brat and I give him a wry smile.

Avery has mellowed out enough to laugh and joke with us, even going as far to offer to babysit the unconscious idiots for us to have the night to ourselves. The grin I give her is bright and relieved and lasts about three seconds before I see the box waiting for us at the door.

I've had another head delivered.

Whoever is sending these boxes was at the Dive tonight with us.

I stare at the Jackal's man that had threatened me with my phone wedged between my ear and my shoulder, keeping my hands free as I write lists from memory of who the hell was there tonight. None of my options make sense.

"Kid, you should have called me for backup." Illi grumbles, and I try to

ignore the guilt starting up in my gut.

“We had it under control, and Odie needs you. Do you have time for a pickup?”

He grunts out a yes and I hear his car start before he hangs up. I drop the phone and look back at my list. It’s not really anything.

Harley comes over and hands me a beer, knocking back his own as he catches my hand in his. “You forgot something. There were bikers there. If we listen to what the Crow says then maybe the Boar is protecting you. Maybe he is your dad.”

I shudder at the thought. “Well, this isn’t making my life better, it’s making shit harder. If he feels guilty for not being around then he should man up and come fucking talk to me.”

Avery calls out from the kitchen, where she refuses to leave while the head is present, “Actually it makes me think he really is your father. He’d have to admit he was wrong about lying to your mother and men usually have the emotional range of a *fork*.”

Even Harley nods at that little nugget of wisdom.

When Illi finally arrives, Avery has gone back to our room to scrub the night from her body and pass out, leaving Harley and I in the boys’ room by ourselves with the head.

Illi ignores the head, completely disinterested in it now we have some semblance of a lead. “Bikers? You didn’t catch their names? Did you at least see a patch? There’s at least three clubs that frequent that place.”

I groan and shake my head. “I know pretty much nothing about how MCs work, Illi. Is there anyone you can ask?”

He nods and looks around. “Where’s Beaumont? I was going to congratulate him on his fight. I’ve already heard it was brutal.”

Harley smirks and shrugs. “He celebrated a little too hard. He’s sleeping it off with Avery and the other dickhead.”

Illi chuckles and tugs at his leather jacket. “It’s good, he’s broken the assumption that the Wolf chose you guys because you’re pretty, not because you’re good backup. There’s a lot of the Jackal’s men who are now hesitating about coming after you.”

I let out a breath and roll my shoulders back like a weight I didn’t know I was carrying has lifted. “Thanks Illi. Thanks for coming out here.”

He smirks. “No worries kid. I guess this is my way of paying my dues. I heard O’Cronin isn’t too happy about handing over his.”

Fuck. No, he isn't. He tried to get out of it and it was only after I called him to tell him I'd be sending the Butcher in after him that he paid up. I don't think any of the members of the Twelve really give a fuck anymore about the way things are supposed to be, not with the war that's brewing, but we can't afford to take on anymore bullshit than what we already have.

"I'll let you know when I have a lead on the bikers. Any chances this is your daddy's work?" Illi says with a chuckle as he grabs the box. I try not to gag at the thought.

Harley gives him a warning look but Illi only laughs harder.

Once the door is shut and locked behind him, Harley tugs me into the bathroom, stripping us both off and climbing into the shower behind me. I sigh under the hot stream of water and lean back into his arms.

"I don't need a father." I mumble, and Harley kisses my neck.

"At least he'd be better than the other two. Killing your enemies is a sweet gesture, helpful and just psycho enough for us to be sure you're actually related."

I snort at him and let him soap me up, his hands wandering over all his favorite places and lingering long enough that I'm panting by the time he shuts the water off. He is less impatient, wrapping me in one of his huge towels and drying me off. I'm shivering and trembling, desperate and needy, but he looks almost unaffected.

I mutter this at him and he scoffs at me.

"Can't I just take care of you sometimes? I hate hearing about this guy that might be your dad, makes me pissed and fucking twitchy. I'm distracting myself so I don't drive down to the Bay and beat the fucker."

I think about the Boar and how fucking massive his men are, and yet I'd put money on Harley in that fight. I think half the Mounties in the Bay would back my guys now too.

Harley chuckles at me. "You're thinking about the fight again, aren't you? Your eyes do this glazed over thing that would make me jealous as all fuck if I didn't see them doing it about me all the fucking time too."

I roll my eyes at him. "Yes, I get it; I'm fucking damaged. But I love that you all can hold your own. I love that you can fight and hurt and kill when you need to. It makes me feel less... alone. And it's hot as fuck."

His chest rumbles and he picks me up by my thighs, carrying me back into the bedroom buck-ass naked and I swear to god, I fucking giggle. Ugh. He cackles at the sound I make and throws me onto the bed.

“Guess I’ll need to take good care of you tonight then, babe.”  
I guess he does.

We go down to the dining hall the next morning for breakfast because Avery and Ash are still arguing. Ash and Blaise both eat the greasiest foods they can find on the menu, hungover and grouchy as fuck, and Harley enjoys talking shit at them.

I take the list of people who were at the Dive with us down and read it over and over again as if the answer to the boxes will jump out at me. I zone the conversations out completely and it’s only when Harley nudges my foot with his that I startle to find them all staring at me.

“How do you survive in the Bay if you’re so unaware of shit?” Blaise grumbles under his breath, and I cut him a glare.

“I’m not unaware when I’m there. I trust you guys enough to block you out when you’re talking shit. What’s up?”

Avery sighs and slides her phone over to me. Atticus has sent more information about my ghost of a father and instructions to attend a meeting during the fall break. Great. Just what I fucking need. No wonder Ash looks like he’s going to start stabbing people in the eye with his fucking fork.

“You don’t have to come. I can take Illi and one of the guys, leave you and the other two back at the ranch.” I murmur, and she shakes her head.

“Ash just needs to get the fuck over himself and stop doubting me. I’m not a fucking child.” She replies, just loud enough for everyone to hear and the bullshit to start up again.

I dig back into my granola. I hate it but I’m trying to make better food choices because I’m starting to get worried I won’t fit into my booty shorts for much longer. I made the stupid mistake of mentioning it to Harley and he snarled at me. Apparently my ass looks great with the steady diet of ice cream and French toast. Who’d have thought it?

We finish up and head back to our rooms, everyone blowing off their extracurriculars to catch up on homework and sleep off their hangovers. Blaise slings an arm over my shoulder and rubs his cheek on the top of my head. I smile like a crazy woman and just enjoy the feel of him, even if he does still kind of smell like stale beer and whiskey. It’s not so bad.

Avery and Ash don't stop snarling at each other the whole way back. Harley eventually shoves his way in-between them and becomes like a freaking brick wall. Avery rolls her eyes but cuts her shit out. Ash is harder to deter but Harley just gives him a haughty look, the asshole golden god himself.

When we get back I move straight to our room, ready for the boys to go back to their room and give me some study time but they all tag along. Blaise grumbles at me when I tug away from him and head straight to my bed where all of my homework has been spread out for me to look at. The stack of information from the Crow is sitting there too, haphazardly piled and rifled through.

"Where did all of this come from?" Harley murmurs as he shifts the pages around. I shrug, because the Crow always did have thousands of informants, but Avery gets this twitchy look on her face that sets Ash off.

"What the fuck has he done now?" He snaps, and I'm seriously about to walk out. I'll just grab my homework and head to the library, fuck this shit.

Avery crosses her arms and gives me a look. "Luca. The Jackal had been looking into your background and digging through everything to do with you. This is everything he has on you, Luca contacted one of his guys who's still on the inside and got it sent through."

I nod, impressed with Luca but also sick to my fucking stomach at being reminded once again at just how badly the Jackal is obsessed with me. I swallow and get back to reading. It's not that much really, except there's a whole fucking dossier about the 'training' I had been put through that I'd literally rather stab my own eyes out than read. Or, fuck, let anyone else read. When I move to stash it Blaise frowns at me.

"What the fuck is that?" He snaps, and I look down at the photo on the front.

Me. Fourteen, covered in bruises, booty shorts and a bralette that covered what little tits I had back then. The scars on my back still taped up and a blank sort of look on my face. I look like a trauma victim and, yup, that's exactly what I was. That's exactly what... I am.

"Just leave it. You don't need to read it, none of you do." I say, but of course that's not good enough. None of them like secrets.

It takes me a second to decide what I'm going to do, lie or talk about it. I choose the third option; run.

When Harley comes over to stand behind Blaise and glare I shove the file

at them and stalk off to the shower. I hesitate at the door and then speak without looking back at them, “I’m not talking about it. Any of it. Just read it and then keep your mouths *shut*.”

I don’t lock the door, too flustered and angry, and I strip off to climb into the shower, shoving my head under the hot water. If I could drown myself here I probably fucking would, just to get away from having to face everyone knowing all of the little broken parts of me. Having the general and vague details aired was bad enough, having the torture logs written out by the Jackal is just fucking *bad*.

When I’ve finally found enough energy to wash my hair and I’m rising it out, I hear the bathroom door open and try not to sigh. I expect it to be Avery or Harley, maybe Ash if he’s angry enough at what he’s found, but instead Blaise hops up to sit on the bathroom countertop, his phone in one hand and our shared iPod in the other.

I raise an eyebrow at him and he grins at me lasciviously. “Harley and Ash have gone down to the gym to beat on each other. Avery needs a break from us all so she decided to go to her dance class after all.”

I snort at him and shut the water off, grabbing my towel and stepping out. His eyes drop down to my wet naked body and I roll my eyes at him. “So the file scared them all off? Why aren’t you running away from my damage?”

He tugs the towel away from me, stopping me from drying off, and then grabs my hips to pull me into his chest. “They’re not scared. They’re trying to distract themselves from running down to the Bay and killing the Jackal today, now, for what he’s done. You never told me it was that bad, Star. You never told me he was torturing you.”

His voice is steady enough but the look in his eyes makes me want to die. Even my nakedness can’t distract him.

“And why aren’t you trying to go avenge me then?”

He strokes my hair back with his colorful hands, the stars moving and flexing on his fingers like they’re alive. “I don’t need to avenge you. I need to follow you down to the Jackal’s fucked up den then watch you slit his throat until he chokes to death on his own blood. I need to watch you get your justice, and your freedom, because it’s not mine to take away from you.”

My heart flutters in my chest. “What if I don’t want to kill him? What if... I can’t?”

His smirk is like a knife’s edge. “Then I’ll love every second of doing it for you, Star. I’ve never slit a man’s throat before, I’d be pretty fucking



happy with him being my first.”

We enjoy the room to ourselves for the rest of the day.

Blaise bitches me out for being so far ahead in our classwork but still being so fucking terrified of being left behind. I bitch him out for slacking when really, he’s been doing fucking amazingly. We talk about his mother, just a little, and I try my best to not get all stabby about it.

Blaise rolls his eyes at the faces I pull. “At least she’s left the dickhead. If she really didn’t care about me then she would have just fucking stayed with him and I’d never have met Blaire.”

I swallow the giant gulp of coffee I take to try to stop myself from having to answer but he just raises an eyebrow at me like a dick.

“She’s a shit mother. If she cared, she would have left him the second she realised he didn’t really love you, just the idea of a son to follow in his footsteps.” I mumble, shifting the pages around on my bed again and avoiding his eyes. Fuck me, I hate all of this emotional talk and who the hell was I to give my opinions on mothers? I mean, mine didn’t give a fuck about me my entire fucking life.

I guess that made me an expert on shit mothering.

“I don’t care about me. I care about my brother. She got him out, she got him away. That’s what Alice and Iris were both trying to do for the others, they were good moms.”

Fuck.

We’re so fucked that our only yardstick for good parenting are the two dead women. Killed by fucking psychopaths. I feel like that doesn’t bode well.

“Well, I care about you and what your mother does to you. I care a whole fucking lot.” I mutter, still looking at the pages and trying desperately to get the fuck off of this topic.

Blaise snatches the page away from me and grins when I glare at him. “Star, you fucking love me. You told me months ago. You’re in love with me and my dick.”

Sweet merciful lord.

“I’m too emotionally damaged to comment on that. If you’re not going to fucking help me with the information then you need to quit talking.” I snap, blushing and fumbling over my words like an idiot.

He grins at me. “You’ve already told me; no taking that back now, Star.”

By the time the others arrive back for dinner, Ash and Harley have beaten

each other to a bloody pulp and Avery is wincing as she moves, having pushed herself too hard and too far.

I feel just a little fucking guilty but I'm smart enough not to try to apologize. There's only so many times I can get snapped at by my family before I learn my lesson.

I fall asleep in Blaise's arms and wake later to Harley climbing in, grumpy and huffing from attempting to sleep alone. I lay there, listening to the all too familiar sounds of my guys sleeping, and I thank the fucking stars I have them.

And I obsessively plan how I'm going to keep my family safe.  
No matter the cost.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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**M**y phone wakes me with a text message, which is never a good sign. Harley wakes as well, grunting and pulling me into his body tighter until Blaise groans in his sleep and rolls away from us both. He's always been the precious one about sleep and I huff at him.

I climb over Harley to grab my phone, my gut clenching when I see the Jackal's number and photos waiting for me. Harley sits up and moves me to sit in his lap, then I click on the photos.

Fuck.

"Aves. We have a problem." I croak, and she startles awake.

She sits up and flicks the light on, straight into cleanup mode. We all ignore Blaise's complaints and I send her a copy of the photos. The photos of tongues impaled on the ornate spikes of Hannaford's wrought iron fence.

There's at least eighty.

"What the fuck is he playing at? The cops are going to be crawling up our asses in no time and that's not good for any of us, for fuck's sake." Harley snaps, and I get up to start pulling clothes on. I flick a text to Ash, the only person in the other room because he's a grumpy shit, and then I slip my knife into my pocket. Harley starts to rummage around for clothes as well, no chance of me doing this alone.

I find my Docs and shove my feet in them as Blaise sits up, rubbing his eyes and glaring at us all. I ignore him and say to Avery, "Can you keep the administration away for long enough that I can clean up the... evidence? I'll call Illi for a pick up and we can figure out what to do about this."

She nods, her eyes never leaving her phone as her fingers fly across the screen, and then curses under her breath. Her eyes flash as she looks up at

me. “Someone has already called the cops. They’re down at the fence already. The Jackal must have waited for them to come in before sending you the photos.”

I groan as the door unlocks and Ash comes storming in, dressed and deliciously sleep ruffled. He makes a beeline to the coffee machine without acknowledging any of us and I feel the same damn way. Gimme some caffeine to deal with this bullshit.

“Why the fuck would he call the cops? Surely someone has to notice a hundred guys walking around with no tongues. Or a hundred dead bodies.” Harley snaps.

I shrug. “He has the Bear on his side. He can dispose of that many bodies all at once easily so there won’t be any evidence for the cops to find. The problem is that they’re going to be hanging around here, questioning everyone, and we don’t know how many of them are dirty and in Senior’s pocket. The two threats are fucking blending together, just like they want them to.”

Avery nods but doesn’t look up from her phone. “Call Illi. Tell him, and I’ll speak to Atticus. We’ll make sure we’re protected before the cops get here.”

I step into the bathroom to call the Butcher so I can hear him over Harley’s bitching. I glance at the clock to find it’s only 5am. Fuck this.

“Kid, just because you don’t sleep, doesn’t mean the rest of us don’t need our eight hours.” He snarks and I snort at him.

“Eight? Fuck, I wish I got eight. We’ve had a visit from our friend. He’s cleaned house to make sure he doesn’t have any more snitches, then called it in with the pigs. We’re going to be put into lockdown, possible interference from the serial killer. Just another day at Hannaford Prep.”

Illi groans and I hear the rustling of him sitting up in bed, Odie’s murmuring low and soft. My heart does this weird clench thing in my chest at just how freaking close we got to losing her. Again.

Fuck.

“Right. Get the ice queen to wipe your phones and I’ll come have a chat with some old friends I have in the force. Everything will be fine, kid. Just keep your family safe.” He says, and I listen to the rustling sound of him pulling on clothes.

I sigh and rub a hand over my face. “Yeah, I know we’ll get through this but fuck, I’m tired and Illi, I’m... I’m worried about who he’s going to go

after next. Get Odie somewhere safe, ok?”

Illi grunts down the phone at me. “Look. No one is touching her. No one is touching you or the rest of the family. We’re fine, stop getting the fucking jitters because he’s going fucking psycho, that’s what he does. We knew it would get bad and his temper tantrums aren’t going to stop us from taking him out. Now hang up and clear your phones. I’ll be there in under an hour.”

I hang up and shove my phone in my pocket, glancing up to find Ash in the doorway with a scowl on his face.

“Did you just get a pep talk from the Butcher? Fuck, we are in trouble.” He sneers, and I roll my eyes at him.

“I’m allowed to feel shitty about this whole... thing, you know. Don’t take your issues out on me, talk to your sister and actually fucking listen to her for once.”

He narrows his eyes at me and grinds his teeth. “Atticus Crawford is a fucking cancer and we need to cut him out now before he gets Avery killed.”

I blow out a breath at him, grabbing a fistful of his shirt to pull him all the way into the bathroom and pulling the door shut behind him.

“Nothing is going to happen to Avery. Not ever, I won’t let my world or yours hurt her but if you don’t pull your fucking head out of your ass she’s going to walk the hell away from you. That’s where this shitty attitude leads, Ash.” I whisper, trying to keep my tone civil but I don’t think I succeed.

He gives me a dark look, one I haven’t seen aimed my way since sophomore year. “She’s not going to walk away, the only way I’m going to lose her is if she’s dead which is exactly where this is going. Atticus is a selfish fucking dickhead, he’s always thought he’s better than what he really is, and if she goes along with him, he’ll get her killed.”

I stare at him for a second and then nod slowly. “Ok. Ok, I’ll do what I can. Just ease up and I’ll do what I can.”

I fucking hate politics.

Especially the family kind.

Avery has all of our phones wiped before I make it out of the shower. I’d dragged Ash in with me to try to get him in a better mood but by breakfast they’re back at each other’s throats. I go back to my default and ignore them

completely, and Harley and Blaise seem to be happy enough to do the same.

There are extra men in suits lining the halls and when we walk to our classes we find pigs trawling through the school grounds, taking photos and questioning the Crow's men. One of them tries to stop Avery to speak to her and at the mere uttering of her name they scatter like mice. I share a look with her; they'll all be in Senior's pocket for sure but how much of this little stunt has he hand a hand in?

In our first class of the day we're told by our teacher to go about our lessons as if there hasn't been dead body parts left on campus. Half the students in the class look like they're about to jump out of their seats and run screaming from the room but it's the other half, the bored half, that holds my interest.

What's happened in their lives that spiked tongues don't bother them?

Avery follows my gaze and starts to take note, this could be useful for us and I have no doubt she'll have a whole new list of filthy rich families under her thumb by the end of the week.

I find myself unable to concentrate for the entire freaking day. Something nags at me and I can't let it go. Something pulling at the back of my memory, and my mind worries over it like an obsessed child until it works it out. It's so frustrating I can't even focus on my classes. Harley notices, he watches me too closely to miss fucking *anything*, and finally at lunchtime when were in the dining hall together with our family, he snaps.

"What the fuck is going on in your head today? You're a twitchy mess."

The whole lot of them stop eating to eye me, Avery frowning and slipping her phone out of her pocket like she's ready to wage war the second I tell her who's pissing me off. It's sweet, a better gesture than any other she could offer me.

I roll my eyes at Harley because I haven't been *that* bad. "How did the Jackal know someone had snitched? I can't let it go. The only people we spoke to about it were the Crow and Illi. Illi would never betray us, *never*, we're family and he's all fucking in. But... I don't think the Crow would either. We have a leak and we need to plug it before it gets someone killed."

Avery's eyes drop down to her phone. My stomach drops, I don't want to have to tell her she can't message Atticus and ask him about this, but then she places the phone on the table where we can all see it. Harley's shoulders relax just a little at the show of loyalty to us, her real family.

She ignores him, giving me a curt nod and says, "It has to be one of his

men. Atticus wouldn't play these games or go back on his word. That's not who he is, even Ash would agree."

Ash doesn't notice *any* part of the conversation except the bit where Avery is defending Atticus and now he looks about ready to murder someone. It's plain to see that the possible question of his loyalty makes Ash positively giddy with murderous intent. "We didn't know he was the Crow, Floss, what makes you think we know enough about him to say whether or not he would betray us?"

I sigh at him and knock his foot with mine under the table. It's a little hard considering I've got to go around Avery but I make it work. I'm pretty impressed with Avery because she manages to control her own murderous intent, everything except her hand tightening around the handle of her knife. "I know you hate him. He's not my favorite either right now. But can you honestly tell me you think that he would do this?"

Harley cuts in before this turns into a full blown Beaumont Bullshit session, "I agree with the girls, it's gotta be one of the men. The real problem here is we didn't discuss with the Crow what had happened."

And then it hits me like a baseball bat to the back of the head. I stand abruptly and curse viciously under my breath. Everyone else goes on high alert and Avery snatches her phone back into her hand ready to run after me or call for backup.

"Someone's bugged our fucking room." I grit it out between my clenched teeth.

That gets a reaction.

Avery's fingers fly over the screen of her phone as stands, walking away from the busy table. Ash snarls and takes off after her, cursing Atticus's name six ways to freaking Sunday until every eye in the room follows him out the door.

Harley shoves my plate back at me and gives me a glare. "Avery can sort it out, finish your fucking food."

I glare at him, my food situation isn't an issue anymore, but Blaise crosses his arms and joins the fight. Fuck's sake.

I sit and shove a forkful into my mouth, chewing without tasting a goddamn thing. "I need to call the Coyote, he needs to come and upgrade every-fucking-thing. We need our own surveillance in the room too."

A slow smirk spreads across Blaise's face and a blush starts creeping across mine. I know that smirk. I fucking love it when he gives it to me, but

only when we're alone and certainly not when we're surrounded by students.

"We should probably make sure Avery isn't the one monitoring it. She wouldn't be too happy to find out I bent you over her bed while she was at ballet."

Fuck.

I do not need to be reminded of that particular memory, not right the fuck here, and not while Harley is sitting there with raised eyebrows and a fucking smirk that mirrors Blaise's.

"And here I was thinking Avery's shit was off limits." He draws, and I steel myself against the shiver that tries to work its way up my spine.

"It is. Blaise just... caught me off guard for a second there. Can we stick to the topic? We have shit going on."

Blaise shrugs at me, sharing a look with Harley. "There's always going to be something going on, Star. I'd rather talk about all of the sex tapes we're about to be making. Can you ask the Coyote to make it a live feed straight to our phones too? That way I can keep tabs and make sure Harley isn't being a selfish *dick*."

Harley scoffs at him and shrugs. "You'll learn some valuable fucking lessons on how to keep our Mounnty satisfied."

Fuck.

I'm out. I don't need the two of them to turn this into a competition in the freaking dining hall of all places. I stand and stalk away listening to them both roar with laughter as they follow me out.

Today has been a fucking *day*.

After classes end for the day, we head straight to the chapel for the assembly that was called to deal with the aftermath of the Jackal's visit to Hannaford. There's an air of sheer, blinding terror amongst the students as we walk into the room together, and I notice there's a small bubble around us, as if the other students are afraid of bumping into us and losing their heads. Good. Fucking great.

Avery frowns down at her phone and when I move to direct us to our usual seats at the front she stops us, tugging me by our joined arms to one of the bench seats at the back of the room. Harley mumbles something under his



breath at her but she ignores him until we're seated. Ash takes his seat next to me with Blaise on his other side and Harley next to Avery. When Avery cuts me a look my stomach drops.

"Ash, don't make a scene but Senior is here." She murmurs, and Blaise groans when Ash turns to freaking stone between us.

I grab his hand and give it a squeeze, leaning in to whisper in his ear, "We're safe. He can't get close to us and I'll gut him before I let him touch Avery."

He gives me a look like I'm crazy or fucking stupid but I only smile in return.

Then the door on the far side of the room opens and Senior stalks in looking clean cut and disturbingly handsome in his suit. His eyes cast around the room until he finds Ash and then he fixes his stare on his son, the obsession and loathing a potent mix of crazy I haven't seen since Joey's head ended up in that fucking cardboard box. A man I've never seen before follows behind him closely, looking sweaty and uncomfortable as he tugs on his tie. Definitely not one of his paid bodyguards, he's far too fucking twitchy.

"Who the hell is that?" I murmur, and Avery's arm tightens where it's tucked into mine.

"That's George Drummond, the Chief of Police. Lauren's father."

I survey the room to look out for any extra threats we might have missed on the way in and I make eye contact with one of the Crow's men. His face is carefully blank but his hands are clenched into fists at his side. The room is uneasy, the students all sensing something is fucking wrong in this room.

Any room with Senior in it would feel this way.

Drummond steps up to the microphone and clears his throat. His voice is clear enough but there's a fine tremble to it if you listen hard enough. "Good evening, students. I am sorry to have to be here today but as you know there has been a crime here at your fine school and we must address that."

The whispers start up around us but Avery shuts them up with a single look.

"We are aware that your parents may have concerns about your safety due to the rise in gang activity. We are here to assure them, and you, that we are doing everything in our power to keep you safe. There are a number of people of interest, those with ties to the criminal underworld, that we are currently investigating and will move in on. We are confident that this will

put an end to the current rise in crime. We have assured your parents that the... evidence that appeared here this morning will be handled with the utmost care, however we are confident that they are not from any students or faculty, past or present."

Senior's gaze is like a freaking laser, incinerating and destructive, but Ash just stares him down like the reckless asshole I know he is and fucking love. The corners of my mouth tug into a smirk that is entirely Beaumont, because fuck this man. Fuck him for ruining his kids and trying to tear us all to fucking pieces.

When Drummond finally stops talking about how fucking important we all are, and protecting us is their top priority, Senior steps up to the microphone. Drummond falters as he steps away, swiping at his forehead like it'll somehow stop him from looking terrified and wet.

Senior's voice still gives me the chills. "As you may all be aware my son, Joseph Beaumont Junior is currently missing. If any of you have information regarding his whereabouts or anyone who may have had a grudge against him, I am offering a large reward. I just want my beloved son home safe."

Every damn eye in the room turns to fix on Avery and Ash. At least that's what it feels like. Even the Crow's men all glance their way.

I want to start swinging, but the cleanup would be fucking colossal and we can't afford any extra work on our plates so I school my face into an innocently blank look and pray Ash is doing the same.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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**F**all break arrives and we're all set for the drive down to Avery's ranch. Harley slings my bag over his shoulder along with his and Blaise tucks me under his arm to walk down to the Cadillac. Avery had gotten up early with a phone call and I don't have a freaking clue of where Ash disappeared to, but I'm buzzing with excitement about leaving Hannaford for a week.

We come to a stop on the bottom floor while Harley texts his cousins and tries to figure out what the fuck is going on. I tell the nerves fluttering in my guts to calm the hell down, everything is going to be fine. Ash is probably just chasing Avery around to piss her off because he lives for that shit at the moment.

"Are you excited at getting back to having your own room again, Star?" Blaise mumbles into my hair. I elbow him but he ignores it. "Looking forward to your orgy sized bed? Maybe we should put it to good use."

Fuck.

I shiver and pull away a little to scowl up at him, trying to ignore just how turned on I am at the thought. "When are you guys going to learn to stop talking about our private shit out in the halls when we're surrounded by the fucking snake pits of Hannaford?"

Blaise gives me a smug look. "When are you going to stop caring what they all think?"

I sigh at him as Avery rounds the corner, marching towards us like a woman on a mission, students scattering out of her way. "If the roles were reversed, you'd be getting high-fived for having three girlfriends, not glared at and whispered about. I don't really care, I'd just rather not hear the gossip about it later."

He frowns at me, and Harley steps up closer to us both with a vicious look when Avery finally makes it to us and interrupts them both, thank fuck.

“We need to talk. Now.” Avery says, tugging me away from the guys and along the hall until we’re standing outside the principal’s office. I give her a look which she ignores, knocking sharply while her foot taps impatiently.

I don’t really want to be in the room again, the last time I’d stood here I’d had to hack Ms. Cougar Whore to pieces, but there’s no sign of the carnage left here when the Principal opens the door, ushering us in.

“Atticus has already had this room swept. I’ve arranged to have our rooms done again and the Coyote has already called about upgrading the security system. We should have had him do it in the first place.”

I nod and try not to think about just how fucked we are if he double crosses us. This is the fucking problem with the Jackal crossing the line and starting a war; there’s no longer any sort of honor amongst the Twelve.

Avery flicks her wrist at the Principal and she nods respectfully, exiting the office and leaving us to speak privately. Even knowing she belongs to the Crow, it’s fucking weird to see, even more so when Avery perches on the desk and crosses her arms at me. I take a seat and steel myself to whatever the fuck has happened now. If we’re all alive it can’t be that bad, right?

“I used Blaise’s list to start recruiting our list of contacts and it’s paid off. I have some big news from the raids Senior and his ‘pocket pigs’.”

I snort at her use of Illi’s term for the men Senior owns, in her cultured tones it’s something else. “Yeah? Are we about to have our doors beaten down?”

Avery smirks. “No. But last night the Bear’s doors were blown wide open.”

I freeze. “The Bear?”

Avery nods, tapping away at her phone and then handing it over to me to show me the file. Every last one of the Bear’s businesses, the legit ones and the fronts, have been raided. Millions of dollars in drugs, stolen cars, weapons, and illegal chemicals have been seized.

An entire empire taken down in one day.

“Fuck. Me.” I gasp, and Avery nods.

“Either the Bear tried to switch sides and the Jackal found out, or Senior sold him out to prove a point.” She says, taking the phone back and tapping away at the screen.

Fuck. Me.

I blow out a breath and stare at the ceiling for a second, mulling over the price of the Jackal's insane and traitorous ways. No fucking honor in the man. I mean, I know we're all criminals, I kill people for fuck's sake, but there's always been a code we live by. Without it... anarchy. Chaos. Bedlam in the streets of Mounts Bay.

We're all fucked because he doesn't know how to be rejected.

"No word on who got the bug into our room. It's definitely one of the Jackal's men though, the Coyote traced it back to him. Jackson isn't so bad I guess, once you look past his smart mouth and atrocious fashion sense." Avery mutters, and I raise an eyebrow at her.

"Not into baggy jeans and band tees? He looks like every guy I ever went to school with, you're lucky you were born richer than god."

She shudders. "It's disturbing that someone of Viola's pedigree has fallen for him. I thought she was just trying to piss her parents off but Jackson made a comment to me last night and I thought she was going to reach through the screen and choke me out for it. I don't know why, he was the one saying it."

He always was a flirty dickhead. Viola should know better than to listen to a word that comes out of his mouth by now.

"Right. So we go back to the ranch, unpack, have a shower, then head into the meeting. Atticus has said the entire Twelve are attending thanks to the Jackal's stunt. Well, obviously he's not going. I don't even think they're counting him as a member anymore. Is there some sort of process you go through to kick him out?"

I stand and tuck my arm into hers.

"We kill him."

Ash reappears and we head down to the Bay piled into Blaise's Cadillac, though Avery packs so much that we really should have brought both cars. Ash is still feeling pretty pissy about his Ferrari being put in any danger and no one seems to be able to get the steaming pile of wreckage out of their mind, all that was left of Harley's Mustang after Joey had gotten to it, so we're stuck with bags on our laps and under our feet.

I don't mind but Harley looks ready to kill.

The ride is reasonably quiet, mostly because Ash and Avery are no longer

speaking to each other, and I do my best to zone out and ignore the tension in the air around us. I haven't had the chance to ask Ash where the hell he'd disappeared to, instead burying my nose into the last of my literature books that I need to read for class for the year. Harley reads over my shoulder, which sounds sickeningly cute and romantic except he reads much slower than I do and I find myself getting bored in between page turns.

After a quick stop off at the ranch, we head straight to the meeting. The Crow lives in an honest-to-god fortress on the rich side of town. I've been there a few times, long before I knew his name was Atticus Crawford and he was in love with my best friend, but I've never been further than the reception room. Yup, the place has a reception room. Fucking rich people.

When we arrive at the large stone walls and electric gate Blaise puts down his window and makes eye contact with one of the Crow's men. The guy keeps his and, I kid you not, he speaks into a microphone lapel, as if he is protecting the President of the United fucking States and not a well-connected crime lord. When I murmur this to Ash it barely gets a reaction out of him. I sigh and roll my eyes at his pissy nature. I can't fucking wait for this whole bullshit to be over with.

"If he did all of this to protect you then I'd be worried, Aves. Pretty sure this place has a fucking sex dungeon or some shit." says Blaise, smirking at her as she sits with a rigid back in the front seat.

You'd think just this once he'd let it go and not make some dumb comment but no, that's just not his style. For once Avery has no snappy comeback, she just sits there and glares out at everything.

Blaise parks next to Illi's car where the Butcher and his stunning wife are waiting for us. I give Odie a quick hug and she kisses Avery's cheek sweetly, murmuring pleasantries in French. Then we walk into the fortress.

The Crow is waiting for us in the reception room, the place still as cold and bleak as ever. Harley looks around curiously but Avery keeps her eyes ahead, barely even acknowledging the Crow's existence. I give him a respectful nod, which he returns and then leads us further into the cavernous building.

"It's like a castle that some doomsday prepper lives in but with like... weird-ass paintings in it." Illi fake-whispers at me, and Harley and Blaise both snicker at him like children.

To be fair, he's not wrong.

The Crow casts a disapproving eye at us all over his shoulder. "The first

year of being the Crow, the Jackal attempted to kill me seventeen times. This building was built like this for a reason.”

Avery’s mouth turns down like she’s taken a hit. “That painting is a Delacroix. It’s a classic.”

Odie nods and says, “My father has some in his collection too, but he could not afford one of this size. It’s very impressive.”

I keep my mouth shut because I know exactly nothing about old French paintings. Ash rolls his shoulders back like he’s preparing to take a swing, then he shocks the hell out of us all by stepping up to Avery and tucking her under his arm, something he hasn’t done in months.

“Let’s get this meeting over with. We have other... commitments to get back to.” He says, squeezing Avery’s shoulders and she waits until the Crow turns his back before giving him a cold look. He doesn’t react, only walks with her into the large meeting room the Crow is leading us to.

We’re the last ones to arrive.

I keep the surprise from my face as I take in the room. Every member of the Twelve, except the Jackal, is present, with a whole heap of their flunkies and followers jammed in as well. I’d been expecting the Bear, he’d lost everything, but to see the Fox and the Tiger here is shocking. The Tiger has been too afraid to turn his back on the Jackal, and the Fox’s businesses are so intertwined I really thought he’d stay with him until the end. The Lynx is a devious bitch so I’m less surprised there.

There’s quiet chatter, murmuring amongst the flunkies, as I take a seat and my family all spread out around me. Harley helps me into my seat and then takes up watch by the wall with Blaise. Ash helps Avery into the seat next to mine and then takes my other side, a cold and detached look on his face. His hand keeps drifting to his pocket like he’s checking his phone is still in there. Fuck.

Once the Crow sits at the head of the table with his sharply dressed men, the room falls quiet without any instruction needed.

“I think it’s best if we keep this meeting short and to the point-” The Crow starts, only to be interrupted.

“I think it’s pretty fucking clear; the Jackal is out. What’s the plan for killing the backstabbing fuck?” The Bear snarls, and I do my best not to roll my eyes at him. It’s hard. It’s fucking hard.

“How about you shut your fucking mouth and let the adults talk? You’re only sitting here because you’re broke and about to do life in federal prison

because you picked the wrong fucking side.” Illi draws, and I bite my lip to stop the smile from spreading across my face. Fuck, I was not expecting this meeting to challenge me so much.

“Why the fuck is the Butcher talking for you, Wolf? Is he crawling into your bed as well?” The Bear snaps, gesturing between my family with a leering look. “You guys take turns or fuck her all at once?”

I can see the effort it takes the Crow to not roll his eyes as the room explodes around us. The rest of the Twelve either laugh or make some noise of disgust. Harley’s tattoo flexes as he grinds his teeth to stop himself from unleashing on the dickhead but he’s the only one trying to show restraint.

From the corner of my eye, I see Blaise cross his arms with a scoff, a lazy grin on his face that doesn’t hide the danger flashing in his eyes. “I know this must be hard for you, knowing a teenage girl is getting way more ass than you, but if you stopped stinking like rotting corpses and that cheap cologne then maybe you could find someone who’d look past how fucking ugly you are. I can’t give you any tips for your micro-dick, sorry. Not something I’ve had to deal with.”

Avery lets out her sweetly murderous giggle and Illi’s hand drops to his side to stroke lovingly at his meat cleaver that’s strapped to his thigh. The Bear watches that hand like he’d stand some sort of chance if he could see the moment Illi chooses to kill him.

He wouldn’t.

The Bear opens his mouth to snarl a comeback to Blaise and two very different but equally startling things stop him: the Crow interrupts him with a snarled, “Can we stay on topic so we can get the situation under control? Preferably by killing the psycho fuck?”

I’m not expecting the ever-proper and rule following Crow to just come out and say we’re here planning to take out a fellow crime lord.

The Bear is stunned, shocked enough that he doesn’t see Ash move until there’s the barrel of a gun pressed to his temple. That shuts him up real fucking quick. The whole room goes silent again until you could hear a freaking pin drop.

“Let me make this crystal clear to every last person in this room; insult the Wolf and I’ll personally end your life. Piss me off enough and I’ll let the Butcher join in, make a real mess of the job.”

The Bear’s jaw clenches but he dips his head. He has no choice but to agree; he’s here alone, all of his men are in lockup, and here I am with the



only guys in the room that don't look worried. It's a weird position to be in, to watch this empire fall right as my own is slowly, hesitantly, building.

Ash finally lowers his gun again and the Crow takes over. He details a very specific, and very discreet, plan to take the Jackal out. I don't agree with the plan at all, but I choose to keep my mouth shut. It doesn't affect me, I'm not involved, all this meeting has told me is that I won't be hunted for taking out the Jackal myself when the time is right.

Avery is not so easy to accept the shitty plan.

"Shouldn't we be sending in a team, not just a single shooter? The Jackal is not someone who is easy to sneak up on and since the defection of Luca—"

"Less is more." The Crow cuts her off. Fuck me.

Avery finally looks at him and raises an eyebrow. "True, less is more... unless we're talking about dick. Maybe you should stop acting like one."

Illi chuckles and slings his arm over the back of her chair to pull my Ice Queen bestie into a sort of side hug. Odie snuggles into his other side, a self-satisfied smirk across her stunning face. They look like a very happy, if psychotic, threesome. That's fucking weird to think about, but I enjoy the look on Atticus's face all the same.

Ash develops a fucking eye twitch, but he manages to hold it together. Harley smirks at the look Atticus gives Illi and Blaise outright fucking roars with laughter, throwing his head back and just fucking shaking with glee.

I slip my hand into Avery's and give it a little squeeze, the smirk on my own face directed at the Bear. "I don't see why we've sat around waiting for the intel, only to send a single guy in. If we're going to do that, I'll just go in myself."

I can feel three sets of eyes glare daggers at me but I keep my eyes focused on the Crow. He smooths a hand down the front of his jacket, something rich people must do a lot because I always catch Avery and Ash doing it, and then he leans back in his chair.

"The Jackal is on high alert. He has thousands of loyal men and every last one of them will be on the lookout for you. Your trip to the Dive to see the Viper was a fluke; there's a bounty on your head and every last one of the Jackal's followers want it. You cannot go after him. We are outnumbered, unless I call in all of my own men which I won't do. Therefore, we send in one shooter. Take him out quickly and quietly, then clean up the mess his organization is in."

It's not going to work. "I'm the best there is. No one else will come

close.”

Avery catches my eye. “You would have been better off getting Luca to kill him, then plead your case with the Twelve.”

Atticus shakes his head at us both. “Anarchy is what has gotten us into this mess.”

I huff out a breath and shut my mouth again. No point trying to argue with the holier-than-thou, pretentious, arrogant fuck. He might have struck a nerve with me. Just fucking maybe.

When the meeting is finally over, shitty plan and all, Avery stands before anyone else and moves to the door. Ash stays in his chair, his eyes glued to the Crow, so I wave the others out and stay with him. If he needs to have a showdown to get this out of his system then fuck it, we’re having a showdown.

Lord fucking help us.

“Anything else?” The Bear snarls, and the Crow shakes his head at him, dismissive as though the Bear is a disobedient child. It’s funny as fuck to see and my little dark stained heart soaks it the hell up. They all stand and make their way to the doors.

Atticus gives us a hard look, but his steely gaze means nothing to Ash. “Is there something else you need?”

Ash reaches into his pocket and pulls out a scrap of fabric, soaked in blood, and he throws it down on the table in front of the Crow. I stare at it and try not to let the shock show on my face. What the ever-loving fuck is that?

“You might want to vet your men a little better from now on, Crawford. It wasn’t that hard for me to find the Jackal’s mark. You’re really not doing a good job of proving me wrong. You’ll never be worthy of Avery. Never.”

Atticus unwraps the fabric and sure enough, there’s a piece of skin with the Jackal’s insignia on it. Holy fucking shit.

I stand before all of the words streaming through my head burst out of my mouth and I pull Ash up with me. His hand is steady in mine as we leave the Crow behind, pausing by the door when he calls out to us.

“The Coyote needs to do another sweep of Avery’s ranch. You should all stay here tonight to ensure it’s safe. I’ve had rooms set aside for you all.” He says in a blank tone, and I nod.

No matter how much I’d like to tell him to shove it up his ass we have a job to take care of. “Thank you, we will stay but we only need one room.”

Then we head back towards the reception room to find the others.

“Where the hell is he? What if someone finds the body?” I hiss at him the second I’m sure we’re alone. Fuck me.

Ash tugs me into an alcove by the painting Illi hated, his eyes like icy blue pits. “Obviously I didn’t leave anything behind. I’m not fucking braindead, Mouny.”

I give him a hard look and his mood sours even more. “I called Illi to get rid of the body and my clothes, then I had a fucking bleach bath. I’m a little fucking insulted you think I can’t do this.”

My eyes dart over his face, taking in his ire and his fierce protective look. “I’m not doubting you. I’m not good at letting you guys take the lead. You know that already. I can’t handle something fucking happening to one of you.”

His hand wraps around my throat and squeezes until my head tips back and our lips meet, rough and desperate. Fuck, the taste of him is addictive and fucking poison.

He breaks the kiss and whispers to me, his lips brushing against mine, “Illi asked me why I was calling, not you, and I told him that when I said I was all in, I meant it. That means if someone is threatening you or our family, I’ll fucking deal with it.”

I stare up at him with a whole new level of respect and adoration. Fuck me.

He leans forward and pins me to the wall, covering me entirely with the hard lines of his body. Sweet merciful lord, I do not need to turn into a puddle here and have the fucking Crow find me looking weak and pathetic.

“Knowing I can use all of the twisted, fucked up shit my family has taught me to keep you safe... well, I feel a little less fucked up because of it. Knowing that it turns you on is just icing on the fucking cake.”

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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I wait until Avery is asleep before I decide I need some answers. I've never felt so watched as I do inside the Crow's fortress. I don't call it that lightly, it's a fucking stronghold and I know I'm going to go to sleep tonight without the slightest fear of having one of the Jackal's men climb through my window.

The room we're put in has no windows.

Blaise and Harley steal a mattress from one of the neighboring rooms and Blaise locks himself in the bathroom to get high enough to sleep soundly. Avery bitches him out but she's asleep before he's finished. Ash takes up watch by the door, one of his guns resting in his lap while he cleans the other. Harley snickers under his breath in pure delight at the whole thing.

I find it less amusing.

At some point, this is going to blow up and I need to make sure Avery isn't going to be kidnapped or some shit. I manage to convince Ash to stay behind and drag Harley back downstairs to hunt for the Crow. We need to have it out and draw some fucking lines.

He can't keep dismissing her ideas, just to 'keep her safe'.

The moment we find him in the formal sitting area, Atticus tips his head towards the bar and I nod. Yeah, his fortress has a fucking bar, complete with staff and bowls of nuts.

Fucking rich people.

I take a seat at the booth and Harley slides in next to me, keeping himself firmly between the Crow and me. It's sweet and entirely unnecessary, but I let it go.

"We need to discuss Avery." The Crow says, and I see the member of the

Twelve slowly slip away until we're staring at Atticus Crawford.

He flicks a hand at the bartender and we're served our drinks of choice, only I never told them what I wanted. Harley's beer is even his preferred brand. I raise an eyebrow at Atticus and he flicks a dismissive hand at me.

"It's my livelihood to know everything about everyone."

I decide that if he's going to be himself then I'm going to drop all of the formalities as well and tell the fucker some home truths. "Well, you're failing. For someone who's known Aves her whole life you fucking suck at really knowing her. You keep cutting that girl so deep she's never going to forgive you."

He sips his bourbon. He has it the same way Ash does, so it must be the preferred drink for all pompous assholes.

He sets the glass back down on the table and says, "Everything I've done is to keep her alive. I couldn't always keep her safe, not completely, but I did what I could to keep her breathing long enough that I could get her out."

My eyes narrow. "Oh yeah? How have you done that? Built yourself an empire, trade in information, but how has that done anything for her? Because I've gotten her out and safe. I'm guarding her, I've killed and bled and tortured for her. What have you done?"

His lip curls into a snarl at me and Harley palms a knife. Illi taught him well and Atticus could be bleeding out in a fucking second if Harley doesn't keep his cool.

"Her father has already sold her twice. The buyers are both dead, because I took care of it. Her father was going to split the twins up, he was going to send her to finishing school across the country where he could have her killed without Ash's protection, I stopped that. I walked into the fucking slums of Mounts Bay and became the Crow for her. If I took her away then I would have had to leave Ash behind. I think you're underestimating Joseph Beaumont's reach. Everything you do for Avery only happens because I take care of the officials. I'm running out of information and bribes to keep her safe. I'm doing everything I fucking can to keep her and Ash safe. I know he hates me, I know that he won't ever trust me, but I'm trying to get him out too."

Fuck.

Dammit. I like him, and from the look on Harley's face he does too. Jesus, what a mess.

"Alright. I'll help. We can work together."

Atticus snorts at me. “I know exactly how loyal you are, Wolf. It’s why I didn’t put a bullet between your eyes when I found out you’d become friends with her.”

Harley’s eyes narrow again and I give Atticus a stern look. “Maybe not the best idea to threaten me while you’re asking for my help.”

Atticus shakes his head. “I’m not threatening you and I’m not asking for your help. I know you won’t do anything for me without speaking to Avery about it. Like I said, you’re loyal. I’m only telling you what she won’t listen to, which is that I’m trying to get her out of this alive and sometimes that means I have to treat her like she’s made of glass. I ask her not to come to meetings because I can’t keep my fucking eyes off of her and the Jackal will notice. He was looking for my weaknesses to exploit and I’ve aggressively kept her away from me and the Bay for that exact reason. I had to weigh up the benefits of having her inducted to you very carefully. The Jackal knows about her now but she’s a little bit safer from her father. It’s a fucking constant battle, walking through landmines and praying I’m not mis-stepping and losing the only fucking reason I have for living. So don’t underestimate me, I know exactly who Avery Beaumont is. I know how strong she is. I’m willing to have her hate me if it means I can get her out of this mess alive. I’d rather have her alive and happy with someone else, than selfishly keep her only to have her die because of it.”

I finish my whiskey in two gulps and say, “Right. So, what threats are you dealing with for her and what do you need me to do? I’ll take care of anything.”

“I told you, I don’t need your help. If I did, I’d ask.” He says in the sulkiest, asshole tone but little does he know I’m fucking immune to it.

I do spend a fuck-load of time with my guys and they’re the kings of this shit.

“Explain exactly how you managed to have one of the Jackal’s men get through your security then? I thought you’d vetted everyone you put into the school?”

His jaw clenches and he gives me the slightest nod, like he’s conceding the point or some shit. “I’ve pulled everyone from Hannaford. There’s a whole new batch of my men, and every last one of them has been personally vetted by me. I’ve called in an old friend; he’s going to stay on top of things. I will find out how the spy got through, then I will deal with it.”

Atticus finishes his drink and straightens his lapels uselessly. “She’ll

forgive me. Someday she will understand the depths I've reached to keep her safe."

I hum under my breath, watching Harley's hands flex as he reins his temper in. "She will. But first you have to stop treating her like a delicate princess and remember she's been waging her own war for years. She can handle your empire, better even than you can, if you'd just cut your shit out."

He shakes his head at me like I'm dense. "It's not about handling it. It's about surviving it. What kind of a monster would I be if I asked an eighteen year old girl to step into a criminal empire?"

I give him an ice cold look. "One that recognizes she was born into a den of monsters and survived it."

I stand up to leave before he says something else that makes me want to rip his arrogant face right the fuck off, and Harley takes my arm to help me out of the booth. A server comes over to refill Atticus's drink and clear our empty glasses. I run through his story in my head again, and sigh.

"Atticus?"

He looks up and, without the mask of the Crow he looks fucking miserable.

I blow out a long breath. "You have my vote. We don't work on a hierarchy or whatever, we vote on shit like a family. If it comes down to it, I'll vote in your favor."

His eyes flash and when he looks at Harley they harden. My golden god shrugs with a haughty smirk. "Two votes to three still means you're fucked, Crawford."

Atticus grits his teeth then relaxes, lifting his glass to his lips again. "What will your vote cost me, Arbour? I'll pay it."

Harley tips his head back and roars with laughter. "You've already got it, dickhead. Avery never backs down, though, and she's going to hold out on you until the bitter end just to prove a fucking point. Ash fucking loathes you, and Blaise always votes with Ash. On everything, except Lips, so you're fucked."

I shrug and smile. "Illi and Odie might decide to vote, you'll have to make a plea to the Butcher. Good luck with that, he's very fond of our Ice Queen."

Atticus gives me a disgusted look but nods. Harley tucks me under his arm and walks us both out of the bar, up the stairs and into our room.

Avery is tucked into the bed, her cheeks red like she's been scrubbing at

them the whole time we've been downstairs. Ash is sitting in the armchair, watching her with a dark look and my gut clenches.

There's no way he's going to let Atticus in.

There's nothing quite like getting back to the mundane normality of Hannaford after the break.

We get in late, shuffling upstairs and passing out wherever the fuck we land. When my alarm sounds in the morning I kind of want to smash it to pieces but mostly I just want to cry.

Avery gives me a knowing look and declares, "French toast in the dining hall sounds perfect, Mouny."

Fuck yes, it does. "Avery Aspen Waverly Beaumont, marry me."

She startles and then cackles like a witch, happy in a way she hasn't been for months. "How the hell did you know my full name? Harley's going to be heartbroken you chose me over him, you know."

I slip my arm into her's and ignore the grumbling bullshit around us. "Chicks before dicks, Aves."

Blaise gets me the biggest plate of breakfast I've ever seen and I'm sure I'll puke if I eat the whole thing but fuck it, I'm always up for a challenge. Ash is softer with his sister again, carrying her tray and helping her into her chair.

I ignore the chatter around us like I always do, trusting Avery and the guys to tell me if I need to take more notice, so I don't notice the excitement until Harley glances up and snarls, "What the fuck?"

The chair next to mine scrapes back and Luca folds himself into it, swooping in to kiss my cheek. "Morning, princess! Missed me?"

A grin bursts across my face, I'm sure I look like a psychotic toddler. "I kinda did. How's things? You enjoying being out of the Jackal's den of evil?"

He cackles at me, ignoring the looks of loathing my guys give him. All three of them. Fuck my life. "It's been quiet, that's for sure. I've been working on a new project for our mutual friend... the non-psychotic one. Apparently, someone is getting gifts from a secret admirer?"

Ugh. "Have you had any luck in your search?"



He shrugs and winks at me, tipping his head back to drink his iced coffee and I think a few of the freshman girls around us swoon. Huh, ok maybe that's why Harley is looking so... snarly.

"There's been a few leads. Whoever is sending them is good... like, fucking good at this. I'd be worried except they're obviously obsessed with you. Thinking about adding to your little harem, princess?" He says with a little sly smile. Ok, bordering on flirty but that's just how he is. It doesn't mean shit.

"You're going to stand the fuck up and walk away. Right now, before I drag your ass across this table and beat the life out of you." Harley snarls, and for once, Blaise doesn't make a joke. He just nods along like it's the acceptable thing to do.

Avery rolls her eyes. "Just leave him. They're friends, it's the same as Illi and you don't go all Neanderthal on him."

Harley cuts her a look. "Illi is family. This dick might be a Crow spy but he lived with the Jackal for too long for me to trust him."

Luca leans back in his chair, nonchalant but he doesn't quite pull it off like Illi does. "I saved your girl's ass last year. Isn't that enough for you to cut me some slack? The Crow is your ally."

Ash snorts and stands, tugging Avery out of her seat and then he grabs my arm to haul me up too. Jesus fucking wept. He gives Luca his most vicious glare and says, "Were you there when the Jackal was torturing the Wolf? Did you stand by and watch it all, collecting your information and telling yourself that absolves you from taking responsibility for that?"

Luca smiles at him, shaking his head. "You only care because you're in love with her. Any other girl and you wouldn't give a fuck. How many girls have you buried for your father?"

Ash leans forward until he can whisper in Luca's ear. "Enough to know you're doing a shitty job of protecting the Wolf, and my sister, and you're not fucking welcome here."

And then he drags us to our classes for the day.

Fuck me.

After our classes let out for the day, Avery heads straight to her dance class

for the evening to pull in some extra hours to work on a new routine and I head back to the guys' room on my own. I'm meeting Blaise for our usual study session and it's easier to get ready there than run between the rooms. I'm half way through my shower when Ash stalks in, a broody look on his face as he stops in front of the sink and stares at me.

He crosses his arms and just stands there for a second until I get self conscious and snap, "What? You coming in or not?"

He raises an eyebrow at me. "Not. Hurry up, I've got you to myself for the night and I've made plans."

Plans? I rinse the soap from my body quickly. "Are we going somewhere? Have you decided to kill Atticus because I should warn you I've promised Avery I'd try to stop you from doing that."

He scoffs at me, grabbing a towel and flinging the shower door open. "Don't talk about him, he has nothing to do with my plans and I don't want him ruining my mood."

I step into the towel as he holds it open, a little weirded out by how he's acting. "Are you going to tell me what we're going to be doing then?"

When I reach for my pajamas he grabs my hand, tugging me out the door. "My plan is you naked in my bed for the whole night to myself. I don't want to talk about my sister or that dickhead Crawford."

Oh. That sounds... perfect and not at all what I thought was happening. I let him tug the towel away from my now dry body and he leads me over to his bed. I climb up and wait while he strips off to join me. He's not in any rush, he folds each item and leaves them on the chair by his bed, and I find myself happy enough to just watch him.

When he lays down I tuck myself in against his chest, my head over his heart and one leg sliding over his. It's the fucking perfect way to spend the night together.

We're both silent and still for a minute, soaking each other in, and then his hands slowly start to move. They're sinful as they stroke over my body, like he's got all the time in the world to touch me. He focuses on sweeping up and down my back, a soothing gesture and nothing sexual about it, but then his fingers start slipping and brushing over the slight swell of my boobs from where I'm pressed up against him, or slipping between my thighs when he curves his palm over my ass. Never enough to properly arouse me, just the little light petting that keeps me on edge.

He's a fucking tease.

When he pulls his knee up, splitting my legs open just enough that the tip of his finger can brush through the lips of my pussy then he moves away again, I snarl at him.

“Either touch me or don’t, quit teasing.”

He smirks at me. “It’s never enough, is it Mouny? You always want more.”

My cheeks heat and I huff at him but he chuckles at me, finally plunging two fingers deep into my pussy and murmuring praises when I instinctively clench around them. “Good girl, you keep that up and I might let you come.”

The flush on my cheeks deepens, there’s something about him praising me like he owns me that sets my blood on fire. I hum as I lean up, kissing him as I roll my hips against his hand, desperate for a little more friction.

“I want some truths, Mouny. If you’re good and give them to me without fussing, I’ll play with this wet pussy and make you come so hard we’ll have to change the sheets afterwards. If you give me all of the details, even the ones you would normally hide, I’ll let you ride my cock. You can be on top and take it however you want.”

Huh.

Ash is usually the most demanding of my guys in bed, never relinquishing the control or letting me call the shots. It might make it worth whatever the fuck he’s going to ask. He moves so his fingers start to slip out of me and I scowl at him.

“Yes, ok, fine. Whatever, ask me. I owe you from last year anyway.”

He makes these little appreciative noises under his breath, the type that have me secretly preening for him, and his fingers press up firmly back inside me again. A little gasp tears out of my throat and he looks at me with hooded eyes, his lip almost curling into a lusty snarl.

“Tell me where the Jackal lives.”

I groan at him. If I hadn’t been preparing myself for the worst that would have probably killed the mood but he knows exactly how I like to be touched, where to sweep his fingers and just how far he can push me.

“The old bank in the slums. It was built in the 1860’s and there’s a warren of underground vaults. The walls down there are reinforced steel and concrete so it’s strong enough to hold off an army of bombs and bullets. He sleeps in one of the biggest vaults and he modified it so the door locks from the inside as well as the outside.”

He purrs at me, his other hand stroking over my cheek lovingly. “How do

you get in? If he's in there and it's locked, how do you get in?"

Fuck. It sounds suspiciously like he's making plans to go find the Jackal himself, but I let it go for now. "You unlock it. It's old and impossible to change the combination but the Jackal never told anyone what it is. Ever."

He hums under his breath, and curves his hand so his palm can brush against my clit, just a little and then he pulls away. My jaw snaps shut and I try to chase his palm but he stops me.

"How do you get in there then, Mouny? You have to know a way."

I blink a little, try to clear my head but it's so hard when he's touching me like this. He clicks his tongue at me like I'm disappointing him, goddammit, and I pull myself together.

"I watched him open it. I watched enough times that I know the combination. He doesn't know that I know, I'm sure of it, otherwise he would've switched vaults. It's long but I remember it. I remember fucking everything from my time there."

He presses up into my clit a little harder, enough that I actually shiver and shake. His hands should be fucking illegal.

"How do I get down there? If I needed to find this vault, how do I know which one it is?"

I groan and bury my face into his chest. I just want to come, for fuck's sake! "It's the biggest vault, he does his torture and maiming there too. It's on the bottom level, the only one down there and it has a secret set of stairs, right at the end of the hall."

"Good girl." He whispers, and finally, finally, he lets me come, three fingers pressing deep into me and his palm grinds against me as I ride the waves of pleasure out.

When I finally stop shaking, I sit up and run a hand through my hair. I feel wrecked, like I always do, and I rock forward onto my hands to try to find my brains. Why the hell does he want to know that? He can't go down to the Bay by himself, this was a terrible fucking idea! He chuckles at me and I glance over my shoulder at the sound.

He's sitting up against the pillows in a sort of recline but half way to sitting up. He looks like a spoiled prince, like he's the black-souled prince of hell and here I am to serve him.

Well.

That kind of sounds perfect.

All of my reservations go out the freaking window. He gets tired of

waiting for my brains to stop leaking out of my head at the mere sight of him and his palm cracks me on the ass. “Well, get up here then, Mouny. You earned it.”

He sounds a little less smug when I slide down his cock in one go, the stretch still taking me a second to breathe past but, fuck me, he’s worth every inch. His hips roll up to meet mine and I tsk under my breath at him.

“You’re supposed to be laying back and taking it, Beaumont.” I gasp, aiming for stern but falling flat as he spreads one hand between my tits, inching up towards my throat, and the other grips my hip.

“No, I said you could take it however you want. If you want to be on top then I’ll fuck you like that. What the hell have those lazy fucks been teaching you?”

I grind my hips down into him, gasping and groaning, and he finally slides his palm around my throat, his fingers firmly finding their place and tugging me forward into his lips for another kiss.

When I try to move my hips again he tightens his hold on my hip, holding me still so he can pump his hips up, driving his dick into my wet pussy like he was made to fuck me so good. I moan like a wanton Mouny slut, and just take it, take every fucking inch and pump of his hips until I’m clenching around him like a vise, coming so hard I black out a little.

He grunts and shoves my hips back down, slamming me onto his cock as he comes, his teeth sinking into the hollow of my throat and his arms wrap around me until I’m surrounded by him.

I take a second to find myself, find my brains and my dignity, and then I snap at him, “If I have to go down to the Jackal’s lair to find you because you’ve taken off down there by yourself, Beaumont, I’m going to tear fucking *strips* off of you. You’ll wish you’d never been born.”

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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I throw myself back into studying, college scholarships still my top priority. What is the use of being this smart if I can't get someone else to pay for my education?

I pick Avery up from her dance class to walk back to our rooms for dinner. The guys are all running late from their sessions at the gym and after a full day of studying I'm antsy to move around.

Avery tucks her arm into mine, flicking her hair over her shoulder like a pro, and says, "It's much nicer having you come get me, Ash has turned into a snarling dick again. I knew his change of heart was too good to be true."

I groan. "Maybe you two need to sit down and sort... everything out. Stop being at each other's throats for a while. I know we'd all appreciate some calm."

She smooths a calm hand down the front of her shirt, pristine even though she's just spent two hours sweating and dancing her ass off. Fuck, still jealous. "I've tried. This is clearly one of his nonnegotiable issues from our childhood. Atticus wasn't even... that bad. I think now Joey's gone, he's found someone else to loathe being around me."

I nod, it makes sense. "And how are you feeling about Crawford?"

Ice. Pure fucking ice in her tone and she snaps, "He's not worth my time."

Yeah. I'm not sure I believe her and, fuck, I don't think she believes herself but if I've learned nothing else about her, Avery Beaumont is not fucking rational around the Crow. Their story is as dark and twisted as mine and I'm not going to judge them.

Ok, lie. I'm not going to judge Avery. I'm going to judge Crawford a

whole freaking lot.

We round the corner to the main staircase and find the way blocked by a crowd of students. It's not until Avery's arm tenses in mine that I spot Lauren standing with a girl that has to be related to Viola Ayres, they look so similar. Well, this girl is the preppy version of Viola. No badass streaks and piercings in sight.

"There they are! The former reigning Queens of Hannaford, we've been waiting for you to arrive."

Avery's eyes narrow at the word former. "Imogen, get the hell out of our way before I destroy your will to live. I've been bored lately, I need a new pet project."

A total lie, she barely sleeps with the workload we're now under, but she would never show the sheep that weakness.

Grief flashes over Imogen's face and I try to remember that this kid has just lost a parent. We should give her just a little bit of leeway. Lauren looks uncomfortable but she doesn't move away. I give her what I hope is a disappointed look but the flinch she gives me says it's probably just a little too murderous.

"Just tell me where my sister's body is. My mom needs the closure."

Avery's shoulders roll back, her arm in mine meaning my shoulders do too. "Your sister isn't dead. She's run off with her boyfriend, that's none of our concern. Move."

Imogen crosses her arms, pulling herself up and stares down her nose at us. Insolent little fuck, isn't she? The guys in the room grin and shift their weight on their feet like they're eager to tear us to pieces and I subtly shift myself in front of Avery.

If I have to kill them all then I will, fuck the cleanup.

"I know you guys are new around here, but you really don't want to do this with me." I say, and I catch Lauren's eyes. She shifts again, leaning in to whisper to Imogen but the girl just shakes her head.

Fuck it.

The guy closest to us takes a swing and I shove Avery back, ducking so he lurches forward from the momentum. Avery gasps, stumbling, but she doesn't hit the ground. I don't even notice why she hasn't hit the ground until the next guy reaches forward to grab me. My knife is in my hand, ready to stab him and end this shit now, when Harley grabs his fist midair and breaks his arm, the crack of his bones deafening.

Harley's big hands clamp over my hips and gently shoves me behind himself like I'm a delicate princess, not a crime lord with a deadly knife clinched in my hands ready to spill some blood. The guy with the broken arm is screaming and dry retching on the ground, and although the others look a little more wary, they haven't backed down. Fucking idiots.

"Well, come on then. If you're big enough to ambush my girl, you'd better hope you're big enough to take on me as well." He snaps, stripping his blazer off.

That gets some attention.

He's wearing his guns, the two of them strapped into his shoulder holsters and I know for a fact they're clean and loaded. If he wanted to, the whole fucking lot of them would be dead in minutes. I kind of wish Hannaford operated on the same rules as the Bay because fuck these rich little bitches. They have no fucking clue.

"Fucking mobster trash." Imogen spits, and Harley smirks.

"Yep, I'm the mobster trash that's going to bleed every last one of you gutless fucks out."

Avery steps up beside me and gives me a look. Right. We can't let him kill these guys, no matter how much they deserve it, because we have enough heat on us as is. Fuck.

I catch his wrist and Avery snaps, "Looks like we'll see you boys tonight at the Fight Club. I haven't attended in years, what are you sluts wearing to those things these days?"

One of the guys step forward and Harley rolls his eyes at him. "Really, Kettering? You wanna bleed that badly you can't wait for tonight?"

Kettering sneers, "You'll show up with your friends and fight dirty. I'd rather finish it here."

I snort at the fucking dickhead. "So, you'd rather your six to one instead of six to three? Good to know that you're aware of exactly how pathetic you lot are."

Harley chuckles at my smug tone. "I don't need backup, dickhead."

Avery arches a brow until they all start moving away. Lauren tries to flee but I grab her arm and wrench her into me until she has no choice but to look at me. Imogen stops and eyes Harley warily as he stands over us both, watching my back.

"I can't believe the girl who tried to befriend me in freshman year would be here today organizing a lynching." I say, my tone even but my face must



be all sorts of fucked up. I don't give a fuck, she needs to know just how fucking badly she's misread this situation.

You'd think the head in the box and the Butcher would have been a big enough warning.

"She's scared for her sister! Her dad has just been murdered!" Lauren shrieks, and I roll my eyes at her. Everyone else has moved away now, leaving her with no protection so she's back to being a terrified little girl, hiding behind her 'good intentions'. Fucking spare me the bullshit.

I grab my phone out and hit dial on Viola's number, switching it to speaker. She answers almost instantly, grumpy as hell.

"Who the fuck is dead now? Jackson is already speaking to Crawford!"

I interrupt her before Lauren gets anything important out of her. "Your sister just tried to jump Avery and me. I choose not to kill the little bitch, so you owe me one."

She swears viciously, snapping, "She never did have any fucking sense! I'll call her now."

Imogen's eyes flare and I smirk at her. "She's right here if you'd like to tear strips from her. I wouldn't mind hearing that."

Before Viola can speak Imogen cries out, "Well, if you didn't run off with some guy then maybe dad would still be here! Why are you siding with trash from the Bay?"

Viola hangs up, then Imogen's phone rings. Fine. I guess they have their own conversation to have but Lauren isn't being let off so easily. I grab her by the arm and pull her into the alcove, where there's no chance anyone passing by will be able to hear our conversation.

"Your dad is a dirty cop. He's bought and paid for, and he's chosen the wrong side. Senator Ayres' death lands at his feet. Get your fucking head around that, then make the smart choice and stay the fuck away from my family. You shouldn't be warning me away, the person who needs to run is you."

"I still don't understand why you didn't just kill them there and get it over with." Blaise drawls, lounging in front of the TV in our room like a freaking cat. Avery's already snarked at him for lying around in his underwear but the

snark just bounces off of him.

I ignore the comment and shovel the pizza Avery handmade into my mouth like I'm a starved Mounthy kid. I mean, I'm totally not one these days but old habits die hard.

"Maybe because I'm currently averaging three hours of sleep a night as it is, Morrison! I can't clean up anything else for you guys, I'm at my fucking limit!" Avery snarls, and I get a bad case of the guilts.

"What else can I do, Aves?"

She gives me a look. "Nothing. You do more than enough. Maybe if the guys all stopped, I don't know, running off to hack bodies to pieces without telling us, my job would be a little easier."

Blaise pulls a face. "I had nothing to do with that. I just helped keep Star busy, you can't put that shit on me. Besides, you're just pissed Ash got to call your boyfriend out for being sloppy. If he says this place is clean, he should be fucking sure it is."

I narrow my eyes at him and he gives me an unrepentant look, the dick. Avery goes back to scrubbing at the dishes in the sink like a crazy woman and I keep my mouth shut. I'm not stupid, poking at a cleaning Beaumont is not a smart move.

Harley arrives back from his swim practice, his hair still wet and the smell of chlorine clinging to him. He grabs a slice of pizza from my plate and kisses my head before eating half of it in a single bite. "What's the problem now? You guys don't have to come tonight if you're busy. Ash will watch my back."

Like fuck am I missing out on this. I don't have to say a word, Harley reads it on my face. "Just saying, babe. I know how badly you're freaking out about not being finished with your assignments yet... you fucking *freak*."

I smirk at him. "Jealous, much? There's no way you're talking your way out of it; I'm watching you and I'm going to enjoy the hell out of it."

Avery pulls a face. "Stop flirting. I don't need to hear about your weird kinks, Mounthy. I can't think of anything worse than watching Harley pummel some guy, ugh. Have we decided what the dress code is yet? Are we going there as a gang, matching leather jackets? We should get patches or something. I feel like we all look great in black."

We'd have to wear white, and it's not exactly a subtle color, but I keep that to myself, rolling my eyes instead. "Just throw something on! It's not a charity gala, Aves."

She gives me a look. “Mouny, I don’t throw things on. We can’t all look stunning in ripped jeans and band shirts.”

Liar, she’s freaking *devastating* in everything, even dressed up like a Mouny, but I give her a look until she grabs one of her perfectly tailored coats and slides it on. “Where the hell is Ash? We’re going to be late!”

Harley huffs at her and grabs another slice. “There’s no such thing as late to fight club, Floss. You show up when you’re ready and then wipe the floor with the posing dickheads.”

She rolls her eyes in return, smiling when he kisses her cheek sweetly. “I’d rather we get this over and done with. Now, stop avoiding my question; where’s Ash?”

Harley grimaces. “He’s already down there, he went straight from track.”

I jump up from my chair, Avery cackling at the look on my face. If I’ve missed out on Ash fighting, I’m gonna be *pissed*. “Morrison, throw some pants on; we gotta go.”

He huffs at me, like it’s such an inconvenience, but he pulls on a pair of ripped jeans and throws his leather jacket over his tank. I shove my feet into my cherry Docs and we’re out the door. I tuck myself under Harley’s arm and Blaise grabs my hand, laughing and messing around with Harley as we make our way down to the chapel. Avery trails behind us, her phone out and her lip between her teeth. Fuck. I need to figure out how to clear the board for her, take out just enough of her problems that I get my ice queen bestie back.

Blaise drops my hand to answer a text right as we get to the chapel, and the guy at the door startles when he sees us all walking up together, his eyes wide and panicked. “Arbour! I wasn’t expecting you to show. This isn’t really your scene anymore, is it?”

Harley’s arm drops away from my shoulder to grab my hand, his fingers threading through mine. “Shut your mouth, Smith, before it gets you in shit.”

The guy’s eyes flick down to me. “Uh, girls aren’t supposed to come in man, you know that.”

I smirk at him, dark and deadly. “You gonna keep me out, Smith?”

Maybe he has some survival instincts after all because he gulps and steps away from the door, ushering us in with his eyes fixed firmly to the ground.

There has to be at least fifty guys bare chested and grunting, and another hundred standing around taking bets.

The room stinks of sweaty boys, blood, and desperation. Not something that’s the norm for my time at Hannaford but Mounts Bay has made me

immune. Avery scrunches her nose up and I laugh at her.

“Gross, right? I thought rich people would sweat some ritzy cologne or some shit.” I murmur, and she snorts at me as she tucks her arm into mine.

“I wish. I’ve spent most of my life surrounded by those idiot boys and they’ve never smelt that good.”

That’s a freaking lie, my three smell amazing. I have no clue what she’s talking about but that’s beside the point. Harley leads us over to take a seat in the same place I sat last time, when he’d beaten Hillson for smacking me around back when I had no clue he liked me. He winks at me, thinking the same thing, and I blush like a swooning fucking virgin.

Lord help me.

Then he strips down to his shorts, the tiny ones he wears to boxing, and cups my jaw, kissing me dirty and raw.

The first guy to step up to the challenge is unconscious in under a minute. Fucking *pathetic*. I lose interest pretty fucking fast and search around the room until I find the other idiot down here looking for blood. He has his back to us, he probably hasn’t even seen we’re here yet, and he’s straddling some guy as he lays into him. It’s a fucking sight to see.

Ash finally stops smashing his fist into the guy’s face, sweat dripping down his chest, and sweet baby Jesus, I kinda wanna lick him. He glances up and notices we’ve arrived, smirking like the cocky dick he is.

“Give me a freaking break.” Avery mumbles under her breath at me, her eyes rolling but the tiniest of smiles on her face. I give her a sheepish smile and she giggles. It’s a fucking magical sound.

Ash gets up and saunters over to us, wiping his face on his shirt. His knuckles are bloody and raw but the energy around him is buzzing with the kind of exhilaration you can only get from the high of winning a fight. I feel the flutters start in my stomach and I’m kind of tempted to challenge someone to a fight myself.

Blaise cracks a joke and strips out of his jacket to give to Ash, who takes it and pulls it on, a wide grin on his face. I decide right here and now that when all of the bullshit with the Jackal is over, we’re going to make nights down at the cage fights in the Bay a regular thing. If this is what it takes to get the tension and bloodlust to a manageable level in Ash then we’ll buy fucking stock in the Dive.

Avery catches my eye and grins with me, totally unconcerned about the fighting happening around us. She’s that happy that her brother has mellowed

out. Good. Life is returning to normal, thank fuck.

Harley finishes off the second guy, barely even panting, and motions for the next one. At this rate we'll be out of here in under an hour. Not such a bad thing.

I'm definitely sleeping in the guys' room tonight.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

---

I'm proud to say we make it back to the guys' room before I rip Ash's pants off and swallow him whole. It's fucking hard, damn near impossible, but I manage to contain myself.

Blaise complains the entire way back, outvoted and sleeping in my bed alone tonight, but for once Avery is giggling and snarking at him with us.

"Isn't there a camera in that room? Just this once, I'll let you jerk off in the shower, Morrison." She laughs, unlocking the bedroom door and winking at me. I blush just a little from where I'm sandwiched between Ash and Harley, but I give her a little wave too, barely managing to contain a squeak when Harley palms my ass and squeezes.

I fumble with the keys on the way in but no one notices, Ash is too busy snarking at Harley about sharing while my golden god kisses his way down my neck in the most distracting way.

I stumble into the room and out of Harley's arms, catching my breath for a second and he rips his shirt over his head, pausing when he sees all of the blood covering him in sweaty streaks.

"I'm going to wash this off first." He grimaces, stomping off. Well, fuck.

Ash chuckles at me, my eyes snapping back over to find him standing in his boxers by his bed. Fuck, that was quick. "Come on, Mouny. I'll keep you entertained while he's off being a gentleman."

Lord knows what gets into me, but I stare him straight in the eye as I strip off slowly, not making a show of it but just slowly revealing myself to him. It doesn't matter that he's seen it all before, that he's fucked me three times this week, he stares at every inch of my skin as it's revealed like he's never seen it before, like he can't get enough of me.

Like he's as desperate as I am, always, never-ending, fucking out of his mind for me.

"Get that ass on this bed now, Mouny, before I come down there and get you."

I shiver at his tone and hesitate just a little. I might like the punishment he gives me, I fucking bet I will, but I'm too fucking desperate for him tonight to wait. Maybe next time.

The second my knee hits the mattress Ash yanks me down and into his arms until we're tangled together, limbs everywhere in the fucking best way. I love this relaxed side of him, the smug grins and dark chuckles, it's fucking perfect. His hands are possessive as he strokes over my body, squeezing and pinching, even throwing the odd slap in, and, fuck me, I'm owned by this man. *Owned*. I could lay here and make out with him all fucking night, but he has different plans for our evening.

I'm completely distracted by the feel of him on top of me because the next thing I know, there's lubed up fingers in my ass and he's caught me the fuck off guard.

Ash laughs as I gasp into our kiss, the whole thing turning into a moan. I sound fucking obscene, my cheeks are on fire and I kind of hope Harley doesn't come out and add to my shame by seeing me writhing on the bed.

I give the smug dick a half-hearted glare. "Why, exactly, are you so obsessed with my ass? Your dick is never going in my ass. Never. Get rid of that idea now, Beaumont."

The slow smirk he gives me has me dripping for him in the *worst* way. "I thought you were brave, Mouny? Sounds like you're back to being *jumpy* to me."

Fuck him.

He's trying to goad me into saying yes and the worst part is the asshole is succeeding. Ugh. He grins at me like I've already agreed to it so I kiss him again, biting his lip and pulling his hair just a bit to get even.

It only makes him more frantic.

I swear, I've been fucking brainwashed by his dick or something because I'm all in. Fuck it, what's the worst that could happen? I'm dumb enough to say this to him, and he rolls his freaking eyes at my dramatics.

"You need to spend less time with Morrison, he's rubbing off on you."

Well, yeah, that's kind of the point. I look over my shoulder to quirk an eyebrow at him and he slaps my ass. "Have I ever fucked you without you

coming over and over again?”

I gulp. “No.”

“Well, ass up then, Mounnty.”

He manhandles me around until I’m face down on the bed. When I grunt in protest at him, he bites my shoulder, licking and sucking at the spot until I’m sure the mark will be visible a freaking mile away. He shoves a pillow under my hips and pours even more lube on my ass, stroking a firm hand down my spine as if he’s settling me but also reminding me that I’m *his*.

As if he’s worried I’ll tap out, he doesn’t waste any time lining up, pushing in slowly but not stopping until he bottoms out. There’s a burn but it’s not so bad. Then he moves and, fuck yes, that’s what I need.

The sound I make isn’t quite human.

He chuckles at me, though he’s breathless and gasping a little. His hips start to move, I’m gushing fucking *everywhere*, and he drops down to hold himself over me, fisting his hand in my hair to jerk my head back and kiss me like he’s trying to crawl up inside me.

I could die a happy fucking Mounnty right now.

Ash grabs my arm and rolls us both until I find myself staring at Harley, naked and dripping wet from the shower. His eyes are like a searing brand on my skin as he takes in my flushed cheeks, trembling thighs, and my dripping pussy.

“How did I know you were going to be the one to talk her into this?” He mumbles, and Ash laughs as he hooks his arm around my leg and spreads me wide open.

“Don’t make me say it.” He grunts back, biting down on my shoulder and I don’t know what the fuck they’re talking about, words are too fucking hard to process right now. All I know is I want *more*.

I don’t even realize I’ve said it out loud until Harley joins us on the bed and catches my face in his hands. “Whatever you want, babe.”

Then he kisses me, his tongue a slow but demanding stroke against mine, and two of his fingers push inside me until I gasp. His palm grinds down on my clit and I fucking *break*.

A strangled sound comes out of me as I see stars, my body clenching down around Ash and Harley’s fingers, and Ash groans as he comes with me, his hips jerking and grinding into my ass.

Harley gives me just long enough to catch my breath, and for Ash to pull out and head to the bathroom to clean up, before he has me on my back,



thighs spread, his forehead pressed against mine as he lines up and pushes in.

“You have no idea how fucking hot you are when you come, do you?” He grunts, kissing me with more teeth than tongue.

He doesn't ease into it, just fucks me hard and desperate until my back is arching off of the bed and I'm screaming again, so loud I'm sure the entire boy's dorm is getting a show, but I come so hard I don't give a fuck.

Ash cleans me up and Harley carries me to his bed, ever the gentleman, because the wet spot is more of a puddle and none of us can be fucked changing the sheets. Once I'm firmly pinned between the two of them Ash hits the lights and I try to focus on sleep, not the delicious soreness that's taken over my body.

I'm still shaking, just a little, when Harley and Ash's phone both buzz. Harley snickers like a dick as he shows me the text from Blaise.

*I fucking hate you both.*

Avery declares she needs me to herself on Sunday and the guys all disappear to beat each other up or drink themselves to death or something. I didn't pay enough attention to the details, clearly.

We spread out college brochures and scholarship applications out on the table in our room and then spend a couple of hours going over our options. I feel kind of bleak about the whole thing, like it could all slip through our fingers at any fucking second because of the war and Senior's psychosis, but Avery refuses to leave anything up to chance.

We can't decide on a school.

“I just think we need to stick to an Ivy League school, Lips. They got to be where they are through their exemplary standards for education.”

I groan at her. “Or, they enjoy pretending they offer something more than state schools do so they can triple their prices. I just don't see it. If I don't get a scholarship, I'm not going there.”

Avery huffs out a breath at me. “Mouny, you're rich enough to pay for it. I will pay for it. God, Ash and Harley will probably duel it out over which one of them is allowed to pay for it for you. Money isn't something we're concerned about, you need to adjust your thinking.”

I take a deep, deep breath. “I've been too poor in the past to *ever* stop

worrying about money. I could have a billion in the bank, I'm still not going to want to spend it. I've gone hungry too many times to forget that feeling."

She rolls her eyes at me again and starts to sort through the papers, making little piles which I'm sure are cataloged perfectly in her head. She seems happier today, less bogged down, and I decide to bite the fucking bullet and just ask. "So, have you heard from Atticus lately? Is he the reason you're smiling like a freaking siren today?"

She cringes and shoots me a worried look. Fuck.

I groan and slap a hand over my face. "Seriously? What now?"

Avery fidgets with her pencil and I do my best not to cringe at her. She has such tight control of her body language the majority of the time, I know when she's fussing it must be fucking hell inside her head. "The attempt on the Jackal's life was unsuccessful."

I blink at her. "Uhm, yeah. I knew it would be. Why is that freaking you out so much? We always knew it would come down to us."

She bites her lip. "I might have... called Atticus and gloated a little. In a more... official way. The Coyote and the Tiger both heard it and have assumed there's tension between you two."

I roll my eyes. "And you're worried because you think I'll be angry? Aves, the whole fucking world is going to shit. I'm sure the Boar called and said the same damn thing to him. I don't give a fuck what you say to him, he already knows where I stand."

Her shoulders roll back. "What? Where do you stand?"

My eyes flick to the door as if Ash will have some sort of psychic premonition that I'm about to talk in Atticus's favor and storm in here to climb up my ass... in a not fun and sexy way. "I told him he has my vote. If you two sort out your issues, then I vote him into the family. Harley did the same."

The coffee cup in her hands slips to splash coffee on the college brochures in front of her but she barely notices. What the fuck is going on in her head today? "Harley did the same? Harley Arbour gave Atticus his vote? My cousin, Harley?"

I stand to grab a towel and mop it up. She just stares at me blankly until I sigh and answer her. "Uh yeah, the only Harley we both know. Atticus explained himself and we both... like him. Kind of. I mean, I don't want to kill him anymore so that counts as liking him, right?"

Avery grabs a handful of ruined brochures and shoves them into the bin,

grabbing her cleaning supplies and getting to work on the mess she's made. I watch her for a minute, moving my books out of her way and saving what I can from her destructive cleaning wrath.

"I just feel like there's this... gap between us now. Like, the guy I've been waiting around for, hoping he'd notice me, he's gone. He never even existed. I don't know what to do with that." She mumbles, and I nod.

"I kind of think this one is better though, Aves. The guy you were thinking of, the clean-cut gentleman, our world would have eaten him alive. He spoke to me about you and, honestly, the guy is crazy for you. I'm not saying you forgive him, fuck that, I'm just saying maybe you should stop being so angry at yourself for still wanting him. Or even wanting him more now. Just think about it."

She scrubs at the table a little harder but I let it drop. Maybe I've gotten through to her, maybe not. I'm sure she'll work this all out at some point.

Maybe.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

---

**W**e arrive at the ranch on Christmas Eve and I head straight to bed, ready to hate every fucking second of the day but fully aware that I'm not going to be left alone for a single second of it.

Sometime after midnight, I come aware to the feel of Harley's fingers brushing my hair away from the nape of my neck, dropping gentle kisses there as he goes. When I wriggle in place he whispers, "Shh," into my ear and slips a necklace around my neck.

My eyes pop open but the room is too dark to see anything.

Blaise's arms tighten around me, pulling me in and pressing me close, and I let myself fall back asleep.

I'm woken again hours later to the smell of coffee being wafted under my nose and I smile before my eyes even open. Avery grins down at me, barely batting an eyelid at the jumble of naked limbs I'm cocooned in.

I smile at her like she's my freaking soulmate, because coffee, and she grins down at me, happier than I've seen her in weeks. I scramble out of the bed, carefully so I don't wake Harley because he's the only one who couldn't sleep through an earthquake, and I slip a shirt on, whichever one is closest. When I step out of the room, trailing behind Avery I feel the weight of the necklace Harley had slipped on me and pull it out from my shirt to look at.

I try not to get choked up but, seriously, is he trying to break my heart here?!

Sitting in my palm is a tiny heart locket, identical to his mother's one, so similar it's only when I turn the locket over to read the inscription that I know he's gotten me one of my own.

*Mine.*

*To the end.*

I almost turn on my heel to go and jump on him but Avery snorts at my lovestruck face and I remember that we have plans.

French-toast-with-sprinkles plans.

We share the kitchen while I cook. I'm not great at French toast but this morning is for the two of us so I can't drag Harley over to do it for me. Avery grins and chatters away, totally content in her new Christmas morning routine.

I love it.

When we have food and, most importantly, more coffee, we sit and solve all our problems, theoretically.

"I still think if we go after the Jackal ourselves it should be in small teams. I know you say you could slip in and out easier without us but... you can't go alone. Take Illi at least." Avery argues. It's an old argument, one we have every single planning session, so it almost feels like it's a part of the routine.

"I'll get distracted if I have to watch Illi as well. It's better if I go alone."

She shakes her head. "If we really are a democracy like you say, you will be outvoted seven-to-one every time. Or, well, maybe Diarmuid will side with you, he seems like the ass-kissing type. He'd probably do it just to try to drive a wedge between you and Illi."

I snort. "There is no driving a wedge between us, we're as close as two people in a non-sexual relationship are. I'd kill and die for that man... I mean, I have. repeatedly."

Avery hums as she takes a sip. "You never have told me the full story of Odie's... sale."

I shudder. "And I won't. It's too fucking... *bad*. Let's just say the fact she can smile and laugh is a fucking miracle to me every damn time I see it. She's... she's a good person. One of the best."

Avery nods. "I agree. We've kept in touch, she worries about you a lot. I thought she might be jealous of how close you and Illi are, especially with how much we've needed him lately, but she always asks about you first."

I see the pleased look on her face. "That gets her in your good books, doesn't it?"

She rolls her eyes at me. "Well, obviously! You need more people looking out for you, lord knows you don't care about yourself enough."

I scoff at her and wipe my mouth, sure I've dripped my syrupy goodness

everywhere. “I care about myself! Everything I’ve done has been to get myself out, that kind of means I look out for myself a lot.”

She smooths a hand down the front of her robe. “And yet the second you inducted Harley, you threw yourself in front of him at every chance. You risk yourself without thought the second one of us is in danger, so yes, I’m very happy there’s someone else out there who would attempt to rein you in a bit.”

I roll my eyes but the sound of doors closing, feet stomping, and, well, bitching lets me know our planning session is over.

It's time to endure Christmas.

Avery grabs my hand and squeezes. “It’s like all of my hard work just gets wiped out. All of the joy and life sucked out of you in a split second.”

I shrug and give her a wry grin. “Sorry. I just hate this fucking day. It’s getting easier but I still fucking loathe it.”

Harley rounds the corner and grins when he sees me, kissing Avery’s cheek sweetly before grabbing my face and drawing me in for a blisteringly hot kiss. Avery snorts at us both and gets up to organize food for the guys. Harley only lets me go when Blaise punches his arm, snarking each other out.

“It’s Christmas, stop fighting over Lips like she’s a joint gift, it’s gross.” Avery snaps, and I laugh at the looks they give her.

I kiss Blaise with the same fire I’d given Harley, it’s only fair, and he groans into the kiss, pulling me into his body to grind on me right here in the freaking dining room. I’m dumb enough to let him.

“Avery will cancel Christmas if you fuck the Mouny on the table, Morrison. I’m sure Lips is secretly hoping for that so fight your urges.” Ash drawls, and I break away from Blaise to grin at him, twisting in Blaise’s arms. He doesn’t care, only rubs his morning wood against my ass instead.

“Bah humbug.”

Ash smirks at me and draws me in for his Christmas morning kiss, leaning in so I’m squished between them both. Yum.

“Your Christmas present is on our bed. I didn’t think Avery would want to watch you open it.” He says as he nibbles his way down my neck, more bites than kisses. I can’t freaking breathe when he does that.

Blaise grunts when I arch into him. “Mines up there too, but for less pervy reasons.”

Nope, still can’t think like this. Harley comes out of the kitchen with a plate piled high, and snaps, “Don’t fucking ruin Christmas by setting Floss off. Get off her.”

I shoot him a look and he only quirks an eyebrow at me, waving a tub of cherry ice cream at me like it'll make up for the whole day.

I mean, it will, but he doesn't need to know that.

We enjoy breakfast together. I enjoy watching the pure, unadulterated satisfaction on Avery's face as she fusses over the guys, handing out presents and pouring coffee. She loves every freaking second of the day and that alone makes it worth getting up for.

Sometime after lunch, a full spread with Turkey and all the trimmings because Avery is nothing but a perfectionist, I'm lying half on the couch in the reception room and half on Harley when a car pulls up. I groan, sure it's Illi and Odie here to celebrate this god awful day, but Harley tenses as he cranes his head up to check the car out.

"Who the fuck is that?" He hisses, sliding out from under me and stalking over to the door.

"Oh, for fuck's sake." He snaps and opens the door to the Stag.

I sit up and see them staring at each other, Harley looking like he wants to rip the Stag's face off. Avery scoffs from the armchair she's perched in. Ash and Blaise are watching shitty Christmas movies and getting wasted in the theatre room.

"Merry Christmas, cousin. I was hoping we could have a chat, nothing too serious."

I shoot Avery a look. What the fuck is going on now?

Harley holds the door, his arm is blocking the Stag's path and looks over his shoulder at me. I shrug. What can it hurt?

"You know it's polite to call ahead." Avery says in her sweetly poisonous voice, and he gives her the famous charming O'Cronin grin. It's a sight to see and Avery jerks back in her seat. Huh.

"I knew Harley would tell me to fuck off if I tried, better to come in person so he can tell I'm sincere."

Avery quirks an eyebrow. "And are you sincere? I thought the last O'Cronin with a soul died in front of his son years ago."

The Stag grimaces, rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly. "Look, I know you all think we're shit. I'll take that, Liam and the rest were shit. But I'm not. There's a lot of us who live by a very different code and now that I've taken over, the code is going to be the family way."

Harley sits next to me again, rubbing the soft organic, fair-trade cotton of my new yoga pants Avery bought me, because nothing makes that girl

happier than spending too much fucking money on clothes for me.

The Stag watches this interaction with shrewd eyes. “This is a family conversation, not business. Can we do this alone?”

Harley shakes his head. “Lips and Avery are family, Stag.”

I sigh. “We can go.”

Harley’s hand clamps down. “No.”

The Stag, Aodhan, shrugs. “I’d always heard you were difficult, Wolf. Too hard to speak to, guarded by the Jackal, bloodthirsty and cold. I thought my cousin was insane for leaving the family for you but now I see the charm.”

I roll my eyes because I know exactly how that is going to go down with Harley.

He reaches over to grab me by the hips and he lifts me easily from the couch and into his lap. His hands stay firmly fixed to my hips, like a brand, and his voice is dripping with poison when he says, “Are you here to try to fuck my girlfriend? I’ve killed people for less, cousin.”

Aodhan scoffs at the way Harley spits the word cousin at him and I ready myself for the fight that’s inevitably going to happen.

Instead, he leans back in the chair and shrugs. “I get it, she’s your girl and our family history says I’m the biggest fucking danger in the room to her. That’s why I’m here. You haven’t taken up my offer of help and I want to clear some shit up so you know where we stand.”

Hm. I slide off of Harley’s lap and I’m a little shocked when he doesn’t argue with me over it. His eyes are intense on Aodhan, even as he threads his fingers through mine.

Avery’s phone rings and she steps out. Some of the tension in Aodhan eases.

“You have three minutes to convince me.”

Aodhan’s eyes grow intense. “Your Ma isn’t the only woman who has been hurt by the family. I would have left years ago but I have younger siblings. I decided that instead of abandoning them, I’d fucking fix it for them. Our family is supposed to be strong, rich, unshakable but under Liam’s guidance it’s just a fucking mess. I’ve cleaned house.”

He rubs a hand over the back of his neck and blows out a breath. “Look, all of our uncles have been dealt with. Most of our aunts were already dead, there’s only two left. I’m doing my fucking best. I don’t want you coming back and taking over because the family needs direction and trust, you don’t



have that for any of us. I'm here because I need the Wolf to vouch for me with the Boar so I can get the businesses back on track. None of us can go legit, it's not in our blood. Being the Stag means I can get us back to where we're not worried about putting food on the tables again. If you don't want to help me, that's fine. I just thought I'd make you aware of what's really going on here."

Fuck.

Harley stares at him for a second, his eyes intense, and then he looks at me. "What happens if you vouch for him and he fucks us over?"

I shrug. "I can handle it. I have more than enough favors to get us through... pretty much anything."

Harley's jaw clenches like it always does when I mention the favors but he nods. "What work are you going to do? Have you inducted the whole family already?"

Aodhan blows out a breath. "I've got the entire family inducted, and there's eight of us old enough to work. I was a bit worried that wouldn't be enough but I guess the Wolf has proven you can do it alone and still make it, as long as you have enough connections."

He leans forward in his seat, and I finally see some sort of resemblance between the cousins, the fierce determination they both have. "I'm not asking for a handout. I'm telling you I'm going to do whatever it takes to make things right and keep my family safe. Part of that is fixing things with Harley. If you offered to vouch for me in exchange for me never speaking to him again, I wouldn't take it. I couldn't help him when we were kids, but I can now and I'm going to."

I hold his eyes with mine for a second longer and then I nod. "If Harley wants me to, I'll speak to the Boar for you."

Harley squints at his cousin for a second longer. "You kill them all yourself? All of the uncles?"

Aodhan grimaces and shrugs. "Jack helped. They did the same to his girl as they did to your Ma, he hasn't been right since. I'm trying to keep him stable but... he might not make it through this."

Harley winces. "Amara? They took her?"

Aodhan nods. "Killed herself before Jack could get to her. Liam decided he was getting weak about her because he'd taken on a legitimate job to get an apartment for her."

He moves to stare at his toes for a second then he grits out between his

teeth, “She was pregnant. Jack was just trying to keep her safe from our family and the Bay. She lost the baby when they attacked her. Jack’s not right.”

I don’t know who Jack is to Harley, where on the family tree he lies, but the wheeze that comes out of Harley makes my chest hurt. I slip my hand onto his knee and squeeze, trying to offer him some sort of reassurance though I know it all feels so fucking trivial.

“Liam deserved a much more painful death.” He finally mutters, and Aodhan nods.

“He did but I had to get him out of the way before he did something to you. He was already in talks with the Jackal over the entire thing.”

Fucking Liam O’Cronin. “Do you know where the treacherous fuck is buried? I feel the need to dig him up and piss on him.”

Harley roars with laughter, pulling me into his side and kissing the top of my head. “You wouldn’t. You bitch me out for taking my morning piss while you’re in the shower.”

I blush, goddammit. “Fine, I’ll get Blaise to do it for me. He’d fucking love that shit.”

I’m trying to enjoy my last night at the Ranch, half-naked making out with Harley in my giant bed, when the car pulls up outside. When we hear the crunching noise of tires on the gravel driveway, we both freeze. Then the front door opens and slams, and I scramble out of Harley’s lap to find out who the fuck is interrupting our break now.

I don’t get to the window before the yelling starts.

“If you think you can just show up here and demand to see her, you’re more of a fucking idiot than I thought.” hisses Ash, and it’s pretty clear who it is.

Harley groans behind me. “Why the fuck is that dickhead here? Has he got a fucking brain?”

There’s a quiet knock and then Avery breezes into my room, scoffing at Harley’s shirtless state. I’m wearing it, so she can’t see whether or not I’m wearing underwear, thank fuck.

“I need you to get Ash back in here so I can talk to Atticus by myself. He

has... that information I told you about.”

Ugh.

Right.

The information about the Boar and his dirty biker world, to see if there’s a chance that’s where my DNA has come from. Harley’s eyes narrow at us both, unhappy we’re keeping secrets, but I just nod at her.

“I mean, I’ll try to get him back inside but you know as well as I do Ash Beaumont kinda does whatever the hell he wants, consequences be fucked.” I say, and she arches an eyebrow at me.

“Just text him for a booty call. I’m sure Harley will take one for the team and step out while you keep him busy.”

I blush so bad and Harley must be in a mood about being interrupted because he snarks back at her, “What’s the point in the orgy sized bed if we don’t use it for one? You can’t be that naive about what happens in here, Floss.”

Kill me now.

I give him a glare and grab Avery’s arm to pull her out of the room and downstairs before she guts her cousin. I’m too freaking tempted to let her.

I forget I have no pants on until we’re both out the door and Atticus raises his eyebrows at the sight of me. Ash’s head whips around to see who’s interrupting their screaming match and his eyes darken as they take in my obviously tousled state.

“For fuck’s sake.” He snaps and stalks over, covering me from Atticus’s view and I roll my eyes at him.

“Please, he’s so fucking obsessed with Aves he wouldn’t give a shit about my ugly legs.” I mumble when he glares at me and nudges me back into the house.

“A fucking monk would be tempted by your legs. Now get the fuck back upstairs and let me deal with that asshole.”

I grab his arm and tug him through the door with me, shooting Avery a look. “She’s a big girl, she can fight her own battles.”

Ash sneers at me but I just roll my eyes at him. Fucking arrogant assholes.

I get him back up to our room, snarling and pissy, and he joins Harley by the window.

“I called Morrison. He’s down there in case Atticus tries anything.” Harley says, pulling a shirt back over his head. I roll my eyes at them both

and then, fuck it, I join them.

Avery's back is so goddamn straight Atticus must be saying some bullshit to her.

"Can I shoot him? I feel like I should shoot the dick." Harley mutters, and Ash snorts.

"Do us all a favor and shoot him in the dick. That will solve everything."

I roll my eyes at them again. "She's stronger than us all, she's got this under control."

Atticus takes a step forward and Ash tenses, probably fucking planning on jumping out the window to her rescue, but then Atticus holds out a manilla file and a small, beautifully wrapped box.

"The fuck is that?" Harley snaps, and I swear I'm going to strain my fucking eyeballs at this rate.

"Clearly it's a freaking Christmas present. It's not big enough for a pair of shoes so clearly he missed that memo."

Harley is relaxed enough to chuckle but Ash acts like he hasn't heard me, glaring down at Atticus with all the rage and fire he used to throw at his brother. Avery is right, he's just found a new target for all that loathing.

Atticus turns on his heel and gets back into his Bentley. Avery opens the box and stares into it for a second. When she turns and stalks back into the house there are tears in her eyes.

"I'll gut that worthless fuck." Ash snarls, and I know things are only going to get worse before they get better.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

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I'm beyond angry at myself for taking so long, but two days before the Hannaford family dinner I finally finish all of the assignments and workbooks for my classes. I climb into my bed that night with the feeling like I have one less thing stalking me. Maybe I should start on Avery's homework and lighten her load a bit? She'd probably be happier with that, than anything else I could do to help.

Harley climbs into bed with me after his swim practice, risking Avery's wrath by touching me until I'm shaking and desperate for his dick. I do my best to not do anything with the guys in our room but his hands are intoxicating and I end up spread out on my bed in no time.

He stays the night, ignoring Avery's scathing tirade about the sex stench in the room, and I walk down to breakfast the next morning tucked under his arm grinning like an freaking idiot.

"The two of you are sickening, try and contain your hormones so I can eat." Avery hisses, and Harley scoffs at her as he grabs a tray and starts organizing our food. I don't have to say a word, he knows exactly what I want.

"I'm just in a good mood, sorry you picked the wrong guy to get infatuated with. You never did say what the asshole got you for Christmas." Harley says, and Avery levels a glare at him.

"And I never will." She snaps. I link our arms and give hers a little squeeze in solidarity.

"Want to plan how we're going to take over the world over eggs? That always cheers you up."

She lets out a little giggle, just enough to show she appreciates my efforts,

and I grab her an iced coffee.

We sit together, Ash and Blaise already there and eating, and Harley dishes out our food. “Well, what about the information he gave you? Is there anything we can use?”

Avery gives him a look, and then turns to speak to me. “There’s nothing concrete but everything still vaguely points to the Boar. The drug running that was happening in the Bay at the time was controlled by the Chaos Demons MC.”

I frown. “The Boar’s MC is the Unseen.”

Avery nods. “Yeah, it is now. He was with the Chaos Demons. He patched his entire club over a few years after you were born. There was a lot of conflict at the time, maybe that’s why he’s kept you out of it.”

Ash scoffs. “That doesn’t explain why he didn’t say something when he met Lips. He would have seen her at the Game and known.”

Harley shakes his head. “Lips doesn’t look a fucking thing like her mom. How would he know? You ever spoken to him about your mom?”

I grimace. “I don’t talk to anyone about my mom. I’ve only ever spoken to the Boar when I’ve taken jobs from him. I was shocked when he sided with me at the meeting remember?”

Harley grunts and shovels more eggs into his mouth with a frown. Ash rolls his eyes at us all. “So why would he suddenly care? What’s changed?”

Avery leans back in her chair, her fingers tapping against the table. She’s barely touched her food, too caught up in her thoughts. “The heads started appearing after the Jackal and Lips declared war right?”

I shake my head. “No, it was after the meeting but the Jackal was still pretending to follow the rules. Something had changed in the dynamics but it wasn’t war.”

Avery frowns. “It has to be him, though. We should have just spoken to him at the meeting.”

“Too many people around.” I say, but really, I was too fucking nervous. I don’t need a father. I don’t need the extra responsibility of family. I have everyone I need in my life right the fuck now.

Ash checks his watch and starts to bully Avery into finishing her food. I shove the last piece of toast into my mouth and stand up, needing another coffee on the way to get through class. Blaise comes with me, twisting his fingers into mine and rambling happily about his new song.

He’d given me his newest lyric book for Christmas and I’m freaking

obsessed with the thing. Now that he knows how much I love his artwork, the little scratched pictures in the margins, he's taken to filling entire pages with portraits of the entire family. The ones of the guys are usually unflattering caricatures that make me snort with laughter, but there's one of Harley in the boxing ring that makes my heart squeeze in my chest. The one of Ash grinning with Avery nearly fucking kills me, especially when they're at each other's throats.

"I'm organizing a tour. Nothing big, more like gigs at bars and maybe a festival or two. The festivals would be good because I want to see you running around in those little fucking bodysuit things that girls wear to them. Fucking hot, Star."

I blush and elbow him. "I wouldn't wear one. I'd wear one of your shirts and be a smug bitch when everyone sees me in it."

He grins down at me. "Promise me you'll sing with me for our song and it's a deal."

I groan as we arrive at our first class for the day. "No way, I'll puke and ruin my reputation."

He roars with laughter at me, dropping me off at my desk and giving Harley a weird bro-nod thing as he walks in that has me shaking my head at him.

Harley sits down and kisses my cheek. "You can't sing on stage anyway, babe. Ash would end up fucking you wherever you stood and Avery would skin him alive."

I ignore his comment, unpacking my bag and smiling at Avery as the twins finally arrive. Ash pulls her chair out for her and when she smiles up at him it's genuine, thank the sweet lord. Maybe they'll stop their shit.

The class starts and I let my mind wander now that I've finished up. Harley scoffs at me as he starts taking his perfectly legible notes. I just don't get how his handwriting can be that fucking perfect. It's unnatural.

I'm startled from my daydreaming, and planning, by a sharp knock.

I glance up to find two cops standing in the doorway.

Fuck.

I shoot Avery a look and she gives me a tiny shake of her head. So not something she knows about, which means it's not something the Crow has planned or is even aware of. Fuck.

The female cop looks around the room until her eyes fall on our table. Harley tenses and his hand clamps over my knee under the desk. I catch his

wrist and squeeze. I'll be fine. Whatever it is, I'll survive their questioning and be out by dinner time. The Tiger owes me.

“Harley O’Cronin? We have some questions for you. You’ll need to join us down at the station.”

My breath catches in my throat. Nope. I can handle it being me, fuck, I was hoping it was me. I can’t handle it being one of my family members.

My face must say everything because Harley kisses my cheek sweetly, whispering, “Don’t freak out, babe. Avery will have me out, I’ll be fine until then.”

But that’s not true. He’ll be alone, he’ll be in lock down, and when one of the cops step forward I notice the district badge on his chest. Mounts Bay. Fuck.

I refuse to leave until they let me in to see him. The lady at the reception knows exactly who I am and each time she has to tell me no, I swear I see her age ten years. Finally, there’s a shift change with the officers and she ushers me in.

Harley isn’t really in the mood to talk, he just sits and seethes as he stares at his own reflection in the mirrored wall. I don’t look at the mirror at all, entirely uncomfortable with the idea of Senior’s pocket-pigs watching us here. Any one of them could take us out right now and there’s nothing I could do about it. I fucking hate it.

When the door opens we both look up to find the Tiger in the doorway, a little pale and shaky under the terrible fluorescent lights. Atticus escorts him with a firm hand wrapped around his elbow and gives him no choice but to take a seat at the tiny table with us.

I give Atticus a nod, my mouth a firm line across my face, and try to be civil as I say, “Is the room clean?”

He nods and turns his attention to Harley. “There’s been a lot of talk about your missing family members.”

Harley scoffs at him. “No shit, dickhead, and we all know exactly what happened to them. We were all there that night.”

The Tiger tugs at the neck of his collared shirt as he sweats. “Yes, well, I can’t exactly get the Stag to come in here and confess. We’re better off



getting you the best plea deal possible and then working out compensation from the Stag for taking the fall for him. These things happen amongst our organizations all the time. No different.”

Nope.

I’ve been pushed too far today, way too fucking far, and my mind just snaps.

I don’t even realize I’ve moved until I’m staring down at the back of the Tiger’s neck, my hand clenched in his expensive haircut and pressing his now bleeding nose into the table. He doesn’t make a sound. I forget sometimes that he had to shed some blood to get into the Twelve. The suit and the arrogant attitude can make him seem clean.

“If I find out you’ve switched sides and you’re getting Harley out of the way for the Jackal I won’t just kill you, I’ll climb in your fucking window and gut your entire family.”

Blatant lie, but the trail of headless corpses that now proceed me have made me look a hell of a lot more callous and bloodthirsty than I really am. I’m going to use it to my advantage.

“Harley leaves here with me today and whatever it takes, he does not see the inside of a cell again. I don’t care what it costs you, I have a fucking diamond and you owe me, Tiger.”

He gives me the barest nod and I ease up, sitting back in my chair. The Crow gives me a disapproving look but Harley slips his hand into mine under the table. I try not to think about the cold steel handcuffs tethering him to the floor.

“I wouldn’t have brought him here if I didn’t trust he was on our side.” Atticus says, and I shrug without glancing at him.

I keep my eyes glued to the Tiger as I snap, “I don’t trust people outside of my family. Keeping my mouth shut in the Twelve meetings and taking jobs from you all seems to have given you the impression that I’m easy to influence and manipulate. I’m not. You’ll do as I say or you’ll die.”

Atticus huffs at me but the Tiger nods. “I know. I chose this side because this is the sane side.” He huffs out a laugh at himself, “How crazy is that? The side that just threatened to butcher my kids in their beds is the sane one. But it’s true. If I’m honest I’d rather it be you climbing in my window than the Jackal and his men. I just needed to make sure you’re aware that this is not going to be easy or cheap. The Police Chief is dirty.”

I roll my eyes. “I’m well aware thank you. Find me a judge who’s also

dirty, but happy to be out of Joseph Beaumont's clutches. I'll pay, in cash or blood."

Harley's hand does a funny little twitch in mine and I squeeze his fingers. Whatever it takes. I really don't give a fuck what it costs.

The Tiger nods and leaves the room, his phone to his ear. I stare at Atticus and try to arrange my face into something a little less hostile but, fuck, I'm not in the best of moods.

"I'll pay for this." He says,

Harley scoffs, leaning back in his chair, and replies, "I have the cash. I'd rather you take care of the blood if it comes to that."

I give him a look but Atticus nods. "If it's something I can take care of, I will. You have my word."

I try to ignore the swirling discomfort in my gut but it bubbles out of me. "You can't buy our friendship. We already said you have our vote. Maybe you should wait until Ash or Blaise need the bail and give them the same offer."

Atticus's eyes narrow at me, like cold steel, and Harley snarls at him for it. Atticus ignores it and says, "You said you work as a family? Well, that's what I do for my family. I told you back at the Gala, if you keep Avery safe then I will back you on everything, regardless of whether or not she forgives me."

Dammit, he just keeps making it harder for me to hate him. "If it's blood I'll take care of it. Illi has been enjoying the... workload that being mine entails."

Atticus scoffs. "He's just as deranged as Matteo. You need to watch him carefully."

Ok, that helps me hate him again. My stomach fills with butterflies when Harley snaps, "He's family too, dickhead. He got my vote long before you did, and I'll side with him over you to the fucking end."

That's the real family line. We don't have to get along all of the time but once you're in, you're fucking in. Unfortunately for Atticus, two votes don't make you family.

Atticus shakes his head at us both. "You grew up in the Bay, how can you not see who he really is?"

Harley smirks at him, cold and arrogant. "Did you know Illi has Ash's vote too? It was unanimous. Just because you see him at his day job means nothing. Fuck, we've all shed some blood at this point, who the fuck cares

how much he enjoys it. Don't get pissy just because he likes playing you. He does that because he's all in and Avery loves it. He makes her feel important just because she's a tyrant and he respects the hell out of her for it."

Atticus stares us both down and then shrugs. "If he touches a hair on her head, I'll walk into that school and drag her back home with me. Then I'll deal with him."

I smirk and Harley makes a big show of dragging his eyes up and down Atticus's carefully styled appearance, all pressed lines and cashmere suits, and says, "My money is on Illi but feel free to give us a good show."

## CHAPTER TWENTY

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“Do I need to drive down to the pay and gut an O’Cronin? Because that sounds like the exact way I’d like to spend my evening.”

To his credit, the Stag doesn’t bitch me out or try to make excuses, he just listens to the fucking venom I breathe down the phone at him and takes it like a champ.

It had taken another three hours for Harley to be released, the Tiger and the Crow pulling some freaking strings to get him out, but the only way to get the case dropped is for the witness to retract or die.

The witness is going to fucking die.

“The Crow has already called, it wasn’t a member of my family.”

I scoff. “I have the Coyote hacking into the Police record system, you better fucking hope it’s not one of yours.”

He sighs at me, and I can hear the call of gulls in the background. He’s down at the docks, probably on his first job now that I’ve vouched for him with the Boar. Fuck. “If it’s a member of my family, who would be working on their own, I will deliver them to you myself. It won’t be.”

I hang up on him, pissed off and feeling kinda stab-y, like someone needs to pay for this and nothing but my knife buried deep in their neck will be good enough.

Harley changes gears in the Cadillac, the one I’d borrowed to come after him, and gives me a side-eye. “You think it was really one of my family?”

“I’m your family. Avery and Ash and Blaise are your family. Illi and Odie, and that’s fucking it. I don’t trust the Stag. He’s a whole lot of talk at the moment, I want to see some action to back it up.”

Harley nods and slows the car as we pull into Hannaford, the gates

opening automatically for us. My phone starts to ring.

“Why hello there, my good friend Lips.” Says the Coyote, and I roll my eyes. He must be with the Crow, he lives for pissing that man off.

“I’m not in a fun-and-games mood, Coyote. What have you found?”

He coos at me, “Aw, did your little friend have a bad time in lockup? I hear your first time can be rough.”

I take a deep, deep fucking breath. “Jackson. It wasn’t his first time in lockup, you already know this, why are you being a dick? Just tell me.”

He grunts and I hear Viola snap at him in the background. “Ow, fine, yes, I knew that. Did you know he got more time for fighting while he was in juvie? Fucking brutal, you’re in bed with a beast. I heard about the other one fighting with the Viper’s guy, too. You got a thing for blood or something? I always knew you were a kinky fuck. I could just tell.”

I squeeze my eyes shut. “Are you high? Put Viola on the phone.”

He cackles and then Viola speaks. “We were out having dinner when Atticus called, sorry.”

Harley parks the car and quirks an eyebrow at me. I shrug. “It’s fine, it’s just fucking weird to hear him like that. Did he find the rat?”

She scoffs. “He couldn’t find his own dick right now. I found the rat, some guy called Michael Byrne.”

No idea who that is but Harley curses under his breath. “Thanks. Can you send through his info? I’ll deal with it tonight.”

Viola makes a choking noise. “Ok, it’s still so weird to me how casual you are about this... stuff. Gross.”

I hang up and Harley’s hand tighten on the wheel even though the car isn’t running. “He’s related by marriage. His daughter married one of my uncles, I think she’s still a part of the family.”

I nod and call the Stag back. “Michael Byrne is dead. If you have to make arrangements to contain the fallout in your family, do it now.”

He curses. “Fucking scum. You don’t have to worry about Deirdre, she’s fucking delirious with happiness now her husband is gone. He was beating her and the kids, if her own family is pissed about the changes in the family well then he deserves a cold hole in the ground.”

Hm. Ok, maybe he isn’t so bad. I guess it’s just ingrained in me to hate anyone with the name O’Cronin.

Harley helps me out of the car and kisses the top of my head as he tucks me under his arm. We head back to our room to shower and grab supplies.

I'm doing this the right way and I'm doing it tonight.

An hour later, we take Blaise's Cadillac and leave Avery safely stashed at Hannaford with Illi and Odie, watching a movie together in our room. Ash insists on driving and I sit in the back with Harley to try to get myself in the right headspace for what the night is going to bring us. The car is quiet, only the sound of the engine revving as Ash changes gears. My bag with all my supplies is on the floor at my feet, re-stocked and ready to go, and I know without a doubt that all three of my guys have the holsters and weapons strapped to them. I have no intention of letting them be involved at all, but it's good to know they'll have the backup if I need it.

"You're not fucking going on your own, so don't even try to start with that shit." says Harley, drumming his fingers against his knee.

I roll my eyes. This is a simple fucking job, there's nothing for him to worry about.

"I told you guys I could do this by myself. I need to send the Jackal, and anyone who makes the stupid decision to work with him, a message. You heard the Crow, half of this fight is dealing with his numbers." I murmur, and Ash slips his hand to lay on my thigh between gear shifting. Harley mumbles something under his breath but I ignore it. He just can't let go of his protective nature, it's something I love about him, but in this situation it's not needed.

I'm not scared of the fucking Jackal. Not anymore. I'm wary, sure, anyone who's ever met him would be wary, but I'm not afraid of him.

I use the rest of the drive to look over the information Viola gave me even though I've already committed it to memory. I always was an obsessive over-planner, but I'd rather put the work in and get it right.

When we finally arrive, I make Ash stop the car at the end of the road. He's not happy about it but I need him to stay put. He's pissed about it but he also knows Harley and Blaise won't let anything happen to me. He insisted on being the driver because he's less reckless at it than Blaise and Harley had bitched him out when he tried to get him to drive instead. Apparently they're taking turns in coming with me on jobs.

I slip on my tiny black ballet slippers. Harley looks at them and then down at his own shoes. I lift a shoulder at him in a half shrug.

"As long as you're quiet and it'll be fine. Occasionally my Docs make a squeaking noise and it's just not worth the risk."

He nods and gives Morrison a look. "And what about him? Those boots

aren't exactly discreet."

Blaise sneers at him. "I can take them off if I fucking have to."

Deep breath. I really don't want to deal with their snarking, not after the day I've had. "He's gonna be the lookout from downstairs. The info pack Viola gave me said that it's just Byrne and his wife here. The kids are all grown up and married off. He doesn't have any men for a security detail, he's just got the system, so Blaise will watch the door and Harley can come with me because I'm sure he'll insist."

Harley smirks. "You bet your ass I insist."

The walk to the house is quiet, no one else on the street and none of the houses show any life. This is one of the best areas in Mounts Bay. The house is close to a mansion, nothing like the Beaumont manor but still pretty fucking pricey.

When we arrive at the Byrne's place I find that it looks as though he's compensating for something, all grandeur and over-the-top details. I bite my lip trying to keep that joke in but Blaise wiggles his eyebrows at me to tell me he's thinking the same fucking thing. Harley rolls his eyes at us both.

I disable the security alarm, too fucking easy to do thanks again to Viola, and we step into the house. Marble floors, Persian rugs, paintings that would easily cost six figures, it's the biggest show of wealth for a guy who isn't really that rich. He's got money, but he ain't a Beaumont. I motion for Blaise to stay put and he nods, leaning against a wall and frowning around the room like the shadows might come to life.

Our feet are silent as we make our way through the house. I wait until we get to the top of the grand staircase before I slip my hand into my bag. I'd rearranged it and left it unzipped in the car so that there was no noise involved. Harley watches me as I carefully pull out a hypodermic needle and a small vial, something Doc had given me years ago and replaces every time my supplies get low.

I lift a finger to my lips to remind him to stay silent. It's not like I think he actually needs the reminder, but I do it anyway. He nods silently, taking the bag from me, and follows me to the bedroom.

Mr and Mrs Michael Brynes sleep in the most ridiculous fucking bed, I barely contain my sounds of disgust. Not really, but fuck man, it's something else. It's the type of bed I would've imagined Avery sleeping in, back when I thought that she was a pampered princess. This man must think so fucking highly of himself, it only makes the kill sweeter.

I make my way over to the bed. Byrne is a handsome enough sort of man, if you're into middle-aged Irishman. He's sleeping on his back, his snores louder than Blaise's and way more fucking irritating.

The bed is a Cal King and there's a huge divide between him and his wife. The universe must be working in my favor today because his wife has an eye-mask and earplugs in. The snoring coming out of Byrne's mouth isn't actually that bad but apparently it's unbearable for his wife.

I fill the needle with the liquid in the vial, silent because I've done this so many times I can't even count, and then I slip the empty vial into my pocket.

I have one chance to get the needle into his neck and the liquid in his system without waking his wife. I don't have any plans to kill her, I'm sure with the way this man treats his daughter that his wife is just as badly mistreated, but if she wakes during this it will force my hand.

I motion for Harley and he gets into position. I slow my breathing down so I am completely ready and then I slap my hand over his mouth and punch the needle into his neck at the same time, shooting the drug straight into his bloodstream. Harley grabs both of his arms and holds him to the bed.

His eyes open but the drug is faster.

GHB is a magical thing. While it takes 10 seconds for the entire body to grow slack, it only takes three seconds for his arms to stop struggling. There is nothing he can do.

Once I know it's taken enough of an effect, that he's awake and aware and *completely* unable to fight back, I move my hand away from his face. Harley lets go and takes a step back as well.

I stare down into his eyes so he can see his own death in them, then I lean forward until my lips are an inch away from his ear.

"No one touches the Wolf."

And then I slit his throat.

Harley texts Ash to drive past and grab us.

I could have made the kill cleaner, less of a total bloodbath, but now I'm playing tit-for-tat with the Jackal, every blood soaked crime scene counts. Blaise climbs into the front and Harley shepherds me into the back, then climbs in after me.



Thank fuck the Cadillac has leather seats.

Ash meets my eyes in the mirror and I give him a calm nod, trying to push down the adrenaline of the kill. Everything went well, I'm a fucking professional after all, and then he pulls the car back onto the road. I look down at myself and sigh. I guess Avery is going to have fun replacing more of my wardrobe.

I peel my shirt from my body, more gore than material.

Harley pulls his shirt off and hands it to me to wipe some of the blood from my face. I try to swallow, my mouth dry as fuck at the sight of his bare chest, and croak out a, "Thank you."

Between rumble of the engine under my thighs, the warm leather caressing my back, and the dark stain in Harley's eyes as he searches every inch of my skin for damage, my chest starts to heave and fuck, I want him. I want to fuck him so bad, the adrenaline of the kill riding me hard, pushing me to fuck or fight.

"How long until we get back to school?" I ask, the need for sex drenching my tone. Ash glances over his shoulder and whatever he sees in his eyes makes his own flare.

"An hour, Mouny. You'll have to wait."

I whimper.

I honest-to-fucking-god whimper.

The sound decimates Harley's control.

"Fuck that." He snarls, and tears his seat belt off, hauling me into his lap and crushing our lips together.

My hands tangle in his hair, smearing a trail of bright red wherever my skin brushes his, and I bite his lip, desperate and raw. Harley grunts and pulls my hips in until he can grind his dick into me. But I don't want a mindless grinding induced orgasm in the back of a speeding car.

I want to fuck him until I can't breathe. I want desperate and rough and hard, and I want it the fuck now. Harley grunts into the kiss when my hands start to tug and pull at his jeans, desperate and empty without him.

I glance over my shoulder at Blaise and he gets on board with my plan real fucking quick. It's a tight squeeze for him to fit between the seats but what he lacks in space he makes up for in enthusiasm.

"Try not to come on my seats, Arbour." Blaise drawls, but it's a heady sound and I shiver. I've gotten blood all over them, isn't that worse? Harley smirks at me, loving every inch of my damage lighting up my skin until I'm

on fire from his touch.

“I’ll pay for a cleanup, fuck it, I’ll get it reupholstered. Get a new one, set this one on fire, just fucking bill me for it.” Harley grunts as I get his pants down enough to free his dick and then I stare down at my booty shorts with utter contempt. How the actual fuck am I going to get them off without kicking someone in the dick?

Blaise laughs at me, reaching over and hooking his fingers into the fabric of the crotch and tugging until it splits. Harley groans and does the same to the delicate lace, and then I slam myself down onto his dick, filling myself up and losing myself in the stretch.

Fuck.

Yes.

Harley grunts and fists my hair, tugging me into a blistering kiss. The noise that I make is fucking embarrassing but these guys have seen me at my worst, at my writhing, shaking, screaming worst, so having them know just how much I fucking worship their dicks is nothing really. I get a few good strokes in before Blaise gets impatient and needy. He tugs at my hair to turn my head into his kiss but the angle is wrong and I’m going to break my neck if we keep going like this.

I wriggle around, ignoring Harley’s grumpy grunts and snarling at Blaise, until I’m riding him reverse cowgirl. We barely fucking fit in the backseat together, a tangled pile of limbs, but I’m filled to the brim with Harley’s perfect dick and Blaise is right there in arms reach so all is right with the world.

I lean forward, bracing myself on his legs to get leverage, and Blaise groans at the sight of my bare and bloody chest.

Ash swears viciously, and our eyes meet in the mirror. “Fuck this, I’m pulling over.”

Harley groans as I start to move, managing to snap at his cousin even though it’s more gasps than fire, “She’s covered in evidence, do you really want to have one of Senior’s dirty cops find us on the side of the highway?”

My hips just keep moving, grinding down onto his dick.

“I fucking hate all of you.” Ash snarls back, but the car doesn’t slow down.

Harley’s hand clamps over my hips, moving me faster and harder, and Blaise fists one hand in my hair to keep my mouth locked onto his and his other hand strokes down my chest and stomach until he gets to my clit,

circling and pressing until I'm screaming into his lips. Harley grunts and shoves me back down onto his dick as he comes with me, the clenching of my pussy around him sending him over the edge.

Blaise grunts and mutters about the lack of space as he shoves his pants down his thighs and I climb off of Harley's lap and into his. Harley's eyes are less frantic as he rearranges his pants but he keeps them locked on my body as I reach down and impale myself on Blaise's dick. His hips roll up to meet me and I lace my arms around his neck, all of the urgency still thrumming through my blood even though I've already come once.

My legs are shaking, still fucking buzzing, and Blaise holds me still so he can thrust up into me instead. When he bites his lip I groan at the sight and kiss him, then he bites my lip and I want to die. I come again, gasping and shaking, but he doesn't stop moving, he just fucks me through it until I'm groaning and panting into his kiss. He loves kissing me through my orgasms, like he can taste the feeling on my tongue.

Ash takes some corners too fucking fast but by the time we roll back into the staff parking Blaise has his pants back on and I... still look like a fucking mess. There's a beat of silence and then Ash tears out of his seat, yanking the door open and pulling me into his arms. My legs are like jelly so I'm fucking grateful he's intent on doing the caveman thing.

Harley growls at him, but Ash snaps, "Fuck. Off."

He waits until the other two walk off, back up the grounds and into the building. I shiver in his arms and wait until he's ready to speak. He ignores me, glancing around like he's trying to find the cameras.

"Sorry about the blood." I murmur, and he lowers me back onto the ground.

"Fuck the blood, Mouny." Then he bends me over the back of the car and fucks me until I see stars.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

---

**A**very wakes up in a bloodthirsty mood.

I don't question it, I know just how much this is all grating on her, and although I've taken the rat out and retaliated she's still out for blood.

We go with the guys down to the dining hall for breakfast and the looks Harley gets from other students set my teeth on edge. We're standing in line, all arguing about colleges choices which is my least favorite topic, when Imogen fucking Ayres steps up behind us.

"I heard you killed your mom, Arbour, good thing the MOUNTY trash fucked a decent lawyer for you. You're way too pretty for juvie."

Nope.

No.

Not dealing with shit today, or any other day here at the snake pit that is our fucked up school. Imogen lifts a perfectly manicured hand up to cover her mouth as she giggles and I grab her by the wrist, twisting her arm behind her back and slamming her face-first into the drinks table.

Her squeal is magical, and the whole damn dining hall falls silent to watch us. Like I give a fuck at their attention, no one is going to step in for this spoiled bitch.

I lean down to whisper in her ear and press her further into the table until she whimpers. "Being Viola's sister only gets you so much leeway, Ayres."

She grunts at me. "I don't care who you think you are, you're nothing but a gangster slut from the slums gang-banging your way to an easier life. You may have scared my sister into submission but I know you're nothing, MOUNTY."

I break her arm.

Oops.

I'm sure Viola will be pissed at me but, fuck, I've dealt with worse. I'm sure the Coyote will understand, if he's ever met this prissy little bitch he'll probably thank me. I let her fall to the ground as she sobs and cradles the break to her chest. I stare down at her, my whole family does, and I'm fucking proud that none of them flinch. Even Avery stands tall, the fire in her eyes kicked up ten fucking notches because today is not the day to fuck with my family.

"Does anyone else have something to add?" Blaise drawls, his hands in his pockets and a cocky smirk on his face as he looks around the silent room. Nothing. No one tries to come and save Imogen, even Lauren just stares at us all with terrified eyes. Pathetic.

Imogen stumbles to her feet and gives me a glare through her tears, stalking out of the room clutching at her arm as she sobs. I feel nothing but satisfaction.

The room seems to take a breath, but no one is whispering about us anymore.

Avery links my arm in hers as we pick out what food we want for the boys to grab. Blaise also picks shit out and Harley snarls at him but he grabs it for the idiot anyway.

"You know Senior was the one to orchestrate Harley's arrest, the Jackal only helped him find a willing witness." Avery murmurs quietly in my ear while the guys all snark at each other.

I give a curt nod. It hadn't been a huge leap to figure that out. "What do you want to do about it?"

Avery tugs me away from the line and towards the long table. "I'm waiting to hear back about some details. I should have confirmation soon."

I nod. I trust her implicitly, if she says she's got it under control then you bet your ass it's under control.

We sit at the table and Avery ignores us all while she taps away on her phone. I dig into my food and read over my notes for my AP History test. Just because I've finished the assignments, doesn't mean I can slack off. The pop quizzes and tests are still challenging. Ash tries to read my notes and sneers at my shitty handwriting.

"Don't you have your own? Fuck man, you're in trouble if you don't." Harley sounds like a smug asshole as he shovels his omelette into his mouth. Ash opens his mouth to snap out a scathing retort when Avery interrupts.

“He doesn’t need them, we aren’t going to class today.”

My head snaps up and away from my notes. “What?”

Avery slips her phone into my hand and I look down at her deviousness. Holy shit. Holy fucking shit.

This girl is going to rule the freaking world.

The press conference is held outside of the Police station in Mounts Bay, though I can happily say I feel a helluva lot better about being here today. Ash escorts her into the building and then a short time later joins me and the others behind the crowd of journalists, reporters, and camera men.

It only takes another minute before she walks out with the Crow and some guy. The crowd quietens down. We all stand and stare at her like she’s the centre of our fucking universe because, right at this moment, she is.

The Fed smooths a hand down his tie in a carefully controlled way that suits the stern look on his face. A savage, proud, fucking elated grin bursts across my face when he glances over his shoulder and nods respectfully at Avery.

He belongs to my ice queen bestie now.

Fuck. Yes.

“Thank you for coming today, I have a lot to cover so leave all questions until after my statement.” He says in a clear and commanding voice. The press don’t make a freaking peep, just stand there with their voice recorders, cameras, and even some old fashioned paper.

The Fed goes on and on about some bullshit policy and it takes me a second to catch on. “Corruption of law enforcement and political parties is not only illegal, but it demeans our great country. It has become clear that there are individuals using money, blackmail, and threats against lives to control vital members of our police force, both on the streets and in management positions.”

Harley leans into me and whispers, “What a fucking hypocrite.”

I shrug. “As long as it gets us what we want, who gives a fuck? This is the way of the world.”

Ash threads his fingers through mine and takes the blunt Blaise offers him. “The world will be a better place without Senior in it, and if that means

Avery has the entire fucking country in her pocket than fuck it. Hail Hydra or whatever.”

I roll my eyes at him. “You’re such a freaking nerd. To think, everyone thinks you’re this cool and unaffected asshole badass and you’re out here quoting Marvel movies like a fanboy. You’re a fucking disgrace, Beaumont.”

Harley and Blaise both snicker at him like children but the glare Ash gives me promises a spanking later and, uhm, sign me the fuck up.

The Fed rambles on for even longer until I start to get antsy, ready to get the fuck out of this city and back to Hannaford, and then he clears his throat, looking for the first time just a little bit nervous. I know before he speaks that this is the real move on the board, this is Avery’s giant FUCK YOU to Senior.

She doesn’t disappoint.

“And finally I have new information on an on-going investigation into the disappearance of the German socialite Lena Müller. As you all know, she was last seen in the Mounts Bay area four years ago and despite extensive canvassing the MBPD was unable to find her. We had an anonymous tip and based on that information we have been able to find and identify the remains of Miss Müller yesterday. We have already been in contact with her family and we ask that you all respect their privacy during this difficult time.”

Ash’s whole body tenses and I squeeze his hand, whether to comfort him or to try to stop him from flipping his shit I don’t know, but he barely notices.

The Fed takes another deep breath. “Further investigation of the burial site is still underway, but it has become clear that Lena’s death was at the hands of a depraved serial killer. Eleven bodies have since been recovered and we are working hard at securing positive ID’s on these women. The MBPD and the FBI are now working together to catch the person responsible and we will pursue them with the full force of the law.”

“Holy fuck. Did you know about this?” Harley says, and I shake my head.

“Aves told me she had Senior sorted, I didn’t realize she was going to ass fuck him like this.” I murmur.

Ash takes a last lungful of musky smoke and then crushes the blunt under his boot. “Senior started it. He sold people out, Floss is just leveling the playing field. What do you think his chances of staying out of prison are?”

I hum under my breath, watching as Avery and Atticus step away from the media circus now the questions have started flying. There’s no reason for them to stick around now the gauntlet has been thrown.

“You said something about Senior’s crimes in other countries? Maybe an anonymous call should go out to them as well. Twist some arms and all that.”

Ash grins for a second, staring down at me like a weight has been lifted from him and I smile back up at him like a pathetic, love-sick puppy. I mean, I’m a total fucking sap for him. Ugh.

“Nothing would make me happier than Senior in a Columbian prison being made into some guy’s bitch.”

Huh. You know what, I feel the same way.

I meet Avery for dinner that night and leave the boys in their room watching some stupid movie.

Avery cooks us some over the top Italian dish I can't pronounce the name of but there's pasta and sauce and I'm always down for that. She preens like a happy housewife at the look of appreciation I give her when she settles a plate in front of me. I grin back at her, totally fucking elated after the day we've had.

"Is there a reason you're wining and dining me? Or is this just because you love me the most?" I say, trying not to moan at the taste of the food.

She settles in her chair and fusses with her cutlery until it's all perfectly straight. I know exactly what that means; I'm fluent in Avery Beaumont's body language.

"Just spit it out, Aves. You know you can say anything to me."

She sighs dramatically. "I think it's time. I think it's time for you to go and confront the Boar."

I stare at her for a second as I wind the pasta onto my fork. It's not like I haven't been expecting this, it's not like I haven't been expecting her to call me out on my own bullshit, but I guess I've just been waiting for the shove in the back to actually go do it. I normally confront everything headfirst no matter how much pain it will cause me. But there's something about this, there's something about the idea of having a dad, that terrifies me.

My mom dying was the best and worst day of my life. Not having her poison was such a relief but it also delivered me into the hands of the Jackal, creating the mess I'm in right the fuck now.

What will my dad give me? What bullshit am I going to have to face for



sharing DNA with this guy?

I shove more food into my mouth like a sullen child, chewing and swallowing it without really tasting the deliciousness anymore. "Yeah, I know. I guess I have to bite the bullet and just go fucking do it."

Avery nods and we both eat for a moment in silence as we think over what exactly this is going to entail.

"I'm going by myself. I don't want the boys starting their bullshit. Ash is likely to stick a bullet between his eyes the second he tells me he's my dad just because he doesn't trust fathers, not that we can blame him for that. Harley will want to have an argument with him over the whole fucking thing in my defense, and Blaise... Blaise will crack some joke about our relationship and I don't know what sort of father the Boar might be but I don't need that shit in my life. Fuck that."

Avery smirks at me. "I think if he had a problem with it he would've said something by now. If it is him sending the boxes of heads, don't you think one of the boys would've shown up in there by now if he didn't approve of your relationships?"

A full body shudder takes over me. I cannot imagine the feeling of opening one of those fucking boxes to find one of my guys in there.

Avery grimaces at the look I give her. "Sorry, I didn't even think before I spoke. Do you think it's him sending them?"

I poke at my dinner. "I guess if this is a blood thing. It just freaks me out to think how much of my life he must know about if he's the one sending them. I mean, my full name is just the tip of that fucked up iceberg."

Avery nods. "To know that much about your life and to not have helped you this far is disgusting. Sending you the heads of your enemies now is too little too late. Are you going to tell him that?"

I shrugged. "I have to be careful about what I say. Clearly sending the heads of enemies means he's a little bit fucking deranged. What if I reject him and his attempts at forming a relationship and he goes psychotic on us? We already have enough of that going on with the Jackal and Senior. The boxes are inconvenient but they're not currently a danger to us. I think I'll play it by ear, see how the conversation goes, and if he wants to keep in touch in a permanent, fatherly way I guess I can pick a phone up every now and then, even if I don't fucking want to."

Avery hums. "Phone calls are easy. It's just if he wants to join us for family dinner, then we'll have a problem. I don't think we can contain the

guys from being absolute dickheads to him over a nice meal. What do bikers even eat?”

I laugh at the look on her face and her use of the word dickhead. It's still funny to hear the girl curse.

We fall into our usual topic of choice these days, college because fuck my life, and it's not until we're starting in on dessert and coffee that she brings up the other taboo topic, the one we can't talk about around the guys.

“Explain to me the Crow's empire.” She says, sipping at her coffee delicately but I know it's an act. She wants to look like she's completely in control, even as her whole world is kind of crumbling away at the thought of the guy. Ugh, I hate it.

“Like I said before, it's all information and money. A bit of influence too. He does a lot of what you do.”

She nods and drums her fingers against the countertop. “Explain the difference between his information and Illi's. And the Coyote, you always call the three of them.”

I hum under my breath, searching for the right way to explain something that's now so ingrained in me that I don't even have to think about it. “Illi is the man to go to for the word on the street. Like, stuff that isn't written down, stuff no one is willing to pass on with their name attached to it. The Coyote is all hacking and data. He doesn't give a fuck about anything except the numbers and the inboxes he digs into.”

I take another deep sip. “Atticus deals in the type of information that can bring down businessmen, politicians, and entire countries. The stuff that happens in soundproof conference rooms and in the back of chauffeur driven Rolls Royces. Now we have access to all three sources there should be less gaps in our information. We won't have the same problems we did with Atticus in the first place.”

Avery hums under her breath. “So his information is like mine. I guess I knew that, but he seems to know everything before me so I did wonder who his sources were. Do you have any names?”

I shake my head. “To be honest, before I knew who he was I stayed the fuck away from him. He's kind of... infamous.”

Avery arches an eyebrow. “For information? Were you afraid he'd dig up your middle name?”

I groan at her, ignoring the cackle that tears out of her, except that I freaking love the sound. “No. He and the Jackal... they came in a tie. They

won the same year, two members were killed in the same incident. The Jackal fucking hates that he didn't come out on top of the Game. No one else even remembers it but I guess he's always been deranged."

Avery's head tilts. "So this rivalry comes from the Jackal not wanting a joint win? Jesus H. Christ."

I nod. "Yep. He thinks it makes a difference even though it really doesn't. He's been after the Crow from day one, it's why their empires are always about the same size, if the Jackal gets bigger than the Crow he'll be more likely to take him out."

Avery's fingers drum out a pattern on the countertop again, the sound soothing to her. "That's all the more reason to take the psycho out then, isn't it?"

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

---

I step into the Boar's clubhouse and do my best not to let the disgust show on my face. The whole place smells like cigarettes, cheap whiskey, and gun powder, with the underlying smell of sex covering every flat surface. Fucking gross.

A lot of eyes follow me as I make my way up to the bar. I ignore them, totally unconcerned with their interest and secure in my status as the Wolf of Mounts Bay. They all know what I can do.

"You lost, little girl?" Someone calls out, and I slide onto one of the bar stools.

"I need to speak to the Boar." I say to the bartender, a biker bitch with a low cut tank barely covering her chest. Fuck, I think I can see the tops of her freaking nipples which was not on my plans for tonight.

She nods at me, sliding a glass of whiskey my way and jerking her head to one of the other girls. "Just excuse the boys, your type don't come in here much and they're not really used to acting like gentlemen."

My type? Fuck me, I'm wearing booty shorts and a Vanth tee not a Chanel fucking dress.

I'm saved from saying any of this by the Boar arriving, a deep frown on his face. The bartender grimaces and steps away as if being next to me is going to make her guilty of something.

"Wolf. I wasn't expecting you."

I shrug. "I was in the neighborhood. Thought I should pop in for a chat."

He stares at me for a second, then gestures at me to follow him. I leave the glass of whiskey, happy to see more of this place. I like to know my way around places, just in case. If the Boar isn't my dad, maybe someday I'll need

to get in here and take him out. Fuck, even if we are related I might slit the fucker's throat someday.

It's not like he's given a shit about me so far.

He leads me to a large meeting room with a huge table and at least fifty chairs, all hand carved out of a deep rich wood. Someone around here has some serious talent. The Boar dismisses two of his bikers and shuts the door behind them until we're alone.

"This is where we hold church; never been a woman in here for anything except cleaning. Some of the boys might take offense to that."

I roll my eyes. "They are welcome to come and voice their concerns with me. I'm not as selective with who I kill for insulting me."

He huffs out a laugh and takes a seat across from me, leaning back in the chair like he's on a fucking beach somewhere and this is all so relaxing. I'm sitting like I have an iron rod rammed up my ass, I'm that freaking tense.

We stare at each other for a moment, the silence thick but not exactly uncomfortable.

There's no point in beating around the bush, I cut straight to the point. "I want to know why you sided with the Crow."

There's a pause for a second while he eyes me like he's trying to decide if I'm worthy enough for a real answer. I try not to let my irritation show.

"You're a smart kid, what's the going theory?" He says and I watch him to try and find some sort of tell, some resemblance I've missed before but there's nothing.

I ignore his question. "Why did you say no to the Jackal?"

He grunts and scratches at his beard. "Because he's a fuckin' psycho. Something just not right in that kid's head."

I nod and say, "Why did you tell him it was a blood thing?"

He grimaces and cuts me a look, finally dropping his bullshit. "I've heard about the Crow sniffing around my bloodlines, kid, I ain't your daddy."

I should feel relief but, fuck, now we have to start at square one again. "I didn't say you were. I just don't understand why blood comes into it and I'm kind of on a time crunch here."

He frowns and turns in his chair, placing the bottle of beer down to focus entirely on me. "Why? Someone bothering you?"

I snort. "Uh, yeah. Lots of people are bothering me. The Jackal is only about a third of my overall problems, believe it or not."

"And why is asking me about blood going to help you with the rest?"

Fuck, I hate the secrecy bullshit. I hate the half-truths and twisting of words. Answering questions by asking another. I should've asked Avery to come here and do it for me.

I pull myself into the Avery Beaumont Power Pose, hoping it'll help me keep my damn head, and I make sure my voice is level as I reply, "Someone is killing people who have wronged me. Sending me their heads in fucking boxes. There's only ever been one note and it mentioned blood, the same way you did."

The Boar blinks at me.

Then he swears viciously under his breath. It's pretty clear this motherfucker knows who it is. Maybe the trip wasn't completely wasted after all.

He scrubs a hand over his face. "Look, I ain't your daddy but I know who is. He's a miserable excuse of a human and I wish to god I'd killed him when I had the chance long before you were born. He ain't the one sending you the boxes, he doesn't give a shit about any of the poor bastards he's fathered, but I know who's sending them. I'll... stop it from happening."

Two very important things stand out to me from his little speech; my father is definitely scum, and I have siblings. The Boar knows about my siblings.

I manage to find my voice, but it's no longer calm and even. I rasp out, "Don't, just tell me who it is and give me my father's real name. Please. I'll call in a favor if I have to."

He shakes his head at me and grabs the beer bottle, draining the last of the liquid in one go. "No favors, kid. Your father is my older half-brother. He's the President of the Chaos Demons MC up in Indiana, and he's a piece of fucking shit. Don't go looking for him, he'll only find a way to break you open and sell you for parts. You have two brothers in the MC and five other bastard siblings around the country because your pop doesn't like wrapping up. He tells women a fake name so they can't come knocking for child support. I took one look at you when you showed up at the Game as a scrawny little kid and knew you were one of his. You look just fucking like... never mind. Just don't go looking. I'll back you in this fight, and any others you might have because of blood."

Seven fucking siblings?!

I need to sit down before I pass the fuck out. Wait, my ass is already planted. Sweet lord, how the fuck am I going to track them all down? Do I

want to? Fuck!

The Boar gives me a wry grin. “The boys in the MC are good enough, but they’re under your pops thumb so don’t bother going looking for them. Three of the bastard kids are fine. Grown up with decent moms, going to college, living white collar lives.”

I clear my throat but it doesn’t help. “And the other two?”

The smirk turns into a grimace. “I watch out for them, like I do for you. I do what I can.”

I don’t see how he’s watched out for me, not really, and I scrub my face with a palm, groaning. “Why? If you hate him so much then why bother?”

The Boar leans back in his seat and glances around the room, rubbing his jaw. I study him but I still can’t find any resemblance. Fuck, he’s my uncle. Today couldn’t get any fucking weirder.

He glances back. “I went to visit your pops years ago for something. Don’t matter what it was for, but when I got there two of his biker sluts were there too, dragging kids behind them. I looked at them and... it wasn’t good kid. Bad situation. But I did nothing. Not my business, not my problem. I was a stupid fucking kid myself. Three days later one of the kids was dead, the other was... worse than dead. Your pops doesn’t give a shit, but I’m not that fucking evil. You look... just like our mom. She was a biker slut, switched up MCs when she’d pissed off enough of the brothers, but she was a good woman. I can’t look at you and not try to fucking help.”

I nod, but it’s weird to hear this sort of family history. My own mom was bad enough, but to hear that my father was worse? Jesus, could I be more cliché? The kid from the slums with a million fucking siblings. I need a drink. I need a whole fucking bottle of whiskey and maybe some tequila. Fuck it, being angry and drunk is where I need to be.

“Thank you for telling me. Once I’ve dealt with this mess I’d like to meet... some of my siblings. Whichever ones you think I should.” I say as I stand, and he nods his head while he stares at the empty bottle on the table.

“I could use your help with one of them. I think you might be able to if... yeah. I need your help too, kid.”

I nod because apparently I also would do anything for blood, imagine fucking that?!

I make it to the door before I turn back to him and say, “What’s your real name? What’s my father’s real last name?”

I can give it to Avery and she can work her magic, give me a whole

fucking file on this family of mine so we will never be caught unaware again.

He scoffs at me. “Breaking all the rules tonight, little Wolf? Daniel Durack. Your pops is a Graves.”

Eclipse Starbright Graves.

Nope.

Don’t like that at all.

Is the whole fucking universe playing a joke on me? I’m sticking with Anderson, even if it is a fake name from a fucking asshole. Ugh.

I turn back to the door to walk out and find two of his biker men, brothers, whatever they call them, are standing in the hall and their eyes are on me.

Do they know about my blood?

“I need some fucking whiskey.” I croak, and the Boar lets out a wry chuckle behind me.

“That’s a blood thing too, kid. Call me if you need anything.”

Nope.

I don’t like that either. I bolt out of the door and into the cool Mounts Bay night air.

I drive the entire way back to Hannaford with a head full of clouds and air.

What the actual fuck has happened to my perfectly empty life? I mean, I’m happy with the family I’ve made, I don’t need anymore showing up. This is bad, this is really fucking bad.

I park, make my way up the stairs and into my room only to find my bed full of Harley, Ash lounging on Avery’s bed, and Blaise sprawled out on the floor. I think about bitching them out for taking over my space but I decide to leave that for later, when I don’t feel like my whole fucking life has been a lie. Oh, there it is; the Blaise Morrison Pity Party has just taken ahold of me and I’m going to need to start drinking before I throw a freaking tantrum.

“I need whiskey. I’m freaking the fuck out and I need to drink my body weight in, like, an expensive aged whiskey that will get me wasted super fucking quick.” I say, and they all look up at me.

Avery stands from where she was sitting at the table doing homework and comes over to me, but it’s Blaise who speaks first.



“So, do we have to explain ourselves to your daddy? Tell him about our intentions?”

Sweet merciful lord.

I could fucking swoon at the thought of any of them speaking to my biker pops.

“Alcohol, Avery. Non-negotiable. 911. We have entered an emergency state.” I could go on but she grabs my wrist and looks at me, all concerned and shit, and I feel light-headed.

“You need to breathe, whatever you found out can’t be that bad. Do you want ice cream too?”

“Fuck ice cream.”

Avery’s eyes widen as she nods and she cuts Blaise a severe look. “No more jokes.”

He grumbles at her but he’s sitting up to get a better look at me and frowning. I stumble over to my bed and half collapse on it, my skin crawling with extra energy like I need to run a fucking marathon to get it out.

Harley gets up and snags some whiskey from fuck-knows-where and I crack it open to take long, deep gulps straight from the bottle.

I know I’m panicking for no real reason but I’ve been alone for so long. No family, no one who gives a shit, I’ve only had myself to deal with. Now I have my family, my real family, and it’s hard fucking work keeping us all happy and alive. To find out I have siblings is too much. A father. A fucking uncle who’s been looking out for me... though I don’t know what the hell he’s been doing for me. It’s not like he got me away from the Jackal.

“Can you tell me anything before you drink yourself into an oblivion?” Avery murmurs, and sits down next to me on the bed. I can’t look at her, or the guys, and the whiskey is already heading straight to my brain. Fuck it.

“My dad’s a piece of shit. I have seven brothers and sisters. The Boar is my uncle. He knows who’s sending the boxes and said he’d get it to stop. My family is as trailer trash as fucking possible and now I have a whole list of people I’m related to and responsible for and I need another fucking drink, Aves. I can’t. I just fucking can’t.”

There’s a minute of stunned silence and then Ash grabs the bottle from me. “Let’s get you a glass so we do this properly. Morrison, find me the bourbon, Mouny can’t drink alone. That’s just pathetic.”

Everyday life at Hannaford starts to become suffocating.

My skin is already crawling with the news of my biker dad, but with the extra men the Crow stations at the school, there isn't a second of the day that doesn't have the oppressive feel that his fortress does and I can't fucking stand it. My entire life I have survived by being unseen, by being the underestimated unnoticed little girl in the room, and now there isn't a person in the entire fucking building who isn't aware of me. It goes beyond my earlier years as the Mouny scholarship student. It goes so far beyond the fucking bet when everyone wanted a piece of me. The students all watch me with fear. The Crow's men all watch me with calculating eyes.

Harley sits beside me at breakfast and hooks an ankle around mine under the table as we eat. His phone buzzes and he checks it with a grimace. "That's Aodhan, he's fucking persistent. He's keeping me updated on what's going on in the Bay. The streets are so fucking bad now that even the locals won't go out at night."

I grimace. "The Coyote has sent me some footage. The Jackal has gone fucking insane."

Harley nods, and glances around the room. We've come down to breakfast by ourselves, the others still tucked up in their beds this early on a Sunday morning. Harley had gotten up early for his swim practice and I'd text him to meet up for food once it had finished. I didn't want to wake Avery by fixing something to eat after the week she's had, and it's nice to get some one-on-one time with my golden god of a boyfriend.

"We've gotta do something about him. We can't let this go on forever." Harley grumbles, stabbing at his eggs viciously.

I shrug. "It's not like we can do anything about it right now. Illi is already on top of everything and we're no good to him right now. We have to finish school, we have to keep up the pretense of being normal teenagers, especially now Senior has the pigs interfering with our lives. The Jackal is keeping his head down for now so we will too."

Harley grumps. "Why can't we just send my uncle in to shoot the psycho fucker?"

I snort. "Well, if I thought that would work I would have sent him in. The problem is the Jackal is smart enough to know Diarmuid is on our side now, so he's smart enough to know not to put himself out in public without the right sort of protection. None of his plans will be documented, no one will know anything about his movements, he'll have a full security detail, the

whole fucking nine yards. I'm not going to underestimate him. The Crow might be cocky enough to give it a try, he might think that they can send in a spy to end this, but I know it isn't gonna work."

Harley quirks an eyebrow at me. "He got Luca in, didn't he?"

My eyes drift over to the man in question. He's just arrived at the dining hall, wearing workout shorts and a black tank so looking nothing like a teacher should, and he's filling a plate up. My mouth automatically quirks into a smile but I smother that shit so fucking quick when Harley gives me a foul look.

"What? I can't help it. We've been friends for too long."

He nudges me gently with an elbow. "Friends? He calls you 'Princess' and talks about your ass a little bit too much to be a friend."

A roll my eyes at him. "You used to talk about my tits!"

Harley wipes his mouth with a napkin and throws it down onto his plate, a freaking sexy smirk on his face. "Yeah and I wanted to own every fucking inch of you. You're not helping your argument here, babe."

I roll my eyes again. "Just because you're obsessed with my ass doesn't mean everyone else is. I mean it's not that great. Fuck, can we stick to the topic? We're supposed to be talking about how Mounts Bay has gone to fucking shit, which is saying something considering it was already pretty fucking bad in the first place."

Harley slings an arm over the back of my chair and pulls me in as close as he can. Luca walks past us and gives me a cheeky grin, dipping his head in my direction in a respectful nature. Harley growls under his breath and I do my best to look innocent as I nod back at him.

"Fucking flirting babe."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

---

**B**y Monday morning the school is writhing with gossip again and, while I don't pay much attention to that shit unless it's about my family, Avery is buzzing with excitement over it by the time we make it to our first class.

She leans against my desk with a grin. "Imogen was expelled. She went to Luca about you breaking her arm and he expelled her for bullying. Oh, and lying about you hurting her. He told her mom to seek therapy for her compulsive need to lie."

She's loud enough that the students around us all hear it and see it as the warning it is; we're untouchable, don't fuck with our family.

The grin I give back to her must look deranged but fuck if I care. Harley smirks and slings a casual arm across the back of my chair, looking around the classroom like a haughty asshole. I love it.

We get through our classes for the day which are mostly pop quizzes and tests so Blaise is a freaking morose dick and the other two are at each other's throats with their competitive bullshit. Avery floats around the school like she's the fucking Queen and I love it.

I study with Blaise while everyone else is at their extracurriculars. We spread out on the floor in front of the TV on cushions with pizza, like the first time we'd studied alone.

Blaise smirks at the little happy grins I give him. "You're such a fucking sap, Star. You're so in fucking love with me."

Dammit. "Like you're not over your fucking heels for me too. Stop trying to distract me, we're finishing this assignment tonight so we can take the weekend off."

Blaise rolls his eyes and tugs me into his lap, rocking his hips into mine

until I can't focus on any-damn-thing. "Say it, Star. Tell me you love me."

I feel so fucking weird about it, the words so raw and revealing coming out of me at him. "Ugh. Fine. I love you, Blaise Morrison."

He gives me a look and I sigh at him. "Fine. I fell for the idea of you when I was listening to your lyrics while I was going through hell. Then I met you and found out the real you was even fucking better. I don't say it easily but... I do love you."

He grins at me. "I know you do, Star, you prove it every fucking day you protect us all. It's just nice to hear it sometimes too."

Ugh, why is he being so sweet today? I wrap my arms around his neck and draw him into a kiss, fuck the assignment. He groans and nips at my lips, his hands trailing up my ribs and under my shirt until he's palming my tits.

"You've been fucking teasing me all night with these, not wearing a bra. I knew all I had to do was get you in my lap and then I'd get to spread you out on this floor and fuck you until you're screaming for me."

Whelp. Yes please. I rock my hips and grind down onto his dick. "Maybe we should go to your room, so Avery doesn't get back and stab you for this."

He bites my shoulder. "Maybe we should defile her bed again."

My hips falter and I give him a glare. "What the fuck is with you and her bed?"

He laughs and pushes me up so he can stand and haul me into his arms again. "Well, when she's bitching me out for shit it's nice to remember how tight your pussy was around my dick when I fucked you on her bed."

Ok, we did not fuck on her bed. My hands might have been braced against it, but at no point did our naked bodies touch it. I feel a little woozy at the very thought of Avery finding out about it.

"Take me to your room and fuck me. We can do it on Harley's bed if you're so set on pissing someone off tonight."

He laughs and walks us out into the hall and through to the guys room. I tuck my head into his neck so I don't have to see any of the other students who may be lurking but Blaise doesn't even bother to look.

He kicks the door shut behind us and flicks the lock, holding me tight against his body with one arm under my ass.

"I'm glad all my extra food hasn't stopped you from being able to haul me around everywhere." I murmur at him, wriggling a little against his chest.

"You're fucking tiny, Star. If anything, we should feed you more. Fuck, your tits are amazing as it is, if they get any bigger I'm going to give up on

school and music, just stay locked up at the ranch titty fucking you at all hours of the day.”

That doesn't make any damn sense. “Just shut up and stick your dick in me, Morrison. You've officially fucking lost your damn mind.”

He cackles at me and slings me down on Harley's bed, the dick. Then I watch as he strips off. Fuck, the sight of him still has me drooling, all colorful ink and long, muscular limbs. Ugh. It's just unfair for him to be so hot, like how am I supposed to be a functioning human when he looks at me like that with that face on that body? Rude. Just plain rude.

“Well? Are you going to stare, Star, or are you going to get your fucking clothes off?”

I throw my panties at his face, laughing when he catches them and throws them on his bed. “Don't fucking steal them! I barely have enough as it is!”

He crawls up my body, kissing and running his tongue along my skin as he goes. “You better not have some guy stealing them again. I'll be the first to kill him for you.”

I snort but it comes out all weird and moan-like. “Yeah, the guys stealing it are you and Ash. Is it some fucking kink I should know about?”

He drops down so he's covering me, his dick rubbing against my thigh and I wriggle until he's lined up with my pussy. I'm not like clawing-at-his-back desperate yet but it won't take much to get me there.

He grins down at me, kissing me slow and deep, like there's no rush at all. I mean, there's not but I'd kind of like his dick in me now. Like now.

The fucker laughs at me. “I love that you never get sick of this, you're always fucking desperate for me.”

I grunt at him. “What part of ‘stick your dick in me’ has you confused, Morrison?”

He smirks at me, all dark and devilish, and slides two fingers in me, hooking them and rubbing at my G spot. He rolls until we're on our sides and he has both hands free.

He hooks his hand behind my leg and yanks it up over his hip for better access and then pulls his fingers out to run them through my dripping pussy, spreading my arousal around until he can slip a finger into my ass.

I grunt, because these guys keep catching me unaware with their wandering fingers, but I don't say a goddamn word. Ash has well and truly taught me that I love this.

Blaise smirks at me, all cocky pride, and I try not to blush and snark back

at him. “Ash told me all about your night, Star. Did you love it as much as he said you did? Did you love Ash’s dick filling you up here and Harley’s fingers in this pussy? Maybe I should call one of them, get them to come help keep you nice and full.”

I gasp out moaning and rocking against him, his dick sliding against my soaking pussy and rubbing on my clit. I can’t think straight. I don’t even fucking want to anymore, I’d rather stay in this hazing, lusty state where none of our problems matter anymore.

The door unlocks but I’m so fucking lost in Blaise’s lips I barely acknowledge the sound. I don’t know if it’s Ash or Harley, but we’re past the point of me caring. I know they all want me, I know none of them care about sharing, and Blaise’s words have sunk into my brain now.

I want them to fill me up.

“Fuck Mouny, I’m glad I left training early.” Ash drawls, and I shiver.

I moan into Blaise’s lips and he breaks away. “I was just about to call you, man. Get the fuck over here.”

Then he kisses me again, his hand sliding into my hair and fisting so I can’t move away. I want to watch Ash strip, there’s nothing fucking better than seeing them get naked for me, but the firm dominance of his grip is such a fucking turn-on. I get so lost in his kiss that I startle when Ash presses in behind me, like a fucking wall of turned on Beaumont. Ugh. So freaking hot.

Ash bites my shoulder and runs his hands down my back until he gets to my ass, spreading my cheeks wide. I break away from Blaise’s kiss to glance back at him, his eyes glued to where Blaise’s fingers are pumping in and out of my ass.

Ash smirks at me. “Turn over, Mouny, looks like Morrison has staked his claim.”

Blaise laughs and helps move me around, reaching back to grab lube. “I’ve definitely called dibs. No more waiting until I pass out for the group sex, Star.”

Ash doesn’t snark along with him, his eyes are fixed on my tits as I get an eyeful of him as well. He’s all flushed and clean from his shower after his track practice. I don’t know how the fuck he looks so good right after he’s run for miles, it’s like he’s fucking blessed or something. Inhuman. A fucking god.

They both also work together a little too well, stroking and touching me, and the cogs start turning in my brain.

“Have you done this before?” I don’t want to know, not really, but the curiosity claws at my gut.

Ash’s hand slides up to my throat as he kisses me. “Not like this. I’ve never wanted to like this.”

“And now?” I whisper, out of breath entirely.

“I want everything with you.”

Ash pulls away from me and slides down my body, biting my hips until I gasp. Blaise chuckles in my ear, pushing me until I’m flat on my back and Ash is flicking my clit with his tongue, then moving down to slide his tongue inside me. Holy fuck, I’ll never get used to this feeling.

“This will be easier if you’ve already come, Star.” He murmurs against my neck, sucking and kissing me there so I’ll be marked up for the whole damn world to see. Fuck, I can’t find it in myself to give a damn.

He sucks at my nipples, biting softly and groaning when I gasp, but I can’t figure out where to focus my attention when Ash is eating me out like I’m his last freaking meal on Earth. I’m shaking and crying out, nearly fucking screaming when I finally come, grinding on his face like somehow I’ll be able to get closer to him. His eyes are dark and hooded as he pushes up to kiss me, sharing the taste of me between our lips. Blaise grabs my chin and turns me so he can chase the taste. My whole body shudders.

Ash rolls and pulls me onto his chest, grunting as I slide myself down onto his fucking perfect cock, letting him fill me up. I give myself a second to breathe before I lean down and kiss him, rocking my hips to meet his own thrusts.

I feel Blaise kneel on the bed behind me, his hand running over my ass as he slicks his dick up with the lube. The synthetic smell of cherries hits me, the smug dickhead, but before I can think of something to snap at him he pushes in.

Well, holy sweet lord fuck.

Just. Seriously. Fuck.

“Look at that face. Mounty, have you died and gone to heaven? I can feel you dripping down my cock, you fucking love it.” Ash drawls out, and Blaise’s hips begin to move and fuck yes, I have gone to heaven. I can’t think, they’re touching every single part of me, rubbing and grinding and pushing, and my body just fucking overloads with lust. It’s fucking perfect.

Ash catches my throat with his hand and pulls me down to a biting kiss, his other hand gripping my hip and grinds his dick into me. Blaise has a little



more movement and he holds my other hip, pumping away like he has something to prove.

I gasp and clench down on them both as I come again, screaming against Ash's lips as he tries to swallow the sound. He's trying to fucking consume me.

Blaise's hips stutter to a halt as he groans, long and low, and pulls out to come all over my ass.

The second Blaise pulls away Ash flips me over onto my back, hooking my knees up and spreading me open to him, pounding into me until I think we're going to break the damn bed but it feels fucking incredible and I'm gasping as my body slams into another orgasm. I think I must blackout for a second because the next thing I know Ash is grunting and biting my lips as he comes, absolute fucking perfection.

These boys are going to fucking kill me but I'd die every damn day with a smile for them.

Ash drags me into the shower with him, holding me up when my jello legs try to give out. He's full of slow touches and murmured praises, and I just soak it the fuck up.

I jump out and leave him in there to finish up, he's been too focussed on me to clean himself off, when my phone rings. I frown and fumble around to answer it.

"I'm outside your door, come open up for me." Illi grumbles and I frown at the weird tone he's using.

I throw a shirt and yoga pants on, ignoring Ash's pissy comments about our shower being interrupted. "Why didn't you just knock? Blaise is here too, he'd let you in."

He grunts and gasps a little. "Ok, fuck, don't freak out but I've been... stabbed a little."

I blanch, and scramble to get to the door, flinging it open without really considering if that's a good idea. It's not, because Illi was leaning on it and he falls forward. As soon as his weight hits me my bad leg buckles and we both go over.

Blaise shouts loud enough as he lurches towards us that Ash hears him

and comes running out of the bathroom, a towel clutched around his waist. He curses viciously at Illi until I manage to roll the Butcher off of me and he catches sight of all of the blood.

“What the fuck happened?” He snarls, and I frantically start searching Illi for exactly where he’s been stabbed.

He barely has the energy to reply to Ash, and his voice is thready when he says, “Let the record show, I can take on fourteen of Matteo’s best men and walk out alive. That psycho fuck needs to train his people better. It was like fighting drunk toddlers. One of them got lucky, it was a cheap shot that somehow managed to land.”

I scoff at him, and rip my shirt off to pack into his wound. I speak without thinking, “What the fuck did they stab you with, a fucking sword? It looks like they twisted it.”

Avery bursts through the door. She gets one look at Illi and chokes on her gag reflex, but her voice is strong down the phone as she calls for a doctor. I’m so fucking glad she’s here; I need someone who’s got contacts and a clear head because all I can think about is the fact I can see Illi’s intestines. Fuck.

“Why didn’t you go to Doc? I could’ve come down and had your back, fuck school.” I croak and when he chuckles it’s all gurgling and wet sounding.

“Doc’s dead kid. The Jackal is cleaning house. Everyone who likes you is out, and Doc fucking loved you. There isn’t gonna be friendly faces left in the Bay for us soon.”

Tears start but I ignore them. They won’t help hold Illi’s guts in.

“It’s not that bad, babe.” I startle, and Harley’s big hands gently pry mine away, taking their place. “Go wash up, Avery’s doctor isn’t too far away. We’ll get him fixed.”

I stare at him for a second and then nod. It’s going to be fine.

It fucking has to be.

Avery’s doctor arrives before I leave to wash the blood away from my hands. I only go because Ash and Harley insist, and Blaise comes with me to force me back into the shower. The shirt and yoga pants are ruined, I had no idea I was so completely covered in Illi’s blood.

Fuck.

It must have been fucking close to hitting something life threatening. I try not to panic as I scrub. Everything is fine. Maybe if I keep saying it to

myself, it'll come true.

Six hours and one very competent but nervous doctor later, Illi is tucked into the roll out bed and snarling about taking the pain meds. He'd refused to be knocked out while he'd been sewn back together, but thankfully he'd passed out a few times. It made the whole thing much more bearable for me.

Once the doctor has been paid, from my pocket much to Avery and Ash's annoyance, and escorted out, Illi tries to get out of the bed and I prepare myself for a fight. I don't want to have to fight him while he's injured like that but I will.

"Odie's at a safe house but I'm not fucking leaving her there after Matteo's shown just how far he's willing to go to take us out." He snarls at me, and I plant my feet, hands on my hips, and stare the fucker down. He's not fucking moving.

Ash snaps at him, pissy at the tone he's using at me, "Where is she? I'll bring her here. No one will get past us all."

Illi grunts and seals his mouth shut until I think about upper-cutting him. Stubborn dick. Finally, after they've glared at each other for a good minute, Illi grunts an address at him then snaps, "If you let anything fucking touch her-"

Ash cuts him off. "I'm not going to promise you anything, I'm going to state a fucking fact. She will be here in under an hour, untouched and only worrying about you. While I'm gone, refrain from speaking to Lips like you just did or I'll choke the fucking life out of you."

Then he grabs his car keys, jerks his head at Blaise, and they walk out together. I'm kind of a puddle but I manage to contain my swooning. Illi's eyes stay glued to the door for a second then he grunts at me, "He's a good kid. Make sure you keep that one."

Harley grunts at him from where he's helping Avery mop up the gore from the floor and walls. "She's keeping us all, this isn't a fucking competition. It's not a trial to see which one of us is the best fit."

I scoff at them both and say, "They're all a good fit. I'll have them until they're sick of me."

Illi grunts and grinds his teeth as he settles back in the bed to get comfortable. "I look forward to being the joint best man at your weird-ass wedding."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

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**A** blood soaked crime scene makes the news. Avery pulls faces the entire way through but watches the coverage with eagle eyes, scouring it for clues and tip-offs. I watch just enough to know that Illi isn't going to be hauled in for questioning and then I get my focus back on my old friend. He's a grumpy fuck when he's injured and worried about Odie.

My phone rings while I'm trying to talk him into taking the drugs Avery's doctor left behind.

"Is it possible for your deranged friend to keep a low profile? We already have enough work on our hands now the Jackal and Senior have made this a media play-off."

I grit my teeth at the Crow's tone. "Why are you trying to get on my shit list, Atticus?"

Avery's head snaps around and her eyes flare as they catch mine.

"His DNA was everywhere. The Coyote will be up for days wiping it all from the police files."

I roll my eyes. "Tell Jackson I'll triple his fee as an apology. Tell him I'll use one of my favors."

I hear his teeth grind. "Wolf, there's a protocol-"

I cut him the fuck off. "No, there's no fucking protocol left because the Twelve is in a fucking mess. You should have killed him when you had the chance! Now he's just had Illi gutted. Yep, I just had to help hold my brother's fucking guts in until the doctor got here! Oh, and we had to call someone new because our usual doc is dead, killed by the Jackal for being my friend. No. No, I'm done with the protocol of the Twelve. Either you're

my family or you're not. That's the fucking line."

I hang up on him.

My hands have a fine tremble to them, I mean, I've just cussed out our biggest ally and someone who is probably in the top ten most powerful men in the country but fuck, I'm so fucking done.

Avery gives me a tiny smile, full of worry and respect, and my phone buzzes again. I take a deep breath before I look down.

*Ignore the cold hearted asshole. You're right. Can me and Vi be part of your fambam?*

Lord help me.

*I'll take it to the vote. You might want to quit calling Avery the hottie though, Ash will beat the life right out of you.*

I tuck the phone back into my pocket as Harley walks over to me with a coffee, catching my fingers in his and tugging me over to the couch. I take the coffee, gulping it down to get me through this all-nighter. Harley slumps down next to me, tucking me under his arm and kissing the top of my head.

"Did you just tell Atticus to go fuck himself?" He murmurs into my hair, and I nod.

"Jackson and Viola want in, too. We need to vote about it once the others are back and Illi is... conscious." I say, and the stubborn dick himself scoffs at me.

"I'm not fucking sleeping until Odie is here." He rasps, and I wince. He sounds fucking awful.

Then, thank the fucking universe, the sound of the door unlocking is as loud as a gunshot through the silence of the room. Odie bursts in, frantic and terrified, and the stream of French pouring out of her is almost too rapid for me to pick up, and I've been fluent for years. The grimace on Illi's face is a sure sign she's tearing him a new asshole for getting hurt. Good. I don't want to think about how badly he was injured, I'll never freaking sleep again.

"I'm fine, baby girl, I'm fine." He says, holding a hand out to her and the glare she gives him would melt skin off of most men.

"You are very fucking clearly not fine, *mon monstre!* Ash said you needed surgery, that's not fine!" Her voice gets higher and higher as she goes on, pouring salt on all of his wounds.

Blaise slumps down on the cushions on the floor and Ash sits with Avery, rubbing a hand over his face.

"Did you have to tell her about the surgery?" Illi grunts out, talking over

Odie who is cussing him out something fierce as she looks at his bandages.

Ash's hand drops and he gives Illi a savage, poisonous smile. "Payback. Don't ever be a dick to Lips again. You're lucky you've lost too much blood or I'd wipe the floor with you."

Illi huffs and tries to coax Odie into the pullout with him but she's pissed, all the fear and terror solidifying into pure rage at her husband for daring to be stabbed.

It's fairly amusing.

"I'm glad you didn't cuss me out like that for nearly dying." Harley says, his eyes on the spectacle.

I snort. "I would've if you'd been awake when I got to you. Your extended nap saved your ass."

I wait until the next afternoon, after we all survive our classes without sleep, before I pull Odie aside and tell her they should stay until Illi has healed up enough to pee standing without passing out. She agrees completely and then spends the rest of the night arguing with Illi over it.

We all eat dinner together and watch it unfold.

"They must have the best angry, hate sex." Avery says, and Ash cuts her a dirty look.

Blaise roars with laughter, as much as he can when he looks so fucking exhausted that he might drop dead at any second. The poor little rich kid. "She's a fucking badass for climbing into bed with the Butcher as it is, throwing hate sex in there means she's got balls of steel."

Harley scoffs and knocks back a beer. "I wouldn't be talking about her balls within Illi's earshot. He's not going to be an invalid for long."

After dinner, we all split up between the rooms for the night and I sleep like the dead tucked between Harley and Blaise in the boy's room, lulled to a dreamless sleep by the sounds of my family surrounding me.

I wake to Avery next door in our room making French toast, pancakes, oatmeal, piles of bacon and eggs, enough food to feed an army of teenage boys, not just the three we have taking up space around us. I flick the coffee machine on and fix us both a cup each without saying a word. If Avery needs to cook out her feelings, then who am I to judge?

“You’re right, none of this would have happened if we’d have killed the Jackal when he came to Hannaford last year.” She murmurs, and I shrug.

“We didn’t have enough people on our side at that point. I was just saying that to him because I’m angry about it all and I hate how much shit Illi gets. He’s a good guy.”

Avery nods and sips her coffee, stirring at a mountain of eggs like this is all completely normal. “He’s the best. I don’t need to know the whole story to agree with you, your word is enough for me. Plus, he’s done everything for our family. I’m glad you told Atticus to fuck off.”

She still looks conflicted, so I start moving the food to the table for her. “So what’s eating you? He’s alive, we’re all safe enough here, we’re... closer to having a plan for the Jackal.”

She chews her lip and fusses with the plates as I grab them. Her eyes flit over to Ash’s sleeping form, tucked up in my bed alone, and she says, “I’m just having an off day.”

Fucking Atticus Crawford.

After a raucous and filling breakfast Harley and I help Odie force some painkillers into Illi and he passes out again. His wound looks good, not inflamed or weeping, so I start to think maybe we’re out of danger with it. The thought of how many infections he could have caught between the alleyway in the Bay and the boy’s room here at Hannaford is fucking mind-numbingly terrifying. Obviously, the antibiotics Avery’s doctor has mainlined into him is doing wonders.

It’s a Saturday morning, so Harley and Ash head out to their extracurriculars and Blaise skips out on boxing so he can sprawl out in front of the TV with his lyric book and guitar. I stay at the dining room table to help Avery with her homework because I don’t need Odie seeing me turn into a puddle over his music.

Odie joins us, flicking through the textbooks and murmuring in French about the shortcomings of the education system here. I smile at her, used to her ramblings and grumpy attitude. There’s never a time where she’s mellow about shit when her husband is injured.

“I’m bored.” She says with a sigh.

Avery’s eyes flick up from her phone and she shrugs. “How are you at planning world domination? That’s what Lips and I usually do when we’re bored. I’m sure you’ll have some insight, what with your upbringing and your life with the Butcher.”

I flinch. Odie hates Illi's nickname just as much as I do, we both see the man behind the reputation, and when we're not around other people she refuses to acknowledge that name for him. I sigh in relief when she doesn't react to it at all.

Instead, Odie smiles sweetly, always a sign of her devious mind at work.

"World domination should always start by taking out the weak men and finding a strong one to stand by your side. Or three if you are la Loup."

Avery smirks, then her eyes flick to where Blaise is sprawled out in front of the TV. He's messing around on his guitar, not taking notice of us at all, but Avery doesn't ever talk about guys in front of... the guys.

Odie's eyes follow Avery's and she switches to French. "Are you in love with this man, the Crow?"

Blaise glances up at us with a frown, but I just smile sweetly at him. He frowns harder because, seriously, when do I ever smile sweetly?

Avery pulls a face. "I was in love with a man who doesn't exist, I was in love with the idea of who I thought Atticus Crawford was. Lips and I have gone through this so many times. I think I should just stay away from men."

I sit back in my chair to watch them both go through this. I feel like I'm about to get a Masterclass at girl talk, because Odie and Avery are so much better at this than I will ever be.

Odie shrugs. "What are the differences between the man you thought he was and the man that he is, are they so different that you do not love him anymore?"

Avery sighs and flicks the page in her own copy of Vogue. "The Crow is much better suited to me. It's the lying I can't get past. It doesn't matter that he was doing it for me, it matters that he was doing it in the first place."

Odie nods. "I get that. How do you know he's not going to lie again?"

"Exactly. If he was willing to do this and tell himself it was for my own good what's to stop him from doing worse? The world we live in is never going to be safe. I can't be questioning whether or not he's lying to me every time something happens."

Ouch. Sucks to be the Crow today. I ask, "So you're voting no? Because I was only voting yes for you."

Avery rolls her eyes. "Why do we have to vote right now? Can't we leave it open until I figure out what the hell I'm going to do?"

Odie leans back in her chair. "So there's a chance that you'll change your mind? There's a chance he can prove himself to you?"



Avery groans and covers her face with her hands. "I hate how pathetic he makes me feel. I would skin any other man for treating me like this and making me feel like some pathetic little girl. I fucking hate it."

Even in French the swearing sounds weird coming out of her mouth. "We don't have to decide now. We do need to vote about Jackson and Viola though."

Odie points out an outfit to Avery and I watch as they giggle over it together. "We need to get you out and about on dates as soon as this war is over. Johnny has quite a few friends I could set you up with."

I shake my head vehemently. "I've met his friends and there is no fucking chance she is dating any of them."

Odie giggles. "Now now la Loup, you can't judge a man by the worst thing he's done."

I pull a face at her. "Yes, I can."

She giggles and shrugs, and we all fall silent again for a few minutes. I get back to critiquing Avery's history assignment while they flip through their magazines.

"I love him." Avery whispers, Odie nods with a little smile.

"I know. Let's get it out and in the air. Talk it out so we can figure out how to get him under your thumb. Men can be stupid sometimes."

I blink. Avery just let it out there without any extra prodding, Odie is a freaking wizard. Fuck, maybe I should take notes?

"I don't take failure well. I don't like things being out of place." Avery stops and takes a deep breath, her eyes catching mine before she continues, "My father used to beat Ash if I failed at things. I get the sense of death in the air when things don't follow my plan. Atticus has always followed his own path, but I always knew I could trust him. Him lying to me about being the Crow... it was too much. I've always trusted him and told him everything. He's lied to me from the very beginning. I can't help but be angry at him."

Odie shrugs. "That's fair. He deserves some hell for that. Do you understand why he's doing it though?"

Avery rolls her eyes. "I have eyes, I know he's doing it to protect me. The problem is... this is our world. This is how we live, and that is never going to change. Even after we kill the Jackal and Senior, someone else will take their place. Either he trusts me to be strong enough to deal with this or he doesn't. We're doomed."

My chest aches at the tone she's using. She sounds so fucking... resigned.

Bleak. Unlike herself, that I want to change my fucking vote.

She's right though, there's never going to be a time in our lives where we're not being stalked by monsters. I'm always going to be the Wolf, he'll always be the Crow, and she will always be a Beaumont.

We can't change that.

"Maybe you need to take a step back. Let la Loup take care of the Crow, let her take the weight of his anger and misguided care."

I nod. "I can do that, Aves. We can do that. Just give yourself some time to figure out how you're going to get him on his knees for you."

A week later, Illi finally wins the argument and they both pack up to leave. I secured a safe house for them that was picked out by Avery, security set up and monitored by the Coyote, and only members of our family know where it is.

We voted Jackson and Viola in, unanimous though Illi is still a little pissy about it.

The Crow is still out.

"Thanks for letting us crash here kid." Illi says, flinging his arm around my shoulders and squeezing me in a weird side hug.

I shrug. "Anytime."

Ash rolls out of my bed and stalks past us, stealing my cup of coffee on the way through. "She says anytime but what she really means is upgrade your security so we never have to do this again. Being jammed in here all together like this has given me hives."

I roll my eyes at him. Jammed in? There's three times the amount of space in one of these rooms as what our group home had and we shared with eleven other kids.

Fucking rich kids.

Odie smiles at Ash like he's her best friend, and my heart does this weird little clench over it. Everything that is happening is bringing us closer together as a family, so as long as we survive it, it's all worth it. I will tell myself that every damn day until this war is over.

Illi grunts at him, throwing an arm around Odie's shoulders and tucking her firmly into his side. "Alright, you grumpy asshole, we'll get out of your

hair before your blue balls fucking kill you. Horny teenage boys; I don't know how you fucking keep up with them, kid."

I will not blush. I'm a killer, *dammit*. "It's not so bad. One of them is usually a grumpy dick and tantruming so it makes it a little easier on the... scheduling."

Illi roars with laughter, fucking quakes with it, and whispers loudly into Odie's ear, "Three guesses which one is the grumpy dick, baby girl."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

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**A**fter Illi's stabbing we decide to stay at Hannaford for spring break where the Crow's men will be walking the grounds and watching the security cameras around the clock.

I spend the time pouring over the plans I've drawn up of the Jackal's fortress, talking Avery through the best ways in and out, provided he hasn't taken a fucking jackhammer to the walls in an effort to keep me out. Now that Illi has had to slow down his protection of us until his guts are less... perforated, the death toll in the Bay is only getting worse.

Avery stays true to her word and stops speaking to Atticus, leaving all of the planning and liaising to me. I quickly decide that I owe that girl another blood diamond because within days I'm ready to smash my phone and never replace the fucking thing.

I also grit my teeth the second I see Atticus' phone number because it's always him calling.

"You can't induct another member of the Twelve. That's not how the institution works." He snaps, and I seriously consider stabbing my fork into my own eyeballs to get out of this conversation. Ash steals my coffee, the dick, and slips his hand onto my thigh, his fingers stroking and petting.

"Yeah, I know. I'm not inducting him, he just joined the family. It means he's one of us."

Atticus huffs down the line at me and I start to count in French to stay calm. "He's just gotten a Wolf insignia tattoo. Viola got one too. They both wear your mark now and that's not how things are done, Wolf."

Well, fuck. "I didn't ask him to do that. If you have a problem with it, talk to him. Just know, if you start shit with Jackson, we side with him."

He hangs up on me. Grumpy fuck.

Ash squeezes my thigh. “We should go take a shower.”

Harley huffs and rolls his eyes from where he’s sitting at the other end of the table. “Avery will stab you for trying.”

I glance over my shoulder to where Avery is doing yoga in front of the TV. It’s been a part of her detox and she’s trying to focus on her dance more, to find her joy or some shit. I dunno, I just want her to be happy so I’m all about it.

“Good thing you’re going to stay here and keep her nice and distracted for us.”

Harley quirks an eyebrow. “And why the fuck would I do that?”

Ash smirks at him as his fingers drifts up until they’re stroking me through my shorts. I flush and Harley’s eyes flare.

“You keep Avery busy and I’ll sleep in here with her tonight so you can have our room to yourself. I’ll even talk Morrison into sleeping here as well, I’ll suffer through some bullshit movie for you.”

His fingers are fucking sinful. Without meaning to, my hips start to rock against them but I catch myself and snap my legs shut, glancing back at Avery who hasn’t noticed, thank fuck.

Harley stares at me for a second longer, then he stands to stalk into the kitchen for beer and snacks. “Fine. But you better get Morrison on board.”

Ash drags me into the bathroom with him and I follow him like a lost fucking puppy. He strips me off, biting his lip at the tiny scraps of lace covering me, a set he’d given me for Christmas that I haven’t worn for him yet. I fucking preen under his gaze.

He tears his own clothes off without a care and I drop to my knees the second his pants hit the floor. I lick my way up his dick, slowly sucking on the head and looking up at Ash in a way I know sends him insane, and he doesn’t disappoint.

“You look so fucking good down there, Mouny.” He groans, fisting his hand in my hair to hold me still so he can fuck my mouth. It’s taken me a minute to work up to this but now I can swallow around his dick like it’s my favorite fucking treat at the drop of a hat.

You’d think this was degrading, him using me like this, but the adoration in his eyes as he watches me is the best compliment, and when he pulls out to tug me to my feet his kiss is intoxicating, his own type of worship that’s so different to the other two but just as fucking complete.

The bathroom door opens and Blaise stomps in, looking grumpy and tired. I glance over at him and Ash runs a hand down my spine, cupping my ass possessively.

“You getting in or not?” He grunts at Blaise, flicking open the shower door and lifting me in. I get my hand around his dick and slowly pump, hating that he’s stopped me from making him come. I’m sure he has other plans but fuck it, I’m pouting.

Blaise watches us both as he strips off, his eyes flaring as Ash positions me exactly how he wants me, tugging at my body and slapping my ass once I arch my back for him.

He slides in and I could die, it feels that good. My skin heats as Blaise’s eyes stay fixed on me, watching my body move as Ash’s hips start to grind against my ass, like he doesn’t really want to pull away. I moan, low and throaty, as he gets his phone out and takes a photo. I should snap at him, be fucking pissed off he’s leaving evidence someone like the Coyote could easily find, but right now I think I’d let him do anything just so long as he keeps watching me.

He hops up on the bathroom counter and fists his own dick, pumping it and groaning. Oh sweet merciful lord, I could die.

The bathroom door bangs loudly on the wall as Harley stomps in, dragging Blaise off of the sink and shoving him out of the room, nakedness be damned.

“What the fuck-“

“You know what, dickhead. Go walk Avery to ballet.”

Then Harley throws a pile of clothes at him and slams the door, ignoring the vicious curses my rock god throws at him and the equally enraged snarling from Avery.

Ash scoffs against the skin of my neck, his hips still pumping into me, so full I can’t fucking breathe. I didn’t think it was possible to feel more than what I am with Ash buried inside me, but when he pushes me forward, bending me so my hands are braced against the glass and he can hold my hips to move faster, I watch Harley slowly strip off and the fierce need in his eyes sets my body alight until I’m coming, squeezing like a vice on Ash’s fucking huge cock.

Ash grunts like he’s dying, and says, “Get the fuck in here before she makes me blow too fast. I want to watch her take us both.”

I shiver all over, the aftershocks of the orgasm rippling through me are

nothing compared to the excitement of having them both at once.

Harley's eyes track the shiver, the goosebumps, the gushing between my legs and around Ash's cock, and the fire in his eyes only burns hotter. He steps into the shower and grips the back of my neck with one big hand to pull my face up to meet his kiss. Ash releases his death-grip on my hips and pulls out, while I whimper pathetically at the loss of his perfect cock.

"Shh, babe, we'll fix it. We'll give you what you need." Harley breathes in between his long and lingering kisses, deep and consuming.

He turns me around, shifting and lifting and tugging, until I'm held between them both, Ash plunging back into my pussy while Harley is lining up to take my ass. I let my head drop back onto Harley's shoulder, the way it always does, and I stare into Ash's eyes as Harley pushes in. The last thing I see before my eyes roll back into my head is the smug look on his face as they both take me apart. Pushing and pulling, groping and squeezing, the rough strokes of their hands all over me, a girl can only handle so much before I die.

Ash's hand slides back up over my chest to my throat to tug my lips back to his. "Come around my cock for me, I want to watch you go over the edge with both of us inside you."

My breathing stutters to a stop even before his fingers tighten, and Harley's hand slides down over my hip to my clit, licking and sucking at my neck as he strokes and I'm a squirming mess between them. I can feel myself dripping around Ash as I come, shouting out so loud I pray Blaise and Avery have left for her dance class already. Ash grunts as he comes with me, his hips pumping as he strokes out his orgasm inside me. Harley groans slowly under his breath as Ash pulls out, dropping my legs down and bending me over until I'm back to where I started; braced against the glass door as he fucks me from behind. His fingers tighten on my hips when he lets out his own shout, coming so hard it joins Ash's mess dripping down my legs.

I take a second to remember how the fuck to breathe.

Harley washes me off, his fingers gentle but firm, and my legs shake so much I have to hold his shoulders to stay upright. When his fingers slide over my raw and deliciously abused pussy I jerk away and he scoffs at me.

"You're a fucking skittish thing."

I'd poke him or something if he wasn't holding me up. "Sorry, my brain is leaking out of my ears right now. Stop looking so freaking smug!"

He laughs at me. "I'm allowed to be smug for making you come so hard,

babe. Come on, let's get you into bed before Morrison gets back and throws his fucking tantrum."

I stay in my room for the night because I have breakfast plans with Avery in the morning and don't want to deal with pissy boys if she marches into their room at 7am to get my ass up. Harley keeps his dibs on being with me for the night, leaving the other two snarking at each other as they go back over to their room, neither of them wanting to take the couch for the night.

Harley and I eat leftover pizza in bed with a movie playing on Harley's beat-up laptop because finally having access to his inheritance hasn't changed him one freaking bit.

When I mention this to him he quirks an eyebrow at me. "I dunno, I'm looking up what it's going to cost to put my 'Stang back together and I think I'm going to fucking pay it. It'll triple the cost of the thing but... I think it's worth it."

I nod and put my coffee back on my side table, leaning back into his chest. "I think it's worth it too. It'll still be less than what Avery spends on hair care for the year."

His chuckle is a rumble under my cheek and I let my focus slide back to the laptop. The movie is an old action flick, something I've never seen before but Harley knows all of the words and pokes me when something important is about to happen to make sure I'm watching. It's cute but I can barely keep my eyes open, being here, warm and safe and wrapped up in his arms, it's my happy place.

The door unlocks and Avery stomps through it like the devil in on her ass. "Lips, there's another box. Lips, it's- I can't! I'm sorry!"

I jump up and off of the bed, Harley cursing up a storm behind me as he scrambles up. "It's okay. I'll get it. Go to the bathroom, or the boy's room! I'll sort it out."

She clamps a hand over her mouth. "This one is different, Lips. I could smell it."

Ah fuck. "Bathroom, Aves. I promise you, I'll sort it out and have the smell gone before you're out of the shower."

Blaise stalks in after her, the box in his hands but held as far away from



his body as possible. “It fucking reeks! This one isn’t fresh. I need to go burn my clothes and sit in a fucking bleach bath.”

I grimace as the smell finally hits me and, yep, this one has been dead for a few days. Fuck, depending on how much the skin has slipped we might not even be able to tell who the fuck it is. That adds a whole new layer of headache to this fucking situation! I’ll have to call the Crow and see if we can run the DNA through the police and FBI databases. Fuck, I’m also going to have to call the Boar and tell him he fucking sucks at sorting this shit out!

While I’m planning and raging in my head Blaise moves towards the coffee table to set the box down and out of his hands.

“Wait! I’ll get some plastic sheeting from Lips’ kit, don’t put it down until I do.” Harley snaps, and I wait until it’s all set up before I go over. Blaise tears out of the room and back over to his room, I’m assuming to burn everything he owns, and I snap on gloves before I slice through the packaging tape holding the box together. Ah, fuck. It’s leaking. Greeeeeat, dead head juice all over the fucking room to clean up. Avery’s going to have a freaking aneurysm.

The head is way too far gone to tell who it is. The bloating and the blood pooling makes it impossible to even guess an ethnicity. Long dark hair though, and it was once curled, so I’m going to assume it’s a woman for now. I reach in to move it in the box a little, just sort of shifting it for clues. I don’t want to lift it up in case the slipping skin... well, slips right the hell off.

That’s when I see the tattoo.

The fucking tattoo.

Fuck.

Holy fuck.

“Okay, we have a serious fucking problem. Avery, call Atticus and get him here now. 911, state of emergency, whatever it takes. Harley, call Illi and get him here too. We need the security surveillance and we’re officially on fucking lockdown.” I ramble, hoping I have all of our bases covered but holy fuck, this is a whole new level of bad.

“Who is it, Mouny?” Harley says, and I turn to see them both watching me. Avery is hovering in the bathroom door jamb, but she and Harley both have their phones to their ears. Their eyes are glued to me, my face must be all sorts of fucked up.

“It’s the fucking Lynx.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

---

The entire school goes into lockdown.

Everyone is told that there's been a bomb threat and Luca takes up watch at our front door. I invite him in, there's no point in him sitting out there, but he shakes his head, all of his usual charm and smiles wiped clean.

Illi arrives, looking far more alive than the last time I saw him, thank fuck. He's moving better, and the grins and cheeky jokes are back. He talks shit with Harley and Blaise as they start strapping their weapons to their body.

Ash leans against the bathroom door, already armed to the freakin hilt, and tries to talk Avery down from the ledge. She's so freaked out by the smell and... fluids, she's already had two showers. Her skin must be scrubbed raw by now, if she climbs in again she's going to be shredded to pieces.

"You can swap rooms. You can have our room, and we'll all stay over there until we're sure this mess is dealt with." His voice is coaxing through the door and her answering snort makes it through loud and clear.

"So my choices are rotting brain matter or slipping in Morrison's DNA matter? Fuck this, I'm dropping out!"

I slip my knife into the pocket of my ripped jeans and pull one of Avery's cashmere cardigans over the soft v neck shirt I've permanently borrowed from Ash. I like that Harley's necklace sits between my boobs and only the chain can be seen when I'm wearing this shirt. It feels like our own little secret, something between the four of us, like my creed tattoo.

I lean against the door with Ash. "Aves, I'm going to deal with this and then I'm going to spend the rest of the night bleaching the entire room. You

can stay over in the guy's room until I'm done, Blaise will change all of the sheets. You and Ash can do a total renovation if you want. How about you get rid of all of their china and start again. That usually cheers you up."

There's a pause and then she says, "I am getting sick of the blue. I was thinking about a deep, forest green. Not olive."

I pull a face because I have no fucking clue of what she's rambling about. "Of course not, fuck olive. Do you think you can leave the bathroom now?"

She retches. "Not until the head is gone. And the smell, too."

I sigh and turn to Ash who's glaring at the box. Guilt pools in my stomach and I lean against him, my forehead pressing into his chest, and I mumble. "I'm sorry. My shit is haunting us again."

He scoffs at me. "Your shit is just messing with our shit. She's like this because of Joey and Senior, and technically your shit has dealt with one of those issues already. I don't want her going down to the meeting with us while she's rattled. She works well under pressure but not rotting-head-in-her-space pressure."

I sigh again and he lets me lean on him for another minute.

Fuck, to think just a few hours ago I was being held up in that shower by him and Harley having the time of my fucking life, and now the real world has come back to slap me in the damn face again.

"Stop thinking about it. If Avery finds out we'll have to burn the entire school down for her and start again. Huxerly is a shit hole, I don't want to graduate there." He murmurs, and my head jerks up to meet his eyes.

He traces his finger over my cheeks. "Pretty fucking obvious with this blush what you're thinking about, Mounnty."

Well, fuck.

There's a knock at the door and Harley opens it, the Crow stepping in with a frown as he takes in the room. I frown right back at him as the Boar steps in behind him with his usual crowd of surly bikers with him.

Fuck. I was not expecting a fucking family reunion in my room while I'm draped over one of my three boyfriends. Jesus fucking wept.

"Wolf." The Boar grunts, and Harley's eyes narrow to slits at him.

Ugh. "Boar. I thought the meeting was in the dining hall? We were just about to head down."

Blaise gives me a look, smirking even as he still looks a little green. I sigh at his twisted freaking humor and Ash huffs at him as well.

The Boar looks at each of the guys in my room and then stalks over to the

box, a couple of his bikers moving with him. "I'm here for the box. My boys will get it out of here before the Lynx's family comes looking."

I swallow as he looks inside it. "They know she's dead?"

He grunts. "Yeah, her body was left for them to find."

The Crow gives him a sharp look. "What was left of it, he means. She was mutilated."

I hear Avery start to shuffle around in the bathroom, getting dressed and prepared for the meeting finally. "You gonna give me this guy's name so I can have a chat with him?"

The Boar's eyes snap over to the Crow, who's standing rigid by the door, his eyes as cold as ever. "Not in mixed company kid. I was waiting to do it in person but I'll put in a call, speed things up a bit. We're due for a meeting anyway."

The Boar tucks the box under his arm like the leaking doesn't bother him, fucking gross, and leaves. There's a second of silence before Ash starts up.

"What the fuck are you even doing here?" Ash snarls, and Avery sighs loud enough it travels through the door.

Atticus turns his trademark cold, calculating looks to Ash. I feel him tense against me, rage slowly seeping into every fiber of his being. "I needed to check if Avery was okay."

Harley groans as Ash stalks forward, two of the Crow's men stepping up and between them. Avery comes out of the bathroom, looking perfectly put together and hugging the far wall to stay as far away from the mess as possible.

Atticus continues, "I've called the meeting so I can question the Boar. We need to know who is sending the boxes. Killing the Lynx was not really in Lips' best interest and what's to stop this deranged stalker from taking you out for being around her? What about Avery, what if he comes for her next?"

Ash's eyes narrow. "We'll protect Avery like we always have."

Atticus's eyes flick over Ash's face and then he opens his stupid mouth and starts a whole new fucking war for me do have to deal with. "Great job you've done so far, when is the Devil due to collect his property?"

Ash is easily the quickest human on the fucking planet and Atticus's men have no chance of stopping him from taking their boss down.

It takes Illi and Harley to peel him off. Blaise refuses to help, he just stands in front of Avery and smirks when Ash's fists come back bloody. I stay out of the way because all hell would break loose if I got caught in the

crossfire. Harley would pull his gun and we'd all be fucked once the Crow's brains were in pieces on the freaking floor.

Harley grabs Atticus by his neatly pressed shirt and hauls him back onto his feet, shoving him towards the door. "You never fucking learn, do you? You just gotta start shit."

Atticus' nose is pouring blood but he barely seems to notice it, other than pressing his pocket square against it. Knowing that rich asshole that thing probably cost more than my entire wardrobe did.

Ugh.

"The others are on their way here. Try to remember that they're all the leaders of large criminal organizations and keep your smart mouths shut before you get us all killed." He snaps and walks out.

I slip my arm into Avery's as we walk, wincing at her flinch. Her hands are a mess from all of the scrubbing, her body must be a freaking mess. Ash watches her obsessively, as if looking away from her will have her whisked out from under his nose. Blaise walks with him, watching them both with that look on his face, the one where he's getting himself ready to defend and destroy for his family.

Illi leads the way with Harley, the two of them talking about the car parts Harley is looking for. We're not exactly being quiet and yet not a single door opens to see what the noise is about on the way down to the dining hall. The other students are that terrified of us, of the whole fucking world going to shit around them, that they stay in their own lanes.

Smart move.

When we get to the dining hall, half the members still aren't here yet but there's coffee being served.

Coffee.

Illi quirks an eyebrow at me. "Quickest way to take someone out is giving them a dirty batch of their drug of choice."

I huff at him but really I'm crying on the inside; I'm supposed to be asleep in Harley's arms right now not dealing with this bullshit. "I know. I won't touch it."

The Crow overhears us and snaps, "I'm not going to poison my allies, I'm

not the fucking Jackal.”

Illi smirks over his shoulder at him. “Nah, you’re something else entirely.”

Great. Wonderful. Fucking perfect. “I shouldn’t have caffeine this late on a school night anyway.”

Avery giggles at me, her first real sign of life since the box showed up, and I laugh with her. The Crow has rearranged the seating plan and we find seats where I can keep an eye on the doors, not trusting the Jackal or, fuck, the Lynx’s family to not show up and kill us all while we’re busy having a chat about sweet fuck all. Avery takes the seat next to me and Ash hesitates for a second before sitting on my other side.

Illi, Harley, and Blaise all lean against the dining table behind us, murmuring quietly to each other as more members arrive with their usual groups of followers, flunkies, and paid men.

“This place is fucking swanky.” The Coyote says, walking into the room like he’s casing the place for a heist later. He probably fucking is, though he definitely doesn’t need the money.

Viola rolls her eyes at him but it’s affectionate and he blows her a kiss in return. It’s fucking weird to see him like that, he’s usually such a playful flirt. When he catches my incredulous look he winks at me, ignoring the scolding look from the Crow.

He sits next to Avery and Viola sits on his other side, giving Avery a halfhearted smile. “Thanks for not killing my sister. Sorry she’s been a fucking nightmare.”

Avery shrugs. “I hope she’s enjoying her new school, hopefully there’s less gang members there.”

The Coyote rolls his eyes, slinging his arm around Viola. “She’s already fucking half the school there, I think she’s enjoying being the new girl.”

Viola elbows him in the gut so hard he does this little wheeze thing and I grin at her. He needs someone to keep him in line.

The Stag arrives with another O’Cronin, a little older than him and a little more... haggard-looking. He nods respectfully at the Crow, then the Boar, then he sits next to Ash and does the same to the Coyote and me. He glances over his shoulder and I don’t see what Harley does but he gives him a nod too. Well, well. Aren’t we a cozy fucking bunch?

When the Tiger finally arrives, frazzled and alone, the Crow takes his seat. The rest all spread out, the room falling silent as the severity of the

situation sinks in.

“Another member has been taken out, the Lynx’s head was delivered to the Wolf tonight.”

The Tiger starts to sweat, I’m half afraid the fucker is going to keel over of a heart attack. The Bear, looking thinner and frazzled now he has nothing left, just stares at the floor like nothing matters anymore. His defeatist posture pisses me off. How fucking pathetic.

“So the Jackal has decided enough is enough and he’s going to start killing us all for the Wolf? Maybe it’s time we got her out. Maybe it’s time we all stop paying the price for her being a cocktease.” The Fox snaps, and the Crow holds a hand up before one of my guys starts swinging.

“This was not the Jackal. This was someone else who is... working on their own but killing anyone who crosses the Wolf.”

“I thought you were going to deal with this?” Avery says to the Boar with an arched eyebrow and a fucking fierce look on her face, and I narrow my eyes at the looks of shock the other members give us.

Avery fucking Beaumont would tear any-freaking-one of them to pieces if given the chance and I’ll be fucked if she has to show them respect now the whole institution of the Twelve has gone to hell in a hand basket. Plus, she needs a little pep in her step after the box and nothing makes her happier than tearing down powerful men.

The Boar’s eyes drop down to where my hand is tucked in Avery’s and then he answers her plainly, no censure or ego in him at all. “The Lynx went back to the Jackal. She decided she didn’t want to risk her rat of a son after all, so I think the Wolf’s... ally made the right call.”

The Crow frowns at him. “This... ally is unknown to the Wolf, that makes him a wildcard. The Lynx should have been dealt with by the Twelve, not taken out by some outsider. How do we know this ally won’t turn on the rest of us?”

The Boar crosses his arms and leans forward in his chair. He looks every inch the cold-hearted biker lord I’ve always known he is. “It’s pretty fucking simple; don’t hurt the Wolf, don’t threaten her, don’t stalk her, don’t piss her off, and don’t ever conspire to fucking kill her. Stay on her good side and you’ll live.”

What. The. Actual. Fuck?

Harley raises his eyebrows at me and I shrug. I’m officially out of ideas on what the fuck is going on.

“Good thing we’re team Wolf.” The Coyote says to Viola, loud and brash as he tucks her hair back from her face. I see the Wolf insignia tattooed to the back of his hand and I raise my brow at him. He grins and blows me a kiss like a dick, like he’s impersonating Illi’s roguish charms and not quite hitting the mark.

Illi himself stares at the other members of the Twelve, one by one, like he’s sizing them up. The Crow takes it without so much as an eyebrow lift, but the Viper rises to his bait.

"Just because the Wolf has decided to put up with your shitty attitude doesn't mean the rest of us have to. Remember that you have no power in this room except maybe having the ear of the girl you sold your soul to."

Illi shrugs. "I don't give a shit about the opinions of some gambling man. Things are changing. My loyalty stays with the Wolf, but the institution of the Twelve is going to go through some big fucking changes now the Jackal has lost his head."

The Ox crosses his arms and huffs at him. “Talking like that will get you and the Wolf in deep shit, Butcher. The type of shit you don’t walk away from.”

The Boar leans forward in his seat, his face a vicious mask that lets you know the biker shit draped all over him isn’t a persona he’s a fucking killer, through and through. “Did I not just tell you to keep your fucking mouth shut about her?”

The room bursts into argument, the Ox and the Viper cussing the Boar out, but the biker doesn’t look at all phased by it. His eyes are on the Crow, sizing him up.

Ash does his own assessment of the shit-fight before us, looking the Boar up and down. Then he waits until the room quietens down to say to me in a not-so-subtle whisper, “You look nothing like him.”

Fuck. I cut him a look as half the fucking room turns to look at us. “Can we stick to the topic on hand? Another member is dead. What are we going to do about that?”

There’s silence for a second and then, surprisingly, the Fox says, “What we always do. Split the empire, run the Game, and keep the streets of the Bay under our control.”



## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

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The Boar leaves the meeting before I can speak to him, snapping at his guys and stalking out like his ass is on fire. I let it go, only because I'm still fucking worried about Avery and we've got to deal with the mess in our room before we can pass out. The Coyote bumps knuckles with Illi, fucking weird, and then leaves with the Crow. I'm sure they'll still be trying to dig up every last clue into who the hell the killer is.

It takes four hours to get the smell of rotting flesh out of our room and to bleach every surface. We lose more furniture because Avery goes on a rampage but it's not like she can't afford it. Once we've finally gotten rid of all evidence we all go to bed in the guy's room, just to let the bleach scent air out a bit more.

We're woken by the sharp rap of knuckles on the door at dawn, less than an hour of sleep for us all.

I lurch up and out of bed before Avery manages to hit the light, and Harley snarls at me to wait for him but I ignore him. This isn't going to be good.

Luca is dressed and armed to the hilt, sour faced and grim toned as he says, "The Boar's MC was hit last night while the meeting was on. The Jackal took out the entire fucking building, only the guys at the docks and those who came with him survived. Things are about to get much, much worse. Just letting you know, Wolf."

Wolf.

He never calls me that unless we're around the other members of the Twelve, fuck.

I nod and close the door, rubbing my hand over my face. Was the

bartender there as well? Did the Jackal kill her just for being there? It's a stupid thing to ask myself, of course she was and of course he did. Women mean nothing to him.

Not even me.

Harley kisses my forehead and heads to the shower to get ready for his swim training. I feel exhausted just thinking about the hard work he's about to put his body through but I know it's his coping mechanism. Ash will probably head out for a run soon and Blaise will... well, he'll be a morose fuck and write a song or drink or something.

I climb into Ash's bed with Avery and stare at the ceiling with her for a minute, neither of us speaking while we sort through the mess in our heads.

"We need to kill him. He's working his way through the Twelve, picking off the bigger members so we have less numbers. The Ox will be next, I bet." Avery murmurs, and I nod.

"He's probably working on the Crow's numbers too, we just haven't heard about it from the secretive dick."

She snorts at me and her hand finds mine under the blankets. "Sorry I freaked out. I feel like a pansy."

I shake my head. "Don't be stupid, you know I don't care about that shit. I'm sorry, hacked up body parts keep following me, no matter where the hell I am."

She giggles and squeezes my hand. "I think it's kind of sweet. Whoever it is must care a whole lot about you. The Boar made him sound fierce. Maybe it is your dad, maybe he just doesn't know how to speak to you after he... you know, abandoned you."

I groan. "I don't think he even knows I exist. The Boar didn't, not until the Game. What would you do, Aves? Would you go find him and have it out with the guy?"

Harley gets out of the shower and interrupts us, kissing me again on his way out. The other two are still out, Blaise snoring and Ash so deeply asleep like always that there's no chance of waking him with our whispers.

Avery hums under her breath. "I guess I'd want to know. I'd have to. It was the same with Harley, as soon as I knew he existed I had to know him. Once I realized he was another good family member, someone worth having in our lives, then I did everything I could to keep him. Would you keep your father? How the hell are you going to explain the guys to him?"

I shudder. "I don't need a father. Besides, the way the Boar spoke... I just

don't see us ever having any sort of a relationship. It's the... brothers I want to meet. The Boar said they were 'good enough', whatever the fuck that means. I know we won't have what you and Ash do but it'd be nice to know them, I guess."

Avery squeezes my hand again. "So we kill the Jackal, deal with Senior, then we meet your brothers and pray they're nothing like Joey. Brothers can be deranged serial killers you know."

I roll my eyes. "Yeah, you kind of ended up on both ends of the spectrum there didn't you? The perfect brother and the fucking psycho brother. Let's pray these ones are closer to Ash."

She sighs and nods, getting up and heading to the kitchen to start on breakfast. When I see the cookbook out, I know she's over the panic and we're back to our regular programming of being her human lab rats at meal times.

The school stays in lockdown, only our family still coming and going as they please because we're not dumb enough to post shit on the internet about the school or try to sneak out to get high in the groundskeeper's cottage. Ash goes for a run after breakfast and I snark at Blaise until he finally relents and works on his homework with me. It's peaceful and soothing for Avery and she only scrubs the bathroom out twice. I'm taking it as a win.

Illi calls me later that day.

"The streets are lined with bodies. There isn't a man, woman, or child in the Bay who isn't aware that the Jackal has lost his shit. The MC was bad, kid. Some of his most blood-soaked work. The pigs are everywhere trying to figure it out but he's got enough of them in his pocket now Beaumont is working with him that they're getting nowhere."

Holy shit. I knew it was going to get bad, I knew he would come after me and my family, but somehow I didn't think his crazy would take over the whole fucking city.

"What's the plan, kid? What are we going to do to fix this?"

I sigh. "I can't leave this up to the Crow anymore. He might know state secrets, he might know about business, but he knows sweet fuck all about dealing with Matteo."

"He's like a fucking cockroach, kid. He'll survive anything."

I duck into the bathroom so I don't disturb Blaise and Avery from where they're still studying together. Avery gives me a look but I smile at her, I'll catch her up on the important shit later. Harley stalks in after me, not trusting

me to keep him fully in the loop too. I roll my eyes at him.

"It's not going to happen with one of the Crow's attempts. It's going to take you and I going down there and dealing with it ourselves." I murmur into my phone. I scrub a palm over my face and Harley pulls me into his arms, running a soothing hand down my back.

Illi scoffs at me. "Yeah, no shit. None of these guys know how Matteo thinks. Crawford keeps expecting him to act like any other guy but he's not, he's a fucking psychopath. It takes a lot to get into that sort of mindset. Crawford's too clean-cut for that shit."

I chuckle at him. "Yeah well, neither of us need any help thinking like a psycho. You're the Butcher and I'm the Wolf. That kind of explains everything."

Harley chuckles under his breath at me and I glance back up to meet his eyes. He looks particularly panty-meltingly hot when he's gloating over my fucked-up mind.

"You're making eyes at one of your boys right now, aren't you? I can tell by the way your breathing. It's alright, it's not like I was hoping for your full attention or anything, kid." Illi teases, and goddamnit a blush creeps over my cheeks.

"Like you can talk! I've sat through so many nights in bars with you draped all over Odie and me trying not to puke at the cheesy lines you give her." I snap.

He cackles at me and hangs up.

Classes resume the next day and I find myself... bored.

I'm itching to head down to the Bay and deal with the Jackal myself. Knowing that he's gone full-blown bloodthirsty killer has only made me more sure of our plans to take him out. There's no chance of redemption. There's no tortured hero buried underneath the controlling obsessive psycho, there's just an egotistical maniac who is throwing a temper tantrum over not getting his own way. He's lost the backing of the Twelve so now he's going to make the entire city pay.

Harley deals with my twitchy attitude all day like a saint but by dinner I think he's ready to either fuck or fight it out of me. Avery glares over her

pasta at him, reading him like an open freaking book, and he snarks at her.

“This is my room. If I want to fuck my girlfriend in my own room, then I fucking will.”

I roll my eyes at him. “Don’t be a dick, she’s working her way up to being okay in our room again.”

Avery’s eyes sparkle with sadistic glee and she uses her sweetest voice to say, “Keep up with that attitude, Harls, and I’ll gut you in your sleep. Illi showed me how to do it to a big guy like you, you won’t stand a chance.”

Harley grumbles under his breath about not teaching Avery any other techniques until she stops being quite so bloodthirsty, then he tugs me to my feet. “Let’s go to the pool. We can go for a swim to get some of this energy out of you.”

I shrug and get up to grab a bathing suit, ducking into the bathroom to get changed and ignoring Avery’s snarky comments about never using the pool again because of Harley’s jizz floating around because just nope, no thanks. I don’t need to be a part of that conversation at all. Avery takes way too much pleasure in embarrassing the absolute shit out of me.

We get out the door and halfway to the stairs when we find Blaise, all sweaty and flushed from the gym. My knees go all weak at him and he turns on his heel to come with us to the pool.

“Pretty sure I didn’t invite you.” Harley snarks, and Blaise scoffs back at him.

“Pretty sure I don’t need an invitation. Besides, I was there when Star’s bathing suit arrived, I’m not missing this.”

Oh. Right. My bathing suit.

I’d stupidly told Avery she could pick one out for me so I didn’t have to steal hers any more. I’d felt guilty for my last encounter in the pool with Harley, especially when the video got out and she’d thrown the last one out. I’m assuming it was at least a thousand dollars, because all of her shit is at bare minimum a ridiculous price.

So the bathing suit is just barely a one piece because there is a piece of string connecting them. It’s fucking obscene but I guess I should get over being shy about this shit considering they’ve both fucked me until I was screaming. Ash and Harley even fucked me at the same damn time. Jesus. I need to get a hold of myself.

Blaise threads his fingers through mine, smirking at my blush. “I hope you never lose that, Star. It would make fucking with you less fun.”

Harley joins him in laughing, the traitorous asshole.

The pool is empty, thank fuck, and Harley immediately strips off, diving into the water in an elegant arc. He looks like a freaking god as he moves through the water.

“You’re drooling, Star.” Blaise drawls, and I elbow him in the ribs.

“Don’t get pissy, I drool at you all the damn time.”

He nods and pulls at my shirt, peeking down the back. “Show me what you’re hiding under here. Arbour is an idiot for jumping in and missing the show.”

There isn’t going to be a show. I pull my jacket off and unbutton my jeans when he interrupts me. “Do it slower, Mouny, it doesn’t feel like a strip tease if you rush it.”

I roll my eyes at him. “You’ve seen it all before, what the hell does it matter?”

He tilts his head back, his eyes hooded and dark, and my mouth suddenly gets dry. “Because when you strip slowly, I get to think about all of my favorite parts of you. All of the parts I want so desperately to see and you make me wait. Then I get pissed off at waiting and tear the whole thing off of you and fuck you on the edge of the pool while Harley does laps.”

I gulp.

He makes a great case.

I drag the zipper of my jeans down a little slower, feeling just a little bit stupid as I slowly push them down my legs. When I bend over to grab them from around my ankles he says, “Turn around if you’re going to bend over, Star.”

I do it, snarking at him, “How many strip teases have you had? Fuck, don’t answer that.”

He laughs at me, which I do not take as a good sign, and I spin back around to slowly strip my shirt off. I still feel like an idiot but when he bites his lip that eases a little.

Him palming his dick through his shorts, already hard for me, helps too.

Harley’s phone buzzes but we ignore it, he’s busy doing laps and then only people we give a shit about know where to find us. But then Blaise’s phone buzzes too. Fuck.

He huffs, frustrated as fuck at being interrupted. “What, asshole I’m kind of busy... no, you said you were taking her down... no, she’s definitely not here... Lips and Harley are both here, there’s no one else... FUCK!”

He doesn't have to say another word, my spiraling mind already knows exactly what's happened.

Avery is gone.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

---

I'm on the phone to the Crow before Harley is even out of the pool, cursing up a storm as he snatches his clothes and shoves them on. We all scramble for the door, the pain in my leg be damned.

"Who the fuck was watching her?" Atticus snarls at me and nope, not today, motherfucker.

"She was in our room which is guarded by your fucking men, so this lands with you. You had better fucking find her right the fuck now."

There's a pause and then I hear Jackson say, "Ash goes in and then fucking nothing. I don't see how she's not still in that room."

"Well she's not hiding under the fucking bed!" I snap and Atticus snaps back, "I thought Ash could take care of her? He has no issues throwing it in my face that he guards her better than I do."

"You fucking survive what he has and then we can talk about whether or not he's allowed a shitty attitude." I hiss back at him, and Harley's phone rings. He frowns at his phone for a second and then answers. His eyebrows shoot up.

I grab his arm to get his attention.

"We've got her."

I ignore Atticus's enraged snarl as I hang up on him and Harley hands his phone to me.

"Looks like my family has fucked Harley over again, Wolf." says Aodhan, and I could fucking scream.

Diarmuid.

That piece of fucking shit Irishman.

"Tell me everything right now, we're on our way." I say, attempting to



stay calm but calm went out the window the second Blaise answered Ash's call. Fuck, Ash must be losing his damn mind right now.

"I'm following them now. He drove through the docks with her, he hasn't been down here since you inducted him, so I knew something was up."

Fuck me, the traitorous piece of shit must have driven like a psycho to get her down there that fast. He knows if I catch him he's fucking dead and he's right, my fingers are itching to slit him open. Slowly, and with great fucking glee.

Aodhan continues, the sounds of cars hooting and shouting coming through the phone loud and clear. "I saw him sling her over his shoulder to switch cars... Wolf, he got in with the Jackal. They're heading for his territory, I'd say they're going back to his vaults. I'll go in after her, you have my word."

He hangs up on me just as we arrive back at our room. I fling the door open, ready for the chaos and carnage Ash must have unleashed when he'd gotten out of the shower to find her gone.

Ash hasn't destroyed the room.

He's standing by the kitchen, staring at the photo Lance had taken of us all together that Avery loves so much. He doesn't move when we come in, like he's saying some prayer over her photo.

"We know where she is. Diarmuid took her, Aodhan is following them." I say, and Harley starts throwing shit around as he grabs his guns and a leather jacket, suiting up for blood. The Crow tries calling me and I ignore it. There's nothing he can do for me now.

Ash doesn't speak, he just moves to strap his body with every single weapon Illi delivered to him, and then he perches on his bed with blank eyes. He watches me with the sort of intensity that chokes me up but I ignore all of that as I pull my clothes on.

I've been here before. I've lost someone like this before. I can get her back.

I just can't think about what exactly might be happening to her right now. I can't think about whether the Jackal has gotten his hands on her already because that'll only make me reckless and I can't be that right now.

I need to be as calm as Ash is. As sure as he is that we're going to fucking fix this.

Blaise finishes up strapping his knives on and then he perches next to his best friend without a word, just a silent show of support. All in, ride or die.

We're going to do whatever it takes to get her

My phone starts buzzing again and I finally look at the fucking thing, only really to turn it off. The Boar's phone number flashes at me. Fuck it, I pick it up.

"The Crow called so I heard you've lost your friend, kid. I've got info on her, a couple of guys heading over there to take stock, they were with the Stag when the Irish cock went past. The Crow is heading over here now, so stay calm and just head over-" I cut him the fuck off even as my vision goes fucking blood red in my rage at his nonchalant tone.

"Don't fucking tell me to stay calm, my fucking sister has been taken. That's what she is, she's more to me than blood!" I scream down the phone, and the Boar just fucking lets me.

"I've sent someone else to watch her. There is nothing that could happen to her with him there. Nothing, Wolf." He says, calm as anything and I try not to fucking scream at him again but, sweet lord fuck, it's hard.

"I'm not really up for trusting anyone right now, Boar. The last person I trusted is the dead man walking who took her."

The Boar grunts a little and I can hear him walking. He's somewhere in the Bay, I hear a door swing shut behind him and the noise of the street turns into the raucous sounds of bikers. "The guy watching her is the guy who's been sending you those packages. He walked into Beaumont manor and cut little Joey Beaumont's head off while fifty or so of his father's men were downstairs keeping watch. Did the same thing at the Lynx's estate. You telling me you don't think he can handle O'Cronin and D'Ardo? I promise you, he won't let anything happen to your girl. Fuck, if I thought you were one to sit around I'd just get him to bring her home but we both know you're already half way out the door to her."

I groan and let my head drop back against the wall. "Tell me who the fuck he is."

He sighs and I hear him swallow. I know it'll be whiskey and that makes something kind of break in my chest. "I think it's better if you meet him. You two can talk things through after we get your girl back."

He hangs up and then my phone lights up with a text from the Crow.

The Boar's MC clubhouse. Now. We're going in together. Be ready to end this, whatever it takes.

I argue with Harley about going to the clubhouse the entire way out to the car.

I get it, I want to head in there for her right the hell now but the Jackal knows we're coming. Illi is going to meet us there, having been away at the safe house with Odie, and we can't show up without the cavalry; we'd be dead and gone in under a fucking minute. Surprisingly, it's Ash who agrees with me.

"We can't save Avery if we're dead. Just get in the fucking car."

The rest of the trip is silent.

We arrive at the MC clubhouse and before I get out of the car Harley grabs my hand. I glance up to find him mulling over something in his head, a deep frown over his face.

"Everything is going to be fine. We are going to find Avery, we are going to find your uncle, and we are going to fix everything." My voice sounds so sure and fuck I wish I felt that sure.

He nods and says, "Diarmuid's death is mine. Avery took me in after my parents died and she's helped me with fucking everything, no questions asked. The O'Cronins only ever wanted a fucking puppet. An empty heir they could mold into the perfect leader they wanted. It doesn't fucking matter that he left them, Diarmuid's the exact same. He wanted me to prove a point and now that Liam's dead, he just wants the fucking bounty taking Avery in will get him. Fuck the O'Cronins, I'm taking him out myself for touching her."

I squeeze his hand back. "I would never take that right from you, but you'll have to work it out with Ash. He's going to need blood for this and I will also say, the Stag is turning out to be a decent enough kind of guy. Maybe the next generation won't be so fucking bad."

Harley grunts, not exactly agreeing with me. I slide out of the car and meet up with Ash and Blaise, who are both staring at the clubhouse like they're about to raid it.

There is nothing human left on Ash's face. I thought that would remind me of his father, or his brother, but it doesn't. All it does is remind me that we are perfect for each other because we won't let anything happen to Avery. We will get her out because how the fuck can we not?

The biker at the door nods at me respectfully and lets us pass. I was expecting the place to be empty after the Jackal attacked but the walls are bursting with brawny bikers.

"There's our fucking backup." Blaise mutters, looking around like he's

afraid to catch a disease just from standing in the room.

I shrug. "As long as they know how to shoot, I don't care what they look like."

Harley rolls his shoulders back. "The fuck are we waiting for? Where's that dickhead Crawford?"

As if summoned, he stalks out of the hallway the Boar had taken me down for our meeting, looking... well, like a pile of shit. Okay, so he's still dressed in his usual suit and his hair still looks all perfectly trimmed but his face is all sorts of fucked up.

I feel a little less like gutting him.

The Boar walks over to him to take his side and face the room. The chatter dies down instantly, the respect for their Prez is a palpable thing. They start giving out the orders for how the night is going to go down, who is moving in where. None of it matters to me, I just need them in there shooting at the Jackal's guys enough to slip past them all and find Aves.

Illi stalks in behind us, quietly clapping Ash on the back. Ash ignores it, doesn't even acknowledge Illi is there but the Butcher doesn't take offense. He just gives me a grimace.

"Sorry it took me so long."

Harley shrugs. "We've just been standing around with our thumbs up our asses anyway, no big fucking deal."

I roll my eyes and Blaise crosses his arms, staring the Crow down like he's planning on killing him for Ash. Fuck, I forget sometimes just how loyal he is. I need to get this over with before the whole lot of them start throwing themselves into danger to get her back.

If anyone is doing that it's me.

Illi starts huffing and grunting under his breath, entirely unimpressed with the plan of action. I am too but I trust my family to get the job done.

When he huffs again, loud enough that bikers around us turn to give him a look. I elbow him and whisper. "How obvious is it that he wasn't made for blood."

Illi's dark chuckle is soft but I hear his answer well enough. "Good thing we were."

No truer words spoken in this shit-fest of a night.

I finally decide I cannot take any more and I grab Ash's arm, tugging him out and back into the night air. I can't stand to listen to anymore of the bullshit. The Crow finishes up as we leave, solidifying his bullshit plan. They

aren't going to be able to find the Jackal. None of them have been in there before except Luca, and I haven't seen him anywhere so far.

It's going to come down to me.

Illi takes his own car and we all pile back into the Cadillac. The drive is short enough, the MC might be out of the slums but it's still straddling the line between there and the docks.

Blaise parks the car and we all step out, silent and fucking ready to face whatever the fuck is happening in that building. The roar of the motorcycles is deafening as dozens of men ride in, then the sleek black town cars of the Crow's men park around us. I don't bother paying any of them attention. I'm too busy looking at the mess the Jackal has made of this place.

There's blood and bodies everywhere.

None of them are men.

For fuck's sake.

"He always was a fucking psycho." Illi murmurs, lighting up a cigarette as he walks over to me.

"Odie safe?" I ask, and he nods.

"Left her over at the Crow's place. I hate the cockhead but his place is secure enough, and she's got her GPS tracker if shit got wrong. I did have to threaten that little creepy fuck about touching her though."

I frown. "Jackson? He's a flirt but he's not going to touch her. He's in love with Viola."

Illi pulls a face. "I don't like him. I don't trust any man that spends all his days playing on his computer and jerking off over porn. He needs to get out a bit more."

I roll my eyes. The conversation is good for distracting me at least, I'm thinking a little less about Avery and what is happening to her right now. I just... I can't think about it until I have her safe, then I can lose my fucking mind over it.

I'm also trying not to think about how many of these dead girls I know, how many of them lived near me in the slums, went to school with me, danced at the same parties as I did back when my life revolved around the sick games the Jackal likes to play.

Stepping back into the Jackal's territory is a jarring, fucked-up experience now that I'm away from him. My life has never felt so different as it does right now staring at these corpses. Illi steps up to my side, grimacing as he glances around at the gore still left on the streets.

"You going to be okay, kid?"

Fuck. I don't know. I roll my shoulders back. "Of course. Let's get this over and done with."

I pull the bandana tied around my neck up and over my nose. Illi pulls his up as well and I roll my eyes when I see what it has on it. The guy's face tattoo, the snarling jaws of the Wolf, stares back at me in white. The cocky bastards.

"Where the hell did you get that?" I say, glancing back to see they all have them.

Blaise shrugs. "Avery got them. Apparently, being a part of a gang means we have to coordinate this shit."

My chest hurts at the mention of her name. I let myself feel it for a second longer and then I empty myself of all of the pain, the feeling, the wishing. Once I'm nothing but a cold void, I nod to Illi.

Let's fucking end this.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

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The Crow and the Boar send their men in through the front entrance of the vaults.

On paper, this is the only way into the dilapidated bank the Jackal has made his headquarters. It's wide open and easier to defend against a hoard of bikers, so a smart defense move on the Jackal's part.

I know better than to use this entrance.

"He'll know we're coming that way, kid." Illi murmurs as I move away, and I shrug.

"It's still the best option. We take out the guard and then we're further into the building than the rest of the men. I know I'm going to face him, I know he's going to be counting on that."

Illi palms his cleaver in one hand and squeezes my arm gently in the other. "We're in and out like old times. The plan is go in through the back, find the vault keys, go to the basement, then get out, killing anyone in our way, cool? We care about nothing else going on except getting our girl and killing that fuck D'Ardo."

I nod sharply. "The Stag too. He went in after Avery so we're here for him as well."

Harley grunts under his breath and when I look at him he shrugs. "You forgot Diarmuid. He's dead too, no matter what it takes I'm killing that fuck."

The sounds of gunfire that starts up all around us gets us moving and I take the lead because I know where to go and I need Illi taking up the rear to watch our backs. The alleyway is disgusting, full of trash and reeking of piss like the whole damn street uses it as a toilet. I mean, they probably do. The

Jackal would encourage it to keep unsuspecting Mouny kids the hell away from here.

“Once this is over with, we are never coming to the slums again.” Blaise says as he gags at the smell. There’s filth everywhere so I don’t exactly blame him, I’m just used to looking around it all, ignoring the signs of how bad this place actually is.

Harley scoffs at him. “You wouldn’t have fucking survived growing up here, Morrison. Maybe you should wait in the car, leave this to those of us who aren’t spoiled pussies.”

I sigh. “We’re trying to be stealthy here guys. Do you not see the guys on the roof with guns ready to be aimed at us the second we’re in range?”

Though none of the Jackal’s guys have Diarmuid’s level of skills and I know O’Cronin won’t be up there, he’s probably not even here anymore but I don’t tell Harley that. He’s not one to stick around after he’s been paid.

I know all of his little hiding places anyway; we can track him later.

Ash pulls his gun out. “Like Illi said, the Jackal knows we’re coming and how we’re getting in there so who the fuck cares if they hear us coming.”

And then he shoots at the roof of the building. He has a silencer on, thank god or my eardrums would’ve been blown out at this close range, and it takes a second for the body to fall off of the roof and land at our feet.

Well.

“That was a great fucking shot.” Illi says, kicking the corpse as we pass it.

Ash shrugs. “We’ve been training for this day for months. You don’t think Harley’s taught us some extra tricks?”

I know the guy on the ground, I don’t look at him because I don’t need to think about what a shitty person he was right now. I need to focus on getting us in there without catching a bullet between the eyes. “There’s two others, you think you guys can get them too? Illi and I will take the door.”

They still can’t see the door from where it’s obscured but their trust in me is rock solid. Harley and Ash both pause and aim at the roof, while Blaise stays close behind me, his own gun drawn and held in his hands with the sort of confidence that comes from extensive training. I knew they’d all been working with Illi while I’d focused on planning and homework with Avery but I didn’t realize just how much they’d grown into exactly what I need.

Confident, assured killers.

Fuck.

“Blaise, when this is over remind me to apologize to you for making you



a killer.” I murmur, and he scoffs at me.

“Ash did that a long time ago, Star. No regrets. Now tell me what I’m shooting, because at the moment I kind of think I’m just going to be used as a human shield if someone aims something at you.”

I roll my eyes and make a mental note to ask him for that story. How do I keep forgetting to ask?

“Kick it in? The vests should be enough, the fuckers the Jackal has working for him aren’t exactly professionals.” Illi murmurs, and I hear two more bodies hit the cement behind us.

“Shoot it out first, let’s not start the night filling up on lead.” I say, and Illi raises his gun, shooting at the hole in the brick wall that’s covered by a large sheet of steel. It looks like nothing from here, there’s plenty of other places that have old signs propped up or slabs of wood, which is why it’s the perfect escape route.

The Jackal had used it once while I was working with him. There had been a party here and some flunky got drunk and set the place on fire. The Jackal had dragged me through here to get away from the smoke and once the fire was out he’d executed half the men here. He’d rambled and seethed about it for weeks, sure that it was an assassination attempt, not a stupid mistake by some guy who couldn’t hold his beer.

“On three-” Illi says, and Ash stalks up behind him.

“Three.” He snaps, and he shoves past us, ripping the sheet off of the wall like it’s nothing and letting it crash to the ground. He keeps his body away from the hole and thank god he does because a shot rings out from the blackness of the hole. There’s shouting, a few of the Jackal’s guys still standing, and Blaise shoves me behind him as Illi and Harley deal with them.

“I’m fine.” I snap, but Blaise holds me there with one arm easy enough. He doesn’t let me go until Illi calls out it’s safe.

“You know I’m also wearing Kevlar, right? I’m just as covered as you are.” I snap at him, and he steps back behind me as we catch up with the others. I feel irritated that he’d cover me, that he thinks I not only need his protection like that but that I’d be able to live with myself if the fucker took a bullet for me. Nope, couldn’t do it.

“You’re also nearly two fucking feet shorter than us all and your head is an open target so yeah, you can stand the fuck behind one of us. Get over it.” Harley snarks back, and for the record I’m not *that* much shorter than these overprotective assholes.

We step over a dozen dead guys, the Jackal clearly wants a few of us taken out before we get to him. He's underestimating my guys. I hold tightly onto the Wolf as I walk through the blood and gore, ignoring the crunching underneath my boots every so often as I stand in bone fragments. You shoot a guy in the head, you better believe you'll be stepping in pieces of his skull.

The hallway leads into the center of the dilapidated building. There are old beams strewn across the cracked and scorched marble floor, giving you the feel that the ceiling might cave in on you at any freaking point. Well... more of the ceiling, there's already sections that have come down.

"If he's that rich, why does he live in a shit hole?" Blaise mutters, and I shrug.

"He lives in the vaults. It's... different there. This is where the parties happen, and some of the killing." I say, and Harley's eyes meet mine as he takes the area in.

The gunfire and shouting echoes through the building and the fighting has already made its way inside. We hug the outer wall as we work our way through, staying unseen but seeing exactly what's going down.

There's a whole fucking lot of blood and death.

I start to wonder how it is the Crow is going to wipe this night from the legal history of the Bay. Does he have enough police and governors on his payroll to do it? I wonder if Avery does? How does the city explain a hundred men suddenly disappearing? Fuck, I need to keep my head in this and stop worrying.

"I'll clear the way, you lot get the keys for the vault doors. It'll be with the dope, always was." Illi says, and I nod. It'll be much easier getting down to the Jackal with them. He disappears through the dark hallway, silent and deadly.

He kills two cowering guys and stalks off as we get to the back rooms, full of drugs and cash and dead girls chained to the wall, and I grit my teeth as I take it all in. I hate this fucking place. We need to set it on fire as we leave.

Harley grimaces as he looks around. Blaise keeps his eyes on me and Ash is a blank fucking void still, cold and uncaring about anything except the job.

Harley huffs and starts to rummage around, looking for keys or something else that might come in handy, but when he opens the only other door in the room his whole body jolts and he snaps it shut again. I raise an eyebrow and he shakes his head at me.

“Whichever flunky or biker did that needs fucking therapy. He’s made the Butcher look mentally balanced.”

Illi rounds the corner and grins at Harley. “Aww, sweet of you to say! I’ve just hacked a man to pieces for saying he couldn’t wait to watch the Jackal fuck my wife once I was dead so my night is going fan-fucking-tastical. Next level amazing. I’m practically jizzing myself with joy.”

Ah hell. “Big pieces or did you really get down to business on him? I feel like no piece of him should be bigger than a quarter.”

Blaise pretends to gag, but the little psycho frown Illi has between his eyes eases off a little. “I guess I’ve been a bit slack. Wanna stomp on his skull with me?”

Fuck, the pretend gag turns into a real one as Blaise’s skin takes on a green-y tinge. He turns on his heel and starts pawing through the drugs as he helps Harley look. Nothing.

“Stop fucking wasting time. Get over here and look.” Ash snaps at Illi, and he grimaces at him.

I start tapping my way around the room, nothing the Jackal loves more than a loose floorboard to hide shit in, and Illi checks the door frames and window sills. Harley gets frustrated and kicks the chair, flipping it. Yup, there it is.

I duck down to grab the key from where it’s taped on the chair.

Harley rolls his eyes. “Are you fucking kidding me? This feels like amateur hour.”

I shrug. “The Crow is the one with all the high-tech shit. Sometimes simple works in your favor, but not today.”

I try to ignore the feeling that this *is* all a little too easy. It feels like the Jackal is playing with us, that he’s doing all of this for us, and us alone.

There’s nothing I can do but play his little game. Illi opens the door that leads to the staircase, flinging it wide and waiting for any gunshots or shouting. When there’s nothing he stalks through, gun first, then motions us forward when it’s all clear. The staircase down to the vaults feels like it never ends, like you’re heading to the center of the Earth itself as we step over the rotted-out holes every so often. Harley grabs my hand to steady me, like he knows my leg will get sore from all of the stairs, and I do my best to be gracious about it.

When we finally get to the bottom of the stairs, guns drawn, there’s already people fighting down here but it’s too fucking dark to see much. We

have no choice but to push on slowly, steady and careful.

The guys on our side made it through the Jackal's flunkies while we were finding the key and we're forced to duck behind one of the open vault doors for cover until the gunfire moves away from us, echoing down the dark, cavernous hall.

Then we move. It's dark down here, but I could walk through it with my eyes closed if I had to and the layout hasn't changed a bit since I was last here. I try to keep my eyes off of the damage being done, of all of the men currently being torn apart by bullets and bikers and men dressed in black. I keep my feet moving. I don't owe loyalty to any of these men but the level of carnage around us makes this place look like a war zone. Even for me it's unsettling.

I just need to make it to the stairs because Avery will be in the basement. She's going to be as close to the Jackal's vault as possible.

"We heading straight to hell, kid?" says Illi.

Ash gives him a look. "Do I even fucking want to know what that is?"

I shrug. "It's where he does all of his evil, and it's in the fucking basement. Pretty self-explanatory."

Illi shrugs. "Every man, or woman if she's like the Wolf, should have a room to work in. The Jackal's is just extra fucking bad because he's a dick."

Harley scoffs. "What's yours called then? The shop?"

Illi smirks. "I work in a fridge. Slanting floor with a drain to clear the blood. Lots of knives. You should come check it out when this is over."

I roll my eyes and hiss quietly at them, "What part of this being a stealthy operation is escaping you guys? Talk shop later."

I'm not used to all of this chatter while I work and it's getting on my nerves pretty damn quick. Illi shrugs and lets it go, and my guys all fall silent.

I motion the guys forward and we do our best to stay out of the bikers' way. They are here to get rid of the Jackal's henchmen. My job is to find the Jackal himself.

I choose not to tell my guys that I'm planning on doing it myself, no matter what it takes. I let them think that we're here to get Avery back, just to retrieve her and let the others take down this empire, but I doubt the Crow is going to focus his energy personally on finding the Jackal. I can't leave here tonight without knowing he's out of our lives permanently.

Illi gives me a side eye. "I know exactly what you're thinking, kid. I can take care of it."

Harley cuts us both a look and I do my best not to glare back at him. "Like you're gonna be any better facing him. He loves nothing more than playing with your head, Illi. He's been in yours as much as he's been in mine. I'm sure he has big plans for us both."

Illi strokes a hand down his cleaver. "That's a shame for him because my plans include pulling his intestines out and strangling him with them. Doubt he's factored that in."

Blaise snorts. "Are we sure you're not the deranged one? That's not even physically possible, is it?"

It is.

Illi just gives him a slap on the back, smirking and shaking his head, and we creep forward. The sounds of fighting and gunfire gets louder and louder as we move forward but the echoing from being underground makes it impossible to figure out exactly how close we are or where it's coming from. At every corner we have to stop and scout it out, usually Illi checking it out while I pray he doesn't catch a bullet between the eyes.

When we finally get close to the vaults we need I know for sure that the Jackal has been waiting for us. It all works out too perfectly to have been a coincidence.

There's a loud crash, the snapping and cracking of the slabs of stone that make up the walls breaking apart and smashing on the ground, and Illi shoves the guys to the side, slinging an arm around me and slamming me to the ground as he shields me from the falling stone and the shower of bullets that come through once the wall is down. I don't have time to protect my face on the way down and pain bursts through my nose as I slam into the ground. Fuck. It's probably broken.

Illi's body is at least three times bigger than mine. He's fucking huge, a wall of muscle and untapped fury waiting for release, and he curves himself around me protectively. I flatten myself to the dirty stone floor so Illi isn't a bigger target, he's already huge so he doesn't need to stick out any further.

I hear the rough shouting and growling of the bikers, and the slang the Jackal's guys all use, and I lay there and pray they all get taken out and that my guys are all safe. I pray that they're all out here and none of them are in torturing Avery, that she's tied to a chair somewhere being pissed off at the fucking audacity of these people, daring to kidnap Avery fucking Beaumont. Don't they know she's an evil queen, a dictator that breathes fire and can eviscerate a grown man with a single look?

That's what I lay here and pray.

There's more grunting and the wall next to us starts to break apart as well. Illi shoves me again as he lurches the other way and the skin on my hands and legs get torn up by the rubble on the ground as I move, the wall crashing down where we were. If he hadn't been so fast we'd have been crushed, except now I'm all alone with a pile of stones and concrete rubble separating me from the boys. The icy fingers of dread creep up my spine. Too fucking convenient.

Then a hand wraps around my mouth.

## CHAPTER THIRTY

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**T**here's no point struggling.

He's much bigger than me, like most guys are, and his arms are like iron bands around my waist. He wouldn't hesitate to break my arm, smash my other leg and destroy my life, none of these things are even close to too far for this man.

So I wait.

He drags me into his vault, into the room Illi called hell, and I start to take note of everything. Avery isn't here, thank fuck, but there's blood everywhere. It's not hers. I won't believe it's hers, not for a second, because grief only blinds you. I need to be wide awake to deal with this man.

My old friend.

If you could ever have called him that.

He slams me back into the only chair in the room. There's straps and chains hanging off it, a dozen different ways to keep a man sitting still for all of the torture the Jackal wants to put him through, and I force my face to stay blank as he straps me in.

The things I've seen him do to men in this chair, well, let's just say I'm not fucking happy sitting in it, even if it's only going to last for a little while.

The Jackal smiles down at me, stroking my cheek and spreading the blood from my nose around like the image of me covered in my own blood is the best fucking thing he's ever seen. "Did you like my little treasure hunt for you, Starbright? I left you clues in all your favorite places. All the places only you would know, all the things only you could do."

I grimace at him, baring my bloodied teeth and wishing I could stick my knife through his throat. "Me and Johnny. The best friend you betrayed

because you're not loyal or trustworthy or worthy of love. Johnny knows every last thing about you, and he'll be here for you soon."

He tsk's at me. "They left you behind, Starbright. After I took you they just kept moving."

His tone is coaxing, like he thinks he can sway me. That my mind is so weak willed I'll crumble at his feet at knowing they stayed the course. He doesn't get it, he doesn't get me and my family at all. It doesn't matter to me that they went after Avery, that's exactly what I wanted them to do. They could leave here with her now and I'd be fucking thrilled about it.

I also know they won't leave me.

He turns his back on me as he sets out his tools, confident the thin straps around my thighs will be enough to keep me secure without my knife to help me get free. He's right; without my beloved Matriarch, the knife that had been with me for years and hundred of kills, it would be impossible to get out.

The razorblade in my sleeve will get me out.

Avery's Matriarch in my boot will be perfectly adequate to kill him.

"I see it. I see you defying me, you think they love you. Ah, my Wolf, they don't. They weren't here for you, Starbright. They don't know all of your secrets, they don't know about the monster inside you. Only I can be that person for you, I need to remind you of that, so we can be together. You need to remember that you're mine." He's still using that voice, the one he uses to fool women into thinking he's human. The one he used on me as a child, to get me to follow him around in the group home, the one he used to teach me how to kill a man.

I don't believe it anymore.

His mouth sets into a dark slash across his face, the fury and loathing seeping into every fiber of his being. He doesn't like it when I say no. I never was allowed to say no to him.

He stares into my eyes as he slides his knife into my gut.

Sweat breaks out over my forehead but I don't scream or cry or *plead* with him to stop.

"I'm picking all my favorite places, Starbright. All of the sections I can slide right into without hitting something vital. Should we do this all day? Should we spend the day like our good old times, finding all the ways I can make you scream?"

I will not scream.



I will not utter a fucking sound, even if it makes my death excruciating.

I let my head roll back on my shoulders and I stare up at the inky black ceiling. Countdown in French. The best way to deal with this is to breathe through it. Empty my mind, nothing, counting, don't think, don't think about-

He grabs a fistful of my hair and rips my head back down until I'm staring at him. "Don't hide from me, you'll take this and you'll do what you're told. I'll keep going until my Wolf is back."

There's no holding it back. I laugh in his face, savage and wild and *fuck him*. Fuck him for being evil, for not being the guy I wanted him to be. Fuck him for being evil, manipulative, and not really giving a fuck about who I really am. I let every last one of these things show on my face because I'm not afraid of him anymore.

He grabs my face, squeezing until my cheeks and my bleeding nose scream at me, my head going a little fuzzy. "You know better, Wolf. I taught you better than this."

He lets my face go, his fingernails dragging down my cheeks, to turn away from me again and I see him grab the blowtorch, one of those little ones that chefs use, and fuck no, I'm not getting burned today. That's not fucking happening.

I flex my wrist until my sleeve rides up, something Illi taught me to do, and the razor blade is easy enough to slice through the leather. The fucker should have used the chains but, as he keeps on pointing out, I know him so fucking well.

He likes the indents the leather leaves in skin when his victims struggle.

I move quickly while his back is still turned. He's an arrogant fuck, and he's so fixated as he lifts the brand up to the blowtorch flame. There's no fucking way I'm leaving here with his insignia burned into my skin.

No fucking way.

The straps are sliced and off my thighs, Avery's knife clutched in my hands as he turns and I stab him in the side, right where one of his kidneys is. Fuck, I hope I've hit it.

He grunts and shoves me away, grabbing Avery's knife out and getting a hand around my throat. I kick a leg out and hit the torch, still burning away on the ground where he's dropped it and his grip loosens off a little as the flame hits his ankle, a vicious stream of cursing streaming from him.

He slams my head back against the wall and I feel as though my brain rattles around in my skull, stars bursting across my eyes. While my vision is

still patchy, he slams Avery's knife into my stomach again, pressing in close to whisper in my ear. "That was very stupid, Starbright. Now you don't have any chances to get away from me."

My voice comes out all gurgling and slurred. "I don't need to get away from you. I need to keep you focused on me."

He chuckles, his breath fanning down my neck until I want to peel the skin off just to get any trace of him off of my body. "You need to stop thinking about them, my little Wolf. They won't get here in time. I timed everything perfectly, so I could have you here and keep them out until I made you mine. You think I had all of my men out there dealing with that cock Crow? No, I have them here. Keeping us safe and away from those arrogant, entitled soon-to-be-dead boys you gave yourself away to."

I snarl at him and he strokes my face again, petting me like I'm someone important to him. "Shh, it's okay. You'll be on the end of my cock by the time they get through all of my men, as much as I'm enjoying this foreplay. One look at you and they'll leave you behind."

My blood coats the inside of my mouth and dribbles out of the corner as I reply, "They'll be here. Even if your pathetic little army holds them off and you manage to rape me, it makes no difference. They'll kill you and I'll still go home with them."

He laughs at me, brushing my hair away from my face as he twists the blade slowly. The sadistic fuck, my vision whites out a little but, fuck me, I hold onto reality by a thread.

"You're a toy to them, something fun and cheap to play with for now. The second they see I've had you they won't want you anymore and then all I'll have to do is show them the door and you'll be mine. Oh, I'll kill them. I would never let them live for touching what's mine, but they won't try to fight for you, Starbright. You'll be used-up slum pussy; broken and *worthless*."

I open my mouth to answer him but the words get caught in my throat. I shut my eyes so the Jackal doesn't see it reflected in them, the relief and fucking love, and turn around.

Whether it was watching Illi and I or something his fucking father taught him, Ash Beaumont makes zero sound as he walks into the Jackal's vault.

He remembered.

He remembered the story I'd told him, all of the details and the combination, and how to find this place. He remembered the plans Illi and I

had drummed into them all, of where things are kept, of where the Jackal like to work. Every last second of training that Illi had done with him has been leading to this.

Most importantly, if he's able to creep in here like this without the rage taking over... Avery must be alive.

"Given up, Wolf? I'll have to tell your little friends that you caved to me so fucking fast, you've been gagging for me." The Jackal says, his tone cruel and smug.

"The only person gagging is me over your fucking egotistical dribble. Honestly, who the fuck would be desperate for you? Isn't that why you built this empire, so you could tempt pussy into your bed willingly? Pathetic." Ash drawls, and I open my eyes again to see the Jackal's eyes widen a fraction as the barrel of a gun is pressed to the base of his spine.

He really did think an entire fortress of men could stop my guys from finding me.

"If you pull the trigger, the bullet will go straight through." He snaps, and Ash chuckles at him.

"Good thing I'm angling the bullet so it'll go straight into that petty brain of yours then, isn't it? The real question is, do you want to die now by bullet, or do you want to step away from the Wolf and have a chance at fighting me and getting out of here alive? I've been dreaming about tearing you apart for a long time. I'd rather do it properly, with my hands."

I frown, but I keep my eyes on the Jackal. Ash should just shoot him and get this over with.

The Jackal drops his hands away from the handle of the knife right as the door to the vault opens, this time loud enough for us all to hear. I stiffen, ready to have to fight off the Jackal's men if I have to, but Harley and Illi walk through, bloody and covered in gore. Blaise steps through after them, his eyes blank until they spot me and then he's full of heartbreak. Fuck, I must look *bad*.

"Fuck. Is that a knife in her gut? You miserable fucking *cunt*." Harley snarls, and I stagger away from the wall towards him. I don't know whether I'm trying to calm him down or get help from him but I'm happy enough to leave Ash with the Jackal's death at the moment which kind of tells me the blood loss is getting bad. *Fuck*, I stumble and the pain is unreal. I'm so woozy from the wounds, this is not good.

"I heard you were so fucking pathetic at finding us and taking us out that

you went to my father for help, is that true?” He says, moving the Jackal until he’s sitting in the chair he’d strapped me to.

“Interesting man. He’s got a whole fucking collection of pigs in his pocket, how are you going to deal with him when you walk out of this building? You know I’ve called him, right? I never start a fight without a Plan B.” The Jackal says, his voice mocking and I give a hacking chuckle at him.

Harley and Blaise start to quietly snark at each other on how best to deal with my knife situation and I ignore them both as I stare down at the man I once thought of as my friend. A long ass time ago.

“You’re blind, Matteo. You think Senior is the danger and, yeah, he’s fucking psycho, but he’s not the only person with connections.”

He laughs and spits at Ash’s feet, spraying his shoes. I make a conscious decision not to look down to see which ridiculously expensive shoes have just been ruined because it’s an irrelevant thing I should not care about and yet here I am, giving a shit. Ash doesn’t flinch, he just stares down at the Jackal like he’s *nothing*.

Fuck.

Ash could give his father a run for his money, the dark void of his eyes pulling you in until you’re empty too. I don’t find it terrifying, I feel safe and fucking adored when I see him like that because he only gets like that for family.

Illi hands me my knife from where he’s snagged it on the Jackal’s workbench, pulling his shirt off to stabilize the knife and staunch the wound at once. This ain’t his first rodeo with knives in guts so I guess it’ll be staying in there until we find a doctor. Ash’s eyes glance down at the knife still clearly inside me and then back to my knife in my hand.

I give it to him.

If he’s doing it for me, and the woozy feeling in my head tells me it isn’t going to be me doing it, then it needs to be my knife.

“Oh, D’Ardo, I’ve been counting down the days for this.” Illi crows, unstrapping one of his cleavers and rolling his shoulders back.

The Jackal shrugs, a smirk on his face like he’s not afraid to die. “If you think I’m going to beg you you’ve got another thing coming. I would never beg some pussy-whipped thug, you became pathetic the day you left with her.”

Illi slides away from me, leaving me with Harley and Blaise, and turning

to where Ash has the Jackal. “Your men are all dead. Your empire is gone. We’ve got both of our girls back. You’re a dead man, Matteo, and worse than that... you’re a forgotten man too.”

Ash’s eyes flick to Harley. “You got her?”

Harley cradles my face in his big palms. “Always.”

Ash smirks and lowers the gun. I see the little gleam in the Jackal’s eyes, like he thinks this is his chance, only Ash doesn’t give him the chance to do a goddamn thing.

He shoots him in the knee.

A scream rips out of the Jackal’s chest, and he collapses onto the floor. I see the blowtorch at the same time Illi does and he swoops down to grab it.

Ash ignores us all, his eyes locked onto the Jackal. “I read her file, you know. I read every last thing you did to her while you were trying to break her into something you could say was yours. I know every last thing you did and you are going to feel them all. Every last one of them.”

Ash drops the gun and pounces on Matteo, snapping his leg with the heel of his boot. I watch on as he slowly, meticulously, tears him apart, piece by blood-soaked piece. Every last scar on my body now a wound on his and when finally I think he’s dead, Illi hacks his head off just to be sure.

He gives me a look, his words making their way into my brain even as I start to finally pass out in Harley’s arms. “We’ll all sleep better knowing there’s no way he could survive it.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

---

I come to when Harley carries me out of the vaults.

There's blood and gore everywhere, Illi and Ash are covered in it, and the smell is fucking foul. I groan and try to wiggle out but he snarls at me, "The knife is still in you just stay fucking still."

I stay fucking still.

Right up until we hit the cold early morning air. The sun hasn't quite risen yet but there's that cold, fresh, new feeling in the air that promises the sun is on its way. Every inch of my body hurts, from my broken nose to the raw skin on my hands to the fucking knife still in my gut. It all hurts but nothing hurts more than my freaking chest when I see the dark halo of curls, waiting with Luca and the Crow, tears streaming down her face as she reams them both a new asshole.

"Well, where the FUCK are they then? If the entire place is clear then they should be here, I'm not FUCKING leaving until I see them."

Ash looks down at his arms and grimaces, there's no hiding what he's done. I don't think he should worry so much, Avery will not care.

As if I said her name her head snaps up and she sees me.

"LIPS!" She screeches and rips herself out of the Crow's hands. I notice her bare feet, fucking weird, but then she's wrapped awkwardly around me and Harley as she trembles.

I refuse to tell her to stop, even if it does hurt like hell, but my guys aren't so forgiving.

"Do you not see the blood and the wounds and the fucking knife, Floss? I need to get her to the car, we can hug and shit at the hospital." Harley snaps, and I elbow him weakly.

Avery looks down and a shrill noise comes out of her that I've never heard before. "What the FUCK happened?"

Ash hovers away from her, probably desperate to hug her and comfort her but he won't touch her while he's covered in blood, no matter how well she seems to be taking all of this. "She had her showdown with the Jackal. He got a few hits in before he got what he deserved."

Avery finally notices the blood. "That's his?"

When Ash nods her mouth curves into a little smirk. "Perfect, and Blaise? What happened to you?" She says, and I quickly look over to where he's bleeding from a gunshot wound to his arm. When I scowl at him and the sight of his blood he shrugs me off, scowling fiercely.

"It's a graze, doesn't even hurt."

What the fuck? "Who the hell shot you? They had better be dead."

Illi outright fucking roars with laughter at me. "Really, kid? And you wonder why you have admirers everywhere. How about you let your boys take you in and get the stomach dealt with, then we can start hunting for the dickhead who dared to scratch your singer."

I roll my eyes at him and turn back to Avery. "What happened to you? Are you okay? Where the hell is Diarmuid, who killed the fucker?"

Her lip wobbles but she holds it in, crossing her arms and glancing around us at the Crow's men still milling around. "I was stupid. I opened the door when I saw it was him to tell him you weren't here and he should call ahead. I didn't have my knife close and he grabbed me so quick I couldn't call out for Ash. He dropped me off and left, no one has seen him."

"It's my fault, I'm the one that inducted him. It lands with me, I'll do whatever it takes to make it right, Aves, but all that matters to me right now is that you're okay. Did he do anything?" I croak back at her, speaking around the lump in my throat. A tremble takes over her and my stomach drops.

"He... burned me a little. It's fine, I'm fine. He slapped me around a bit too when I didn't scream. I don't know how you do it Lips, I thought I was going to pass the hell out. If it wasn't for Aodhan... I don't know what would've happened."

Ash curses under his breath and, blood be damned, he crushes her into a hug.

"Get off of me, you're gross and I'm fine!" She says weakly, her voice trembling as the tears she was holding back finally fall and her arms clutch at

him desperately.

She makes that little gasping noise in the back of her throat and I try not to lose my shit at the sound of it. Harley finally decides enough is enough and snaps, “We’re going to the fucking hospital *now*, no more talking about shit that can fucking wait.”

No one argues with him.

He carries me the whole way over to the parking lot as if I weigh *nothing* and bundles me into Illi’s car, the both of us in the backseat and Illi’s shirt still pressed firmly against the bleeding mess my stomach is in.

I glance up to see who is following us and find Avery back in Atticus’s arms, trembling and his head bent low as he whispers in her ear. Ash and Blaise are both watching her like they’re about to rip them apart.

“Fuck. Maybe Morrison should come with us instead, kid.” Illi grunts as he starts the engine, and Harley scoffs.

“No fucking way, they’re dragging Avery away from that dickhead and following us.”

The doors behind my family swing open again and out hobbles Aodhan, propped up by the same guy he’d brought to the meeting at Hannaford, and Avery rips herself out of Atticus’s arms to throw herself at the injured Irishman.

“Well, fuck.” I gasp, and Harley grimaces.

Aodhan grips her back just as firmly, even as he wobbles on his feet. The O’Cronin hovers by them both and his eyes look clearer than they had been when I first met him. Ash watches them and I don’t know if it’s the fact he’s covered in blood or not but he looks kind of like a serial killer himself. Jesus.

“Just what we fucking need.” Harley mutters, and Illi pulls the car away, driving as smoothly as the shitty, pothole filled roads in the slums will allow.

“He saved her. She told us herself, the Jackal didn’t have time to do much more to her because of what Aodhan did.” I murmur back, and he kisses my forehead.

“I know. I... I think I trust him now. I think Ash likes him a helluva lot more than he likes Crawford too.”

I nod and let my eyes slip shut for the rest of the trip. Every inch of my body hurts but it’s a great distraction for the mess that my head was in.

Once I have my stitches in, a bottle of pain meds I refuse to take in my pocket, and a fresh set of clothes on I sign myself out of the hospital. I fucking hate them after spending the week sleeping in it when Harley was



drugged, and I completely ignore my family when they all bitch me out over it. I don't care, I'll survive. I've survived bullet wounds and stabbings with nothing but dirty needles and a bottle of whiskey before so I'm good. I'd rather be in agony at home than drugged in that fucking place.

Ash drives the Escalade back to Hannaford, snapping at Blaise about his rough driving, and Harley stretches out on the backseat with me tucked into his lap. Avery laces her fingers through mine and glares out of the car window like she's hating the whole fucking world. I get it, I get how bad being tortured by that man is, I get how terrifying a shower of bullets and gunfire is when you have no weapon of your own, I get how scary it must have been to see me covered in all of that blood. I never want to put her through this again and yet this is our fucking life. There's no way I can protect her from it forever.

The stairs are fucking impossible.

I try to walk it but the first one nearly knocks me the fuck out, so I relent and let Harley carry me. Classes are in, so thankfully there's no students around to see it, because I don't even have the strength to hold onto him properly, his hands have to hold my legs in place around his waist. Avery stays tucked under Ash's arm and keeps making all of these weird gasping noises but my own head is too full of *pain* and *hurt* and *stop* to be able to concentrate on it and question her.

When we get back to our room I insist on a shower even though I'm in absolute agony. I can't stand the smell of the hospital on me and I need to get comfortable so I can pass out for three days. Avery starts on dinner, scrubbing at every pot and pan before she cooks, and I'm positive we're going to be ordering a whole new freaking kitchen by morning. Even that isn't enough to get through to me that she's not okay, my brain is fucking scrambled.

Harley directs me into the bathroom and strips me off carefully, his frown getting darker every time I gasp or wince. When I nearly blackout at lifting my arms over my head Ash cusses us all out and grabs scissors to cut it off of me.

Thank fuck it's not one my Vanth shirts.

Then Ash rolls his sleeves up to hold me up while I shower. I'm so fucking weak I can't do much more than stand there so Blaise strips off and climbs in with me, soaping and scrubbing gently until I smell like me again. When they turn me so they can wash out the blood from my hair something breaks in me and I finally cry.

Deep gulping sobs.

I can't fucking help it. I hate the Jackal. Hated him and wanted him dead. I needed to get my family clear of his poison.

But for over half my life he's been my shadow. Not a good one but he also never let anyone else hurt me without consequence. It's not a good thing, it's not okay, but my brain is fucked up on drugs and blood loss and I'm too fucking overwhelmed with relief that he's gone to hold the tears in. I'm a fucking mess.

"I'm sorry," I croak, and Blaise pulls me into his chest, resting his cheek on my wet hair.

"You're allowed to feel shit about it, Star. It's... fucking confusing but I'm sure this is all hard for you."

I try to gulp down the sobs but it only makes them worse. "I hate him. I hate him so fucking much and I'm glad he's gone but I still feel like I've lost something. I feel like that part of me is over with and I'm fucking scared without it."

He cradles my cheeks and gives me a little peck on the lips. "It's okay. It's okay to feel like that. Let's get you dry and into bed. Sleep will help fix... this."

I stay in his arms under the warm stream of water until my tears dry up, and his hands never stop stroking and soothing my skin. I tell myself the second I get out of the shower, I will never think about that man again. He isn't ever worth mourning or remembering, that part of my life really is over.

When I have my head together I glance up to find Harley gone and Ash leaning against the bathroom sink, watching us intently. I expect him to be pissed at me, but his face is calm and blank, and when Blaise hands me over to him, his hands are gentle as he carefully dries me off. I get choked up all over again at the intensity of his love for me.

I refuse to put clothes back on, it hurt too much getting them off in the first place and everyone here has seen me naked anyway. I try not to cry as I get into my bed and Harley climbs in with me, refusing to eat or talk or do fucking anything aside from stroking one of his big palms down my spine. It

hurts to breathe, it hurts to exist, but somehow I still manage to fall asleep like that.

I don't wake up for two days.

When I finally come back to the land of the living, Avery is a freaking mess.

I wake in-between Blaise and Harley, and I feel like a stinking wreck. Covered in sweat, my eyes still gritty with sleep, I need to pee so bad I think I might actually piss myself on the way to the toilet but I just barely hobble there in time.

I take a shower and though it still fucking stings like a *bitch*, I no longer think I'm going to pass out in pain. The chair someone has left for me in there helps. When I get out I find Avery standing in the kitchen in her Chanel bathrobe, bags under her eyes, whisking eggs in a bowl. I ease myself into a chair and then curse at myself for not making a coffee before I sat down.

"Don't be fucking dense, Mouny. I can get you a coffee." Ash snaps, because apparently he can interpret my huffing and groaning, and steps up behind me to kiss the little patch of skin of my neck he loves so much.

Avery startles and glances back over at us like she had no idea we were even in the room.

"Lips! *Fuck*. Never do that to me again. No more being stabbed and checking out for days, I can't do this on my own." She hisses, looking a little fucking crazy and I give her a lopsided grin, pretending it's not agony to breathe and getting worse every second I'm sitting upright.

"I'll be fine, Aves. Everything is fine." I aim for a soothing tone, but my voice sounds fucking terrible after two days of sleep. Also, I'm kinda starving.

Ash sets a cup of coffee in front of me and I gulp it down in one go. Gimme the fucking caffeine, maybe the fine tremble in my hands is just withdrawals. He waits patiently for me to finish and then refills because he is the single best human being on the planet. I'm dumb enough to say this out loud.

"*Lies*. I am. I've been covering for you for days, I also had all of the finals moved back for you, which wasn't easy at all but I love you so I made it work." Avery snaps, still grumpy as fuck.

She places a plate in front of me, full of eggs and bacon and mushrooms, and I could cry. I mumble a thanks under my breath as I get to work, refueling being more important to me right now than anything else and Avery takes a seat next to me.

“You know I cooked French toast the last two days, hoping the smell would wake you? Figures that the morning I let the idiot boys bully me into something else you’d wake up.” She snipes, sipping her own coffee and moving the eggs around on her plate.

I pause in my inhalation of the food and give her a proper once over. “What’s going on? Why are you so worried about me? I know I slept but that’s what I needed to do to heal.”

She bites her lip. “I can’t sleep. I keep dreaming about the Jackal and... what he did to me. I know that’s pathetic-”

Ash and I both cut her off.

“It’s not fucking pathetic.”

“Don’t start that shit again, Floss.”

Her lip trembles but she holds it together. “Lips, you had to be stitched back together. You have internal *and* external stitches, your face looks like you just climbed out of a freaking boxing ring, and you had to kill people. You slept like the dead! I only got roughed up and yet here I am being unable to shut my fucking eyes without blinding terror. It *is* pathetic.”

I shrug at her and get back to my food. “I’m pretty sure the blood loss helped me out. I’m feeling the repercussions too, Aves. My body is just taking what it needs first. You’ll be ok. I can sleep in your bed with you tonight if you need.”

Ash scoffs at me. “Not with all of her thrashing around you won’t. I’ll stay in her bed until the nightmares ease up, it’s fine.”

I’m not ok with this, not at all, but I keep my mouth shut and just keep chewing. I need another week to heal up, then I’ll be able to fix Avery and deal with whatever she needs to have her usual fire back.

Avery’s alarm goes off and Harley and Blaise both cuss it to high fucking heaven, only stopping when they realize I’m up and about. Harley lurches over to me, cupping my face and pressing his forehead against mine as he breathes me in. I’m glad I had the shower.

“You fucking scared me, babe.” He murmurs, and I clutch at my necklace. It hurts too much to lift my arms around his neck, but his eyes flare when he sees the golden heart in my hand.

When he takes a seat, Blaise drops a kiss on my forehead and slumps into a seat across from me, looking like he's either hungover or halfway to the freaking flu. He gives me a slow smile. "It's been hell without you, Star. Maybe now everyone can stop being such morbid fucks now you're back."

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

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Avery managed to push the exams back a week, thank fuck, so I have a few extra days to lie in bed and feel shitty about my wounds. I turn into a grouchy bitch but the real cause for my angst isn't the pain I'm in, it's watching Avery slowly lose her shine as her nightmares get worse and worse.

If I could go back, I'd have killed the Jackal myself and made it ten times worse than Ash and Illi did. I'd have killed myself trying but *fuck* would it have been worth it.

Ash sleeps in her bed every night and we're all woken by her thrashing around. I think about finding her some type of therapist or something, but when I ask her about it she arches an eyebrow at me and snarks, "You first, Mouny."

No fucking thank you.

When I'm finally forced to get dressed in my uniform and leave our rooms, I sit through my exams in absolute agony. I guess I've always done my best work under extreme pressure so it's not like I'm worried about my marks, but every breath feels like I'm being stabbed all over again and the walk between classrooms has my vision blurring around the edges.

Harley is a snarling, enraged asshole to everyone, and I have to remind him that he needs to do well in these exams too. It doesn't mellow him out at all and I make a note to get Avery to check his scores before they post.

There's no way I'm dealing with his sulky ass if he gets shitty scores, I'd rather we change them.

I sit for lunch and do my best to eat at least half of my plate. It's hard to do, I can't take full breaths, only shallow panting, and when he notices Ash shoves some aspirin in my hand.

“That won’t get you high but at least it’ll be something in your system.”

I grimace but take it, it really does hurt that much.

“Shouldn’t it be healing by now? This feels like it’s taking for-fucking-ever.” Blaise mutters, and Avery shoots him a glacial look.

“It’s been a week. How about you stop acting like a spoiled toddler and join the real world. She has three stab wounds, a broken nose, and gravel burn. I think she’s allowed to be in pain, asshole.”

Blaise’s eyes turn to slits and I nudge his foot with mine under the table to remind him to keep his cool. The dark circles under Avery’s eyes are so pronounced that even her massive amount of beauty supplies can’t hide them. She looks tired, brittle, sort of fragile in a way she never has before, and if he snaps at her I’ll be *pissed*.

Even if she is being a little harsh.

“I’m worried about her, Floss. I’m worried she has an infection or something that’s slowing down the healing. I’m worried about her, not myself.” He grits out as gently as you can when you’re talking between your teeth.

Avery’s eyes snap to mine. “Is it red? Puffy? Do you have a fever? Why does Morrison think it’s infected? Ash, we’re taking her into the hospital, grab the car.”

I grab her hand under the table and give it a squeeze. “It’s fine. You’re all just on edge because something extra shitty happened. I’m fine. Just stop getting on each other about me, wait until I’m back at a hundred percent before you start your snarking.”

Harley snorts at me, filling my juice up and sniffing the glass a little before handing it over because we’re all paranoid like that now. “You need to be at a hundred percent to ignore us all over lunch like you normally do, babe?”

I grin. “Yeah, takes a whole lotta energy to block you lot out.”

Ash tucks Avery under his arm and murmurs in her ear when her eyes stay glued on me, assessing and critical, “I checked her out in the shower this morning, I promise you they’re fine.”

Avery shoves him away. “Gross. Harley was in there with her, I don’t need to hear about your group sex. In fact, I’m banning you all from showering together in my bathroom the second Lips can stand in there on her own.”

I squeeze my eyes shut the second I see the smug grin start on all three of

my guys' faces because nope, I'm too *wounded* to deal with this. That's my excuse and I'm sticking to it.

After our finals are over for the day I tuck my arm into Avery's as we head back to our room together, slowly and steady in our steps. When we get back, Avery triple checks all of the locks are in place and then gets me set up on the couch, fussing over me like I'm the freaking queen and not just her injured friend.

I feel guilty as fuck.

She ignores me when I say that to her, just grabs us both ice cream and turns the TV on. I nudge her gently and she shakes her head at me.

"I was the one who let our family down, Lips. I knew you didn't fully trust him, I knew he forced your hand. It's my own fault I was taken and it's my fault you're hobbling around with *fucking* stab wounds."

Ok, Avery swearing still sounds so freaking wrong. I shut my mouth but only until she takes a deep, shuddering breath.

"I'm only going to say this once Aves, so listen up. You did nothing wrong. Yeah, we now know that we need to have better plans in place for this shit, but you were supposed to be safe here. Atticus has a hundred men watching this school and yet Diarmuid walked right in. I was supposed to make sure only people we trust are allowed to get close to us and yet I let him manipulate his way into our family. I can't change that, no matter how shitty I feel about it, but I'm not going to let it eat me up either. We've had a bad year. We've still got a ways to go before we're out from under it all. But we're doing it together and without any useless guilt because I swear to you Aves, not for one second have any of us blamed you for being snatched. Not for a single second. You're my sister, closer than blood, and I won't hear a word against you. Not even from you."

From the corner of my eye, I see a single tear roll down her face and she hastily wipes it away. I don't comment on it, we're not the type to cry about shit and I know how exposed you feel when the tears fucking happen. I just sit there, eating my ice cream and watching some stupid reality TV show with her as we both haven't gone through hell.

Avery sleeps eight hours straight that night.



Seniors at Hannaford get a week off after our finals.

I take this time to catch up on sleep because my body just can't get enough at the moment. Avery decides that a spring cleaning of both of our rooms is required and when Blaise tries to bitch her out about it she tells him she'll burn all of his guitars if he doesn't help.

I stay in bed.

After three days of this my skin is itching with the irritation of being stuck in one place with nothing to do, so I drag everyone into an emergency college meeting because we all seem to have forgotten we're supposed to be going to freaking college next year.

I get the sweats thinking we've missed all of the cut off dates to apply.

Avery sets a plate of freshly baked cookies on the table and rolls her eyes at me. She's going through a 'homemaking' phase as Harley and I are very secretly calling it and I swear to god I'm going to triple my weight by the time she's done with it. These cookies are to freaking die for.

She smooths down her skirt as she sits so everything is *just* so. "Whatever college you want to go to Lips, they'll take you. Between your GPA and finals scores, and the cash we'll throw at them, we're in anywhere. Just pick and I'll make some phone calls."

Blaise pops the cap off of his beer and clears his throat. "Can we talk about taking a gap year? I've been talking to Finn about doing a tour and now that Lips is insisting I actually go to college with you lot... it'll clash. Plus I think we need to take some time and actually breathe for a minute now we're not being... you know, actively hunted like deer or whatever."

It's the weirdest little speech but I also feel like a tight fist in my chest loosens off a bit. Like maybe we do need a minute. Maybe I need a minute.

Harley watches my face closely and then nods to Blaise. "Yeah, that's what we're doing. She needs this."

I snag another cookie and shove half of it straight into my mouth, talking around it like a savage, "We're going to live at the ranch, right? Like tour on a bus or whatever but our home is the ranch still? I want to unpack my bags and know that they're staying like that for... a while."

Avery clears her throat and pegs me with a gentle but stern look. "Wherever I live, you live, Lips. Us leaving Hannaford doesn't mean you need to get your own place... or decide how the hell the four of you are going to go about a plural relationship outside of school. You live with me until you want to live somewhere else. That's how we work."

Harley groans. “Are you going to get jumpy and weird about this shit now because school is ending? Can we just have fucking *normal* for five minutes?”

I honestly don’t know how to do normal, but I nod my head anyway, just to keep him happy.

And we do get normal for a little while. We go back to Avery dancing and snarking us all out when she can. We get Blaise drinking a little too much at all times and singing at random times to piss Harley off. Harley goes to swim practice and the gym everyday and kisses me sweetly overnight when he crawls into my bed to hold me desperately like he can still see the blood on me when he closes his eyes.

Ash acts as though he didn’t tear a man apart with his bare hands and a few small swipes of my knife. He spends a lot of time either at the gym with Harley or out picking fights in the halls with unsuspecting students. He sleeps in Avery’s bed every night, even though her nightmares have stopped, because she’s better but she’s still not okay.

We let ourselves forget that the Jackal was only a third of our issues, right up until our week off comes to an abrupt end.

I’m sitting on the couch in Ash’s lap when he gets the text message.

We’re watching some shitty thriller movie with the family, Blaise sprawled out on the floor and Avery tucked into Harley’s side, helping him find parts online for his ’Stang. I feel the phone buzz in Ash’s pocket but I ignore it, content to just soak Ash in. I miss waking up with him, not that I’d ever say that to anyone because the twins need each other right now, but I’m enjoying this while I have it.

Ash stares down at his phone, his body rigid under mine and I curse viciously under my breath. “What now?”

He stares at me for a second and then hits play on a voicemail and Senior’s void-like drawl fills the room. I get freaking chills from the sound of it.

“I’ve spent the evening looking over your work on the Jackal. I had an old friend send me through the files on it. Well done, son. I thought I’d lost all chances of having a legacy when your slut killed Junior. I’ve decided to take matters into my own hands and I’m calling you home to me. Something has gone wrong in your upbringing, that you can only torture men, but now that Morningstar has arrived to take your sister, we can get you back on the right track. Say your good-byes now, Alexander. Your pathetic little family

will be taken care of, your sister will be owned by the Devil and you... you're coming home."

Morningstar has gone back on his word.

*Fuck.*

Sweet merciful lord, *fuck.*

He never did call me back; whatever Senior has offered him must be big. My eyes snap shut and I take a second to breathe. Can't I catch a fucking break? I just wanted my family safe and left the hell alone and now this.

"We've survived the Jackal, only to be taken out by some dickhead called the *Devil*? Fuck this." Blaise snaps, stomping off to the fridge to find the beer.

Avery's hands have a fine tremble in them as she picks up her phone. "Should I call Atticus? Do we call the Boar? I need you to tell me what to do, Lips."

I know what we need to do, and none of them will like it. "Don't worry about it, Aves. Let's just get through graduation on Monday and then I'll deal with it. I've already made some calls, I have some things in place. Don't think about it until then."

Harley eyes me, aware of just how bad Morningstar really is, but I keep my face so fucking blank he'll never see through it. Finally he nods, and I don't let my relief show either.

I know then that there's nothing I can do to stop Senior, without driving myself up to the Manor and killing him myself. I don't even really know if that will stop Morningstar from finding us, but it'll get one thing off of our plate. All of our caution and careful planning goes out the fucking window because I'm not letting Avery get hurt again. I'm not letting anything happen to Ash, I'm not having Harley lose more family or Blaise lose his best friends. It's just not fucking happening. Maybe the Jackal hit something vital but not life threatening inside me when he stabbed me because I feel reckless but also I'm just fucking *done*.

I'm not in a state to go, not at all, but there's no way I can take the guys with me and Illi is still dealing with the fallout of the Jackal. The streets of the Bay have never been so dangerous, so chaotic and lawless. Now is the

best time to go and deal with this man by myself.

Blaise and Harley sleep in my bed, and the twins sleep together in Avery's bed like they have every other night since Avery was taken. I lay there, silent and still, until I'm sure they're all asleep. Then I lay there a little longer just to be sure.

I slip out of bed, extra quiet, the way I had last year when the Jackal summoned me downstairs. I stare down at Ash for a second and I know, deep in my twisted and crookedly healed bones, that not only do I love him, but I'd die for him. Happily, and with such fucking conviction. He'll hate me, he'll fucking loathe me for leaving him again, but I have to. He can find someone else to love, they all can.

I could never live without them now.

I make it downstairs without any interruptions, then I boost the Cadillac exactly how Harley showed me. I hate driving, it's not something I'm particularly good at, but I get onto the highway and start the journey to the end.

Whether it's the end of Senior and the demons hunting us, or the end of me I don't know.

But it's the end.

I wait until there's some distance between the school and me before I make the call.

The Boar picks up on the first ring, like he's never too busy for little old me. It's fucking weird. He's obviously at his clubhouse, the noise is unmistakable and earsplitting.

"I need you to do something for me." I say, and he growls out orders for silence. The din quiets and I go on. "I need you to approach my family if... if what I'm about to do kills me. I need my diamonds to go to my sister. You said shit was hard for her? I want her to be set up, to get out of whatever life her junkie mom has left her in. I have close to thirty million dollars worth. Put it in a trust or something so she's taken care of. The combination to my safe is Harley's birthday, get it off of him. Avery will square it with him."

The Boar grunts at me again and growls, "Kid, where the fuck are you? Tell me so I can at least try to help. I have... someone nearby. Just tell me where you are."

I laugh, a hollow sound but fuck it, I've always had a dark sense of humor. "I'm about to go have dinner with a serial killer. My life is crazy bad, but it's all been worth it."

Ok, so I'm being a little dramatic but fuck it, I kind of think I'll be dead before help arrives so I think I should be given a pass.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

---

I park the Cadillac up the street from the Beaumont manor. I get out immediately and grab my bag, slinging it over my shoulder gingerly. My wounds are better but still not fully healed. I'd taken some painkillers, nothing too strong, just to help me move for a few hours. Hopefully that's all I'll need.

My phone buzzes as I start to walk.

There's no one on the streets, it's the middle of the fucking night, so I don't hesitate in answering it. If I'm going to be yelled at by one of the guys I need to give myself the time to clear my head before I go in.

What's the chances that Senior will be asleep and I can gut him quietly?

Probably not great.

"Where the fuck are you?" Ash's voice doesn't sound like his usual ice, it's fifty degrees colder than sub zero.

"I'm fixing the problem. Go back to bed." I whisper but I can hear them all moving and slamming doors in the background.

"You promised me. You promised me last year you wouldn't pull this shit again. Are you there already? Are you at his house?" Ash hisses, and I give myself thirty seconds to be weak and girlie and tear up. Then I'll be hollow and carved out and nothing but the Wolf.

"I told you I wouldn't choose." Ash says in a flat, cold voice when I don't answer. He knows where I am.

I wince but I can't back out now. I look up at the Beaumont Manor, clutching the wound at my side. The drugs are only making it bearable to move, but by no means am I pain-free.

"I'm not making you choose, I've made the decision for us all. I'm the

expendable one. I'm the one that can do this. I swear to you, Ash, he's not getting out of tonight alive. No matter the cost, you and Avery will be safe. I've done this before, I can do it tonight."

I hear car doors and yelling. I have two hours to get this done before they get here. It's doable.

I hear the engine roar to life and Ash snarls at me, "You aren't fucking expendable. You're nonnegotiable. You're everything I've ever fucking wanted and needed, and you're trying to get yourself killed."

I swipe my cheeks and clear my throat. "I love you, Ash. I love you and I won't ever let this man touch you again. That's the line I'm drawing. I can do this."

I hear him groan, then he snaps, "I'm not saying it over the phone. You'll stay alive so I can say it to your face."

Arrogant until the end, but I hope he's right.

"Tell Harley and Blaise I'm sorry too. Tell them I love them and tell Avery I love her too, that she's the best fucking thing that ever happened to me. That being her friend has been the greatest fucking honor and if I die, she's worth it. You all made this entire fucked up life of mine... worth it." I rip the phone away from my ear before I can hear his reply, ending the call and shoving it in my pocket before I break down completely.

The first step is the hardest to take, but the second I do my feet don't stop. It ends tonight.

I'm expecting to have to take out a whole hoard of Senior's thugs to find the serial killer himself but the closer I get to the house, the more I realize how alone I really am here. It's as if he's cleared the whole place out for me but I didn't exactly call ahead and tell him I was on my way. The psycho probably thinks he's enough to take me on by himself and, fuck, he might be. With the stitches still fresh in my gut, he just fucking might be.

My original plan is to scale the outer wall and catch the psycho fuck by surprise but the closer to the monstrosity that is the Beaumont Manor I get, the more I know that something is not right here.

I get a bad fucking feeling about walking into this place tonight.

Then I see the blood.

I tighten my grip on the strap of my bag as I walk up the steps of the manor, through the river of blood streaming down them. It looks like a fucking horror movie, nothing like the refined facade I was expecting to walk in to, and I pull my knife out of my pocket as I step through the already open doors.

Holy. Fuck.

Senior's gone off the fucking rails and killed all of his own men.

There's pieces of them everywhere, blood and bone and innards spread around like they're fucking nothing. Jesus H. Christ, an arm here and a leg hanging there... I take it all in for just a second, long enough to scout out for danger or clues, and then I ignore it all and stalk through the gore.

I need to replace these shoes the second I make it out of here alive. Just burn them and my clothes because there's no amount of scrubbing that will wash this scene away from them.

There's no sounds of fighting or dying men, the whole place is as silent as the grave and it's eery as fuck. I try not to let shivers take over my body but something here feels fucking wrong. More than just Senior, something truly fucking bad is going on here.

I give myself a shake as I move silently through the house. My plan has gone out the freaking window, I'd guessed at this time the psycho would be asleep, but every light in the place is on and there isn't a single room without a dead body in it.

The fuck is going on?

I climb the stairs and head for Senior's private rooms. I know he has his own wing and that all of his evil happens there, but I guess tonight his evil happens every-fucking-where. I have to make it past Avery and Ash's room to get there and, oh look, dead guys are piled in their rooms too.

I make a note to burn this place to the ground before Avery ever has to see it.

The Jackal has done enough damage to my Ice Queen, I don't need this serial killer doing anything else to her to her head.

The hallway that leads to Senior's rooms is dark and gloomy but there's less death up here. The plush carpet doesn't squish under my feet like the one downstairs. The only fucked up thing up here seems to be the paintings of the Beaumont's ancestors on the walls and, fuck, that's because they all look a little deranged. I make a note to ask Avery if there's any fucking normal in their bloodlines, on their father's side at least. Their mom sounded nice



enough, just had shit taste in men.

The painting of Joey makes my skin crawl.

I'm busy trying not to tear the thing off the wall and shred it with my knife when the door at the end opens and Senior himself steps out. He's wearing a suit and looks as unruffled as the day I met him at that fucking dinner. There's a gun in his hand, not pointing at me yet but the threat is still clear. I slow my steps and he smirks at me.

"You've caught me at a bad time, Wolf, but I suppose I can make an exception for the little slut that stole my son."

Well, here we fucking go.

I shrug. "I've been looking forward to finally dealing with you so I'm sorry but it can't wait."

The smirk only grows and he gestures for me to enter his rooms. "Ladies first."

Like fuck. "As I'm sure you'll love to point out to me, there are no ladies here. After you, Beaumont."

It feels weird calling him that, something I usually reserve for Ash when he's being an arrogant dick, but calling him Senior seems wrong as well. He turns his back on me, like there's no chance I'd be able to stab him or slit his throat from behind, and I try not to get pissy about it. I need a clear head.

He leads me through three very luxurious rooms until we get to what is obviously his killing room. The only luxury in this room is the single plush seat sitting next to a small, fully stocked bar. I imagine this is where he watches the girls he's torturing scream and writhe in pain, sipping a fucking bourbon and enjoying the show.

Fucking gross.

The table that Ash described to me is sitting in the center of the room, all of the lights on the ceiling pointing towards it so it's the centerpiece of this sick spectacle. The bench he has with all of his carefully cleaned tools is pretty standard, nothing unexpected on it. There's a security camera setup and as the views flick through the screen I doubt there's a single inch of this property that doesn't have surveillance. Jesus, Alice never stood a chance against this fucking psycho.

He notices my eyes and walks over to the screens, again giving me his back. I slide my bag down to the ground, it was only ever here to take him out if he was asleep, and I make sure my knife is open and ready in my pocket.

Senior looks up from the security camera. “It seems my guest is making a mess of the place. I suppose this is what happens when you invite the lower classes over to play. He showed such promise, I really thought he might be able to reach Alexander but he’s turned out to be such a disappointment.”

So Senior isn’t killing all of his own men? There’s another psycho on the loose. Ah, *fuck*. It’s fucking Morningstar.

“Does it matter? We should get this over with.” I murmur, and he nods slowly.

He turns back around to face me, his hand sliding into his pocket casually. The smirk is back and I grit my teeth so I don’t snap at him. That’s what he wants, he wants me brash and reckless. I’ve got to keep my head.

“I think I’ll have a taste of that cunt, the one that bewitches all of the men who meet you. You’re pretty enough, for a piece of slum ass, but I don’t feel the pull. You’re already too broken for my tastes.”

I ignore his words, watching only his hands. If he goes for any of the weapons on the bench, I’ll see it and make my move.

“How sweet it must be to trap both my sons. The Jackal. Morningstar, himself.”

I startle but my eyes stay fixed on his hands. “Oh you didn’t know that? Didn’t know that he was invited to come kill you and take my useless daughter? He had a good look into your life. Saw something he liked and now he’s at my mansion, killing my men and making a *fucking* mess. I guess killing the Jackal hasn’t stopped you from being stalked. I wonder if my son would be willing to share you with him too? Not that we’ll find out. I need him home with me, my legacy where it belongs. I’ll have to break him myself.”

He’s just trying to get a rise out of me. It all means nothing, if he gets into my head then he wins, so I ignore him and keep my focus true.

A sensor pings and Senior huffs under his breath. “More unwanted guests. The gall of you people.”

Fuck. There’s no way it can be Ash and the others, no fucking way. I do the math in my head twice before I take a breath. Even at the Ferrari’s top speed the entire trip I still have an hour. Ash is fast and arrogant but he’s still subject to the same laws of physics that the rest of us are.

Senior takes a step forward and I take a step back, watching as he shakes his head at me, his finger tracing down the length of the scalpel on his workbench. “If you came all the way here and didn’t want to work with me

then you're in for a rude shock, slut. Either you get on the table yourself and we do this the right way or... you displease me. That will not be satisfying for either of us."

He's talking like I'm going to enjoy being carved to pieces and killed, like this is an erotic game for the two of us.

No wonder Joey was fucked in the head.

"Apparently you didn't get the message. I live for displeasing men."

He raises the gun in my direction for the first time. "On the table now. I'd like to enjoy you without interruption."

I move slowly enough that he doesn't see my knife in my pocket, I just need to get close enough to him to use it before he sees it coming.

I don't want to touch the table at all but I slide my ass onto it without a flinch, even as the bare skin on my thighs touch it. I pray Avery got her cleanliness from him and this thing was bleached after the last time he used it.

If I'm sitting in a puddle of blood and his semen I'll lose my fucking shit at him.

After he's dead.

"Lie back, I need to get you strapped in."

Ugh.

I pivot so my legs are on the table as well, ignoring the dull pain in my stomach as I slowly lower myself. The sadistic twinkle is back in his eyes and the bloodlust starts to take him over. Good. I need him all worked up.

He walks over to grab my ankle to strap it down and I take one last deep breath. Now or fucking never.

I kick my foot out and slam it into his wrist, knocking the gun out of his hand. He snarls at me but I'm faster than him, grabbing my knife and swinging it at him. He turns at the last second and it sinks into his shoulder, not his throat where I was aiming.

Fuck.

He grabs a fistful of my throat, roaring in my face and lifting me from the table. My feet don't even touch the ground as he slams me into the wall.

"You stupid whore! All of this is your fucking doing, I've lost my sons because of some worthless slum slut who thinks she can climb out of the hell she belongs in, on the shoulders of my bloodline. You are nothing. *Nothing.*" he hisses, and I focus on staying calm, slowing my pulse so I can stay conscious for longer. Passing out now means death, and when I'm done with

him I still have to get out of here without the Devil finding me.

He leans his torso into me, my arms pinned, and he starts to really fucking rant about me and my dumb, slutty pussy. Men are fucking pathetic sometimes. He gets himself all worked up, badly enough that I manage to hook my ankle around his leg without him taking notice until I break his choking hold, ducking out from under his thumbs and taking his leg out on the way down. I lurch towards the workbench at the same time as he roars at me, all of his refined gentleman exterior gone.

Senior shoots towards me, but I'm prepared for how fast he's going to be. I snatch the knife and slam it into his throat. The triumph I should feel is cut out of me as the searing pain of my own knife in his hand slicing through my gut hits. Fuck.

What the hell is with these assholes stabbing me in the stomach? I'll be fucking lucky not to lose a fucking kidney or some shit at this point.

He gets his hand around my throat again and it tightens just a little before finally he lurches back, slumping down to the ground, grabbing at his throat uselessly. I'm freaking covered in his blood but I barely notice.

I slide to the ground, hacking and choking on my own blood as my mouth fills with it. He's hit something important, fuck knows what.

The bubbling finally stops and the rattle in his chest dies down to nothing. He's dead.

Thank fuck.

The only problem is that I think I am too.

I sprawl out onto my back, my head lolling about uselessly, and suddenly I see my own eyes staring down at me like I'm having some sort of fucking out of body experience. Fuck. They look angry, fierce, fucking furious and yeah, I guess I am pretty pissed that after everything I've done, now I'm fucking dead.

Fuck this, and then I pass out into nothingness.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

---

**T**he next time I open my eyes I come face-to-face with the Devil.

I mean, I've always assumed I'd be going to Hell for everything I've done, even if it's all been self-preservation, but seeing the man who is freaking legendary in the underworld for what he can do to a person is actually worse than waking up in the flames for one very vital and terrifying reason.

He looks eerily like me.

Our eyes are exactly the same, the shape, the color, everything.

He stares at me and leans back in his chair. "You can imagine my own surprise, when Joseph Beaumont invited me to Mounts Bay to play with his children, to find another little lost sister down here."

I actually feel it click together in my sluggish brain, the drugs slowing me down some. My mouth is as dry as the Sahara and hurts when I swallow. "You were sending me the heads."

He nods again, but his eyes move to the door like he's waiting for someone to show up and try to kill me. The air around him is protective, I know it well now. The guys are all the same way with me. It's... fucking jarring.

"We only have one other sister. I have no time for our brothers but Poe is... everything. You two could pass as twins. We all look like the cunt who fathered us, but you two are so similar."

I struggle to sit up but, fuck me, the stab wounds in my gut hurt like a bitch. "So, I look like our sister and that makes you feel protective of me? I don't need a bodyguard."

I've clearly lost too much blood and gone insane, because not only am I

talking to the Devil himself like this but he's also just saved my damn life. That kind of proves I might need some help, just a little.

He shrugs and still doesn't look at me. "I was formally diagnosed as a sociopath at eight."

A shiver runs down my spine. Fuck. Maybe this is the part where he paints my innards all over the walls.

"I don't feel things. I don't feel happy or good about people. I enjoy cutting them to pieces. I enjoy blood on my hands. I didn't question the diagnosis."

I discreetly try to find a weapon or the nurse call button or something to get me out of this situation. He notices and looks back over at me, pinning me to the bed with a single look.

"When I was seventeen I went looking for our father. I decided it was time to end him, to destroy him for his many sins, so I rented an apartment next to his clubhouse. I watched it for weeks, and then one night I was woken up by a knock at the door. I opened it up to find a little girl, a little sister, and my heart beat for the first time. I looked down at that girl and knew that I'd kill anyone for her."

Right.

Ok, so he's got some deep-seated issues but that's noble enough and we're fucking related. I relax just a little and stop looking for weapons to just listen to him.

"Her mom is a junkie. She went back to our father to get a hit and he told her to earn it. No one in the MC wanted to touch her so she sold her daughter off instead. Our sister was six."

Fuck. I can see why the Boar said not to go looking for that man. I feel my fingers twitching to go hunting. Morningstar, the Devil, *my brother*, turns back to watch the door.

"The first biker to climb into her bed was drunk. Made him slow, easier to fight off. Poe managed to get out from under him and climb out the window. She ran to the closest house, but no one would answer her knocking. The only people desperate enough to live that close to the MC were junkies and whores. I was the only person to open the door for her. She still had blood running down her legs. I looked down at her and knew I'd never let anything hurt her again."

I find my voice again, and years of being the Wolf means it's clear as I say, "That was the MC you tore apart. How is our father still breathing?"

He shrugs. “I got her cleaned up. Got the whole story out of her. The biker managed to get his fingers inside her but nothing else, so I didn’t have to take her to the hospital. I didn’t know how to take care of people. I called our uncle to come get her but when he arrived she wouldn’t leave with him. She only wanted me. So I told her what I was going to do and she told me she would be a good girl and keep her eyes shut. Her mother had taught her how to do that when she got high and fucked men for drugs. The junkie cunt had already left by then, didn’t care that her kid was gone. Our father had left for a run so I sent him a message. I heard about his reactions to it a few weeks later and I’ve found I like the idea of him watching over his shoulder, living in that state of fear, while he waits for me to come find him. Someday I will.”

A fight breaks out outside the room and I look up to find Harley screaming at Illi. My oldest friend, the only one left, tries to keep Harley from bursting in the room but my boyfriend is having none of that. Illi has to use every muscle, every ounce of strength in him, to keep Harley out.

If Blaise and Ash show up, it’s game over.

“If you don’t want to speak to me, you don’t have to; I know my reputation precedes me. I’ll leave you with my contact details and you can call if things go bad again. I would have been here sooner, but Poe had... an incident I had to take care of.”

I look away from the brawl. “What’s your name? It’s not Morningstar, is it?”

He shakes his head. “Nathaniel. Poe calls me Nate. Morningstar is my middle name, my own addict mother thought it would suit me, seeing who our father is.”

I take a breath and reach out to touch his hand. He’s my blood and he’s saved my ass. The least I can do is try. “I’d like to know you. I just don’t understand why you’d want to know me. Just because I look like our sister doesn’t mean you owe me something.”

He looks down at my hand and I think about taking it back, but then looks back up at me and says, “One look at you and I knew I’d kill for you too. You’re different to Poe, more guarded and cynical, but if anything, that proves you’re my blood.”

Huh.

Holy fuck. Ok.

I nod at him and squeeze his hand before letting go. “I’d like to have a brother. And I’d love to meet Poe. I’d... love for you to meet my family too.”

His eyes flick out to the raging screaming match happening outside the room. Ash and Blaise arrive as we look up and Illi glances over at us. Nate stares him down.

“The Butcher is a good addition. The Beaumont kids seem to be proficient, and the mobster is decent enough. Not sure why the singer is hanging around.” He says, and I gulp. I’ve never had to tell a brother anything, let alone about my complicated, messy, fucking perfect relationships.

“I’m dating him. And the other two, not the Butcher. I’m... with three guys.”

The Devil, shit... Nate nods and says, “I know. I was planning on killing them too until I saw how they are with you. I don’t give a shit who you’re with, as long as it’s what you want and you’re not being hurt.”

I look up at Illi and jerk my head to tell him to let them in before Harley hulks out and beats his face in. Ash shoves him away from the door so hard he bounces and Blaise completely ignores Nate to bundle me gently into his arms.

Harley and Ash both know exactly who is sitting by my bed.

Nate doesn’t speak to them, doesn’t acknowledge them at all, he just watches the door. I tuck my face into Blaise’s neck for a second and then let him go when Harley yanks him off to get a good look at me.

“What the fuck happened to trusting us and not running off on your own? You could have fucking died, babe.”

“She did die.” says Illi from the doorway, a frown pulling the corners of his lips down. I grimace and try to smile at him.

“Sorry. Thanks for coming for me.”

He scoffs at me and waves a hand at Nate. “You’re lucky your brother was stalking you. He found you first, staunched the bleeding, then did CPR while I drove you both in. You’d be dead in that fucking mausoleum if it weren’t for him.”

I don’t point out that Nate made it there first, that I’d interrupted him taking care of Senior for me. I don’t think the guys will take that very well.

“Brother?!” sputters Blaise, and Avery stalks through the door with Atticus hot on her eight-inch heels.

She arches a brow at my rock god. “Isn’t that obvious? You only need eyes to see it.”

I swallow and stare at her for half a second before my eyes think about



leaking. We made it. We're alive, the demons stalking us are dead, or I guess related, we're going to be ok. She smiles at me then frowns.

"I'm angry at you, Lips. We're having our first official spat as friends. Ash, you and Illi are on my side. Lips can have the other two idiots."

I smile at her but Ash snorts, and snaps, "Not fucking happening. I'm not on your side after the year we've had and I'll never side with Atticus fucking Crawford." Ash sneers, and I hold my hand out to him. He stares at it for a second and then takes it.

"I'm angry at you too, Mouny, but I'll wait for you to heal before I spank you."

Avery makes a disgusted sound and elbows her way over to me. "You haven't even introduced yourself to your girlfriend's brother and you're talking about spanking? Jesus H. Christ, Ash. Anyone would think you were raised by wolves."

She stops and gets this weird look on her face. We stare at each other for a second and then burst out laughing until my stitches hurt. I'm not sure if the tears streaming down my face are from joy, hysterics, or pain, but fuck it, I feel alive.

"Well, guys, this is Nate. He's my sociopath half-brother and we've decided to keep in touch. He also approves of our relationship."

Nate speaks without looking at any of us, "I didn't say I approved. I said I don't care, and as long as you're happy I won't kill them."

Avery swipes a hand over her own wet cheeks and shrugs at him. "It's a start. Avery Beaumont, lovely to meet you. Thank you for saving Lips. Losing her would have been unbearable."

Nate nods. I don't understand what the threat is that he's staring at the door so obsessively, but I decide to let it go. He's here, and he cares enough to kill for me and watch my back while I'm down.

It's more than my parents ever gave me.

Nate doesn't move from his chair for hours.

The guys all take it in turns sitting in my bed with me, forcing me to eat jello and snarling at the nurses to give me more drugs when I start wincing. Avery sits at my bedside and has a death grip on my hand at all times, like if

she lets go I'll disappear again.

It's fucking perfect.

Atticus sits in the corner on his phone, completely ignoring us all, and Ash keeps watching him like he's going to knife him in the kidneys the second Avery isn't paying attention. I raise an eyebrow at him but it only makes him smirk back at me.

"Maybe wait until the drugs wear off before trying to look stern, Mouny. You look like a pouting toddler."

Well, fuck.

Illi brings Odie in to see me with pizza for lunch, which the guys inhale like it's their last meal on death row, and Avery refuses to touch it. She's looking exhausted, and I kick Blaise out of my bed to bully her into it for a nap. She's out like a freaking light the second her head touches the pillow.

Nate watches her for a second and then says, "I didn't think such a spoiled princess could be as tough as her. She'll be a good influence for Poe."

Atticus glances away from his phone for the first time and, hoo boy, I'd put money on Nate skinning him alive for the look he gives him. "She's not spoiled, she's just from a different class than your sisters. Anyone who isn't a biker brat would look like a princess to you."

Nate's head tilts. "Last person who called my sister a biker brat ended up being put through a wood chipper. The noises he made were the sweetest sounds."

Atticus holds his eyes for another second and then flicks his attention back to me. "Your friendship with the Butcher makes more sense to me now, knowing that 'deranged psychotic killer' is in your blood."

I smile at him, more teeth than sweet. "I'm taking that as a compliment, Crawford. The best people I know are all a little psycho. Avery included."

He huffs at me, and we're interrupted by a knock at the door. It swings open as the Boar steps in. Nate's eyes turn glacial and he turns to look out the window. Right, so their relationship isn't all that great after all.

The Boar doesn't acknowledge anyone, just pegs Nate with his own glacial look and says, "I've just gotten done cleaning the mess you made down at that billionaire's mansion. Thanks for that, by the way. You could've done it clean, just this fuckin' once."

Nate doesn't move or look away from the spot he's fixed his eyes to. "They deserved to die screaming, I wasn't going to give them anything less."

A shiver runs down my spine but I don't let it show.

The Boar huffs. “Well, your sister is here, Nate. Some of my boys brought her in so she can meet the Wolf.”

Nate shows the first sign of life, his eyes narrow at our uncle’s words. “Your boys? If he’s touched her-”

“He hasn’t. He’s a good man, wouldn’t trust him with her if he wasn’t. Besides, Thorn came up with them.” The Boar says flippantly, and I decide here and now that I’m *firmly* Team Morningstar.

I’ve been thinking about Poe all day, from the second Nate told me her story. I’m weirdly protective of her already and I haven’t even met the kid yet. Fuck, how old is she? Nate looks young, is she still in grade school? Christ. I’m not good with kids.

Nate stands and presses his back against the wall where he won’t be seen by anyone looking in. I arch an eyebrow at him.

“It’s best if they don’t know Poe’s my sister. Makes her a target.”

I nod. Smart. I’m starting to really like him.

“The bathroom might be a better choice, we can watch out for Lips.” Avery murmurs from where she’s woken up, meeting Nate’s eyes like a badass bitch. I’m freaking proud of her.

He stares at her for a second and then back at me. I don’t know what the look means but I jerk my head towards the bathroom with a smile. Aves knows her shit.

He closes the door behind him and Avery leans into me to whisper, “He’s fucking terrifying, Lips. Honestly, I feel like he really is the devil incarnate.”

I nod, and clear my throat, scared of what they all think about keeping him around.

Harley reaches over to grab my hand and says, “Family is family. He saved Lips; he’s in.”

Avery opens her mouth and Ash cuts her off, severely, “He’s done more than that dumb fuck you’re still mooning over. He’s in.”

Avery ignores his comment entirely and slides out of the bed, yawning and stretching. Odie murmurs softly in French to her, passing a fresh cup of coffee and sitting with her on the plush chairs against the wall. I must be in some ritzy hospital because every other hospital I’ve been in had those cheap plastic chairs.

My mind goes off on that tangent for a minute and then the door opens again and in walks a girl who has to be my sister. Holy *shit*. Poe is not a kid. She’s a teenager, younger than me but not by that much. She’s... gorgeous.

She looks like me but without any of the demons, the dark stain nowhere to be seen. I could fucking cry all over again and it just confirms once again that I'm with Nate.

I'll fucking gut anyone who tries to take that sunshine away from her.

"Holy shit, we look exactly the same!" She squeals and bounces into the room. A dirty-blond biker steps in behind her and tips his head at Nate, who steps back out of the bathroom now it's clear Poe hasn't come up with a hoard of bikers.

"Morningstar."

"Thorn." He replies, and Poe rolls her eyes as she climbs up onto the bed next to me, careful about the wires and tubes.

"Brothers are dumb. Hi. I'm Posey, but everyone calls me Poe because Posey is a stupid-ass name."

Her southern accent is freaking adorable, especially with the curse words, and I fall hard. I glance at Avery and see the same thing on her face, even as guarded as she is. Looks like our family really is growing again.

"My name is Eclipse, but I go by Lips because Eclipse is a stupid-ass name too." I say, and Poe giggles.

"Do you think our dickhead father can only get it up for junkies with shitty taste in names?"

Blaise cackles beside me and I grin so fucking wide I feel my cheeks protest.

Thorn kisses Poe's head and walks out. Poe calls out to him, "Don't wait up!"

I have no idea what to say to her as she glances around the room. "So, ah, who the hell are all these people? Are we planning a heist? I always thought I'd end up in a life of crime. No one tell Thorn I just said that, he'd fuckin' skin me alive."

Nate gives her a dark look. "What's he said to you?"

She rolls her eyes and grins at me. "Nate doesn't get expressions. Like, because he does skin people alive, he doesn't get that I'm not being serious. Thorn would be pissed off, is what I'm saying. He said he's putting me on the path to a blue-collar life or some shit. There's no way."

I look her over. "Is he also your brother? I'm guessing I'm not related to him, though apparently I have about a billion siblings."

Poe cackles. "Nah, Thorn and I have the same mom. He shares custody of me with Nate because Nate doesn't want his annoying kid sister cramping his

serial killer style or some shit.”

Illi fucking loses it, just roars with laughter until tears stream down his cheeks. “You’ve got a way with words, kid. How old are you?”

Poe grins. “Fourteen! Fifteen in the fall, which means I’m so fuckin’ close to freedom. Nate said I had to be sixteen before he’d let me live with him and... I mean, I think I still wanna live with him. I think.”

Nate’s jaw clenches and I try to steer us to a safer area of conversation though I have no idea what the deal is there. I introduce Poe to the rest of the room, stumbling like an idiot over my guys and how exactly I’m supposed to explain them to her. She laughs at me, like I’m a fucking comedian. It’s fucking perfect.

The Crow leaves shortly after Poe arrives and Illi takes Odie home for the night, confident that I’m safe with my guys and Nate watching over me. We order in Chinese for dinner and Poe takes a seat between Harley and Ash to eat. They all treat her like she’s not just my little sister, she’s theirs too. My chest aches over it all.

Nate gets a phone call and steps into the hallway to take it privately while also still guarding the room. He hasn’t eaten a thing.

“Oh, who’s car is that!” Poe says, peering over Harley’s shoulder and he tenses a little.

“It was mine. I’m fixing it at the moment, it doesn’t look like that at all anymore because someone blew it up.” He mumbles, still torn up about the ‘Stag.

“Who the hell would do that to such a beauty? I hope you beat the fucker.” She says, prying the phone out of his hands and staring at the car lovingly.

Ash stares at her for a second and then shrugs, “Your brother cut his head off.”

I shoot Ash a look, because I know she’s just been joking about that shit but I’m not sure how much she really knows and let’s not fucking break the kid, but Poe just laughs like a freaking witch.

“Good. Fucker deserved it. You shouldn’t pay that for the muffler by the way, the guy is ripping you off.” She says around her mouthful of fried rice.

Harley frowns at her curiously as he swipes his phone out of her hands. “What do you know about cars?”

She shrugs and clicks her tongue. “I build ‘em with my pops. I hate school but I’ve never met a car I couldn’t fix. I wanna drop out and work at

the garage with him but I think that's the one fucking thing Thorn and Nate agree on and... never mind. Everyone agrees."

There's a hint of color on her cheeks and, *sweet merciful lord*, that's my blush. The one I get about the guys, the one that let every-fucking-one know I wanted them.

Who the hell does my sister have a crush on and how quickly can I kill him?!

Harley's eyes narrow and I know he's onboard with the killing. "Who else agrees? No lies in this family, kid."

She grins at him, so happy at being his family, and fidgets a little. "It's nothing. He's too old for me. We're just friends, he would never... I'm not someone he'd ever want."

Too old? Fuck, I need to nip this in the freaking bud.

"Just forget about guys for now, Poe. Focus on fun shit before boys tie you down." Lame, so freaking lame, but whatever. Avery scoffs at me and I shoot her a look. She should be helping me!

"You'd know, you've got three of 'em." Poe says, all sly and coy, then she scrunches her nose up at us and shrugs. "Rue's not going to be interested in some dumb kid. We're friends. I help him with cars and he beats up guys who ask me out because he thinks he's my protector like that. It doesn't matter."

"What kind of a name is Rue?" Blaise jokes.

Poe grins, "The type of name a Prez's son has. The type a future Prez has. His name is Ruin, but there ain't a biker out there without a nickname."

Fuck.

He's a dirty biker and my sister is crushing hard.

"Which MC would that be?" Avery says sweetly, like she's taking a passing interest when really she's digging for enough information to do a background check. Good. I say we shank the dickhead.

"The Unseen, back in Mississippi. When I moved in with Thorn, Rue lived next door with his uncle while his dad was in lock up."

The door opens and Nate steps back in. Poe shovels another forkful into her mouth until there's no way she could say another word and we all follow her lead.

Clearly Nate isn't big on that sister having a love life.

Good.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

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Avery works her magic and by the early evening there's extra beds in the room for everyone to sleep in. I wake up to the sounds of Poe teasing Nate and his gruff replies. I rub my face against Harley's chest, wriggle a little against the hard lines of him, and he grumbles under his breath at me.

"It's fucking weird enough having your brother in the room, babe, don't make it any worse."

I blink at him. "What exactly have I done wrong? I was getting comfortable."

He gently eases me off of his chest and grumbles under his breath at me again, something about me being a drug-induced temptress, but it still doesn't make much sense to me. I must look like a freaking mess so it's not like I was trying to tease.

Nate doesn't say a word about it, or anything else, he just comes over to my bed and says, "I need to take care of something else here at the hospital. Is Poe ok with you for an hour or two? I won't be far, she's got my number."

I nod and he gives each of my guys a fierce look before heading out. I have no idea what the fuck is going on there but Poe is still laughing and full of jokes so I let it go.

Atticus arrives and I find myself wondering why the hell he's sticking around. He brings Avery and I coffee though, the real stuff not the shitty sludge the hospital has, and I think a little more favorably of him.

When he steps out to take a call Poe jerks her thumb at the seat he's just left empty. "So, who's the fuckin' suit? He some sort of dirty cop or somethin'? He looks fuckin' pissed."

I cringe. Avery rolls her eyes when Ash starts glaring at the doorway Atticus just walked out of.

She turns to Poe and speaks in her sweetest, most dangerous tone. “He’s an old friend of mine. We’re having a little bit of a disagreement at the moment, so Ash has decided that Atticus is the number one enemy of our family now that the others have been taken care of.”

I scoff and Ash gives me a foul look, like it’s all my damn fault.

“Isn’t that the point of brothers? To hate any guy who comes within spitting distance?” Poe says, that sly little grin on her face, and Avery narrows her eyes at her even though it’s so fucking clear she’s being charmed so freaking hard by the kid.

“Is it? What do your brothers think of Rue?”

Poe cringes, her eyes darting around at us all and blushing a little under the intensity of our eyes. Or maybe just at the boys who are all now glaring just a little at the talk of this biker. “Well, Nate doesn’t know I’m sweet on him because if he did, Rue would already be nothing but DNA matter. And Thorn... Thorn knows I have some feelings and he’s told me if my panties come off at any point before I turn eighteen he’ll tell Nate and that’ll be the end of that. I think he’s bluffin’ but I ain’t risking it. Nate’s fuckin’ fierce when he needs to be, and I don’t want Rue dying over some stupid... crush I have.”

She sounds so miserable as she trails off and, fuck it, now I want to hug her or something. I clear my throat. “I agree with Thorn about the... panties thing but once you’re... ready or whatever, I’ll help you tell Nate. We’ll tell him together and before you start anything so he has time to adjust to the idea of his baby sister being with a... dirty, fifty-seven year-old biker named *Ruin*.”

Poe smiles again, giggling and rolling her eyes at me. “He’s twenty, so he’ll only be a dirty, twenty-four year-old biker when we have to tell Nate about him. That is, if he hasn’t shacked up with some stripper or biker slut before then.”

I swear to fucking god, my eye twitches and if we keep talking about this it’ll be a full blown tick.

I do my best to stay awake with them all, but I find myself randomly falling asleep while I listen to them all shoot the shit together. I wake up later in the afternoon with Poe tucked up next to me, tapping away on her phone sending a text to someone named Trink on her phone.



“She’s my best friend back home. She’s pissed I got out of school to come see you, there’s been tests and shit all week and here I am hanging out in the party capital of the country.”

I roll my eyes. “I’m never letting you come to a party here, Poe. Not ever. I’d spend the whole night gutting guys for looking sideways at you.”

She giggles and wriggles down in the bed. “Do you gut them for looking at you too? Or do you just collect the hottest ones?”

I give her a side eye and she cackles right back at me. “I’m going to pretend you didn’t just say that, Harley looks like he’s about to have an aneurysm over there.”

Poe glances over and freaking loses it at the look he gives her. “My bad, no more teasing your man meat, sis.”

*Man meat.*

Jesus fucking Christ.

“Hand me the brain bleach, this is as bad as that one time Lips told me how much Harley would go for on the blackmarket. I could fucking gag.” Avery snarls, and I join Poe in laughing, even if it does hurt like a motherfucker.

There’s a knock at the door and Nate glares out the window at whoever it is that’s there. Harley waits until he jerks his head before he opens the door to... fuck, I guess he’s our uncle.

The Boar looks over at us all, Poe tucked up in my bed with me and Nate obsessively watching our every move, and there’s a ghost of a smile on his face.

“Good to see you kids together. I’m glad you made it out alive, Wolf, I didn’t get the chance to say that yesterday.”

Nate’s eyes flick up at him and, sweet lord *fuck*, there’s his inner psycho right there. “No thanks to you. None of this would have happened if you had told me about her sooner.”

The Boar shrugs. “She was happy. Doing fine. She didn’t need a big brother, and when she did need you, you were here.”

I cringe because I know what’s about to happen before Harley even opens his mouth, and he doesn’t hesitate in snapping, “She was starving, you utter *fucking* dickhead. She was starving and being stalked by a rapist psycho who thought he owned her. She’s had years of abuse and because she never talked about it to you, a fellow member of the fucking Twelve, you think she was fine. Fuck. You.”

Posey does this sort of gasp thing that makes my heart hurt and I hold her hand tighter. “I’m fine. It’s all over and done with, I’m fine.”

But her eyes stay glued to her brother.

Nate is no longer with us, that man is nothing but the Devil.

I wince as I lean forward and grab him by the arm. He doesn’t tense or anything at my touch but he’s so far on edge I think it’d be impossible for him to get any more agitated.

“Nate, listen to me. I don’t need any vengeance for that part of my life. I’m here today because of what happened, and I would do it all over again. Don’t go looking for blood on my behalf, not for this. You’ve got my back for the future shit, that’s all I need from my brother.” I murmur, and he doesn’t move an inch. I don’t take it personally or anything, I still don’t know how to talk to him yet, and I consider how else to calm the rage in his blood.

His eyes finally flick to mine and then down to Poe. “This is why we only trust each other. Anyone else is a liability.”

Fuck. I’m saved from answering him by Poe snorting and saying in her teasing tone, “Well, I have a whole fuckin’ heap of people I trust so maybe you need to rethink that line.”

Nate turns his back on the Boar dismissively and I nod to... our uncle. Fuck, that’s still weird to think.

The Boar doesn’t seem to care, he just turns back to Poe with a wry smile. “Thorn and the boys are downstairs, kiddo. They’re here to take you back to the clubhouse for the night then you’ll ride back tomorrow.”

Poe pulls a face and wraps an arm around my shoulders. “If I could, I’d stay. If Thorn would let me but he’s already told Nate I could only stay the night here. Promise me you’ll call though. Promise?”

I swallow the lump in my throat. “Of course I will. You have my number, and everyone else’s so if you need anything, Poe, anything at all, you just call. Any of us.”

She smiles and hugs me again, her chin wobbling a little. “You too. Not that I’m much help, though I did totally save Harley a couple of grand on that muffler.”

He smirks at her. “We’ll come see you when I have the rest of the parts, kid. You can help me put it back together.”

The grin that lights up her face is fucking unreal. I love it. Harley catches my eye and I give him a nod.

“I’ll walk you down. Too much bad shit has happened lately, I’m not

letting anything happen to the baby of the family.” He says, and Poe grins so fucking wide my heart clenches. This kid needs a family. She needs people loving her. Well, I’m up for it.

I watch them both walk out and then I heave myself up so I can peer out of the window to look out over the car park. There’s a heap of motorcycles and bikers loitering, but I make an educated guess at which one this Rue guy is. He’s pacing, twitchy and pissed off, and that makes me twitchy and pissed off.

He looks like a fully grown man, and my baby sister is in love with the fucker.

“I say we gut him. Too late to take care of Atticus, but let’s not ever let that happen again.” Ash murmurs in my ear, and I shiver.

“Agreed. I don’t like him.”

Blaise snorts at the two of us from the chair he’s still firmly planted in, though he does stare at the pacing biker with as much interest as we have. “You haven’t even met him yet. She’s not going to be happy about you guys even lightly maiming the guys she’s sweet on.”

I grit my teeth. “Fine. All we need to do is tell Nate about him and then we’re golden. Job done.”

I glance back to the carpark. Harley has an arm slung over Poesy’s shoulders as they come out of the hospital and into our view. My heart clenches, I’m so fucking happy they get along, and then I see exactly what he’s doing when Rue’s pacing slams to a halt, his spine snapping straight as he gets an eyeful of my golden god cuddling up with my baby sister.

It’s fucking perfect.

Blaise freaking cackles and hoots like an idiot, but Ash just glares down at the biker like he’s planning on dismembering him before Nate gets the chance to.

Not long after Poe leaves, I decide I can’t fucking stand being in the hospital for a second longer. I tell Ash I want to leave and there’s something in my voice that lets him know I mean business.

We’re being discharged thirty minutes later.

Nate watches me emerge from the bathroom wrapped firmly in Harley’s

arms and I do my best not to blush like an idiot. I clear my throat and Harley, noticing all of the attention we're getting, props me up against the bed and takes a step back to let Nate say whatever it is he needs to say.

"I'll head out to keep an eye on you and Poe tonight. Call me, Wolf. I'll come whenever you need. I mean it, you *will* call me from here out."

I nod and feel freaking emotional as hell at him leaving. He watches me closely and then holds out his arms. Holy shit, he wants a hug?

"Poe taught me sisters need hugs." He grumbles, and I step into his arms.

"Maybe normal sisters do, but I'm fucking broken." I say, but I enjoy the hug anyway. How different would my life have been if he'd have found me a little sooner? Before Matteo became the Jackal, before the war in Mounts Bay started?

No. I would never have met my guys. Ash and Avery would be dead at Senior's hands. Harley would be killed by the O'Cronins. Blaise would be... dead too, suicide or alcohol probably. No. If everything I've been through, fought, and conquered got us here then it's worth it. And now if anything happens again, well.

We have the Devil on our side.

"You know you can call me too, right? If you need anything, or Poe, just call and I'll be there."

He gives me a look, like I'm a mystery or something. "You don't owe me anything, Lips. You don't have to pay me back for protecting you."

I shake my head at him. "Well, here's another lesson for you from a sister; family means ride or die. You're not only my blood, you've been voted into my family, my inner circle. That means call me, anywhere, anytime, for anything, and I won't be the only one to show up. My whole fucking family will."

Nate nods and pauses for a second before saying, "Posey tell you about the biker she's been making eyes at?"

Ah fuck. Apparently, Poe hasn't done such a great job of hiding her feelings for Rue after all. I nod hesitantly.

"He makes a move on her before she's eighteen and he's dead. You with me on that?"

I sigh. "Yeah, I am but I should warn you that I promised her I'd help her to convince you not to kill him when the time comes."

Nate nods and looks over my shoulder at the guys. "Once she's old enough I don't care. I'm not her fuckin' jailer. Though, bikers are known for

being whoring, abusive, spineless cunts so if he so much as looks sideways at her I'm going to blood-eagle him and enjoy every fucking second of it."

Blood-eagle?

I'm not sure I even want to know what that is, but I nod. "I'll help you if that happens. Whatever it is, I'll help just so long as it's for the right reasons. I don't want to push Poe away by trying to be too overprotective. The girl needs to live."

And I'll keep telling myself that until it sticks, because I'm still firmly in favor of killing Rue right *the fuck* now. Avery smiles at me like she knows the words nearly fucking killed me to get out and Ash looks at me like I've betrayed him, *goddammit*.

We all walk down together and then Nate leaves in a car that has Harley fucking drooling. I have no clue what type it is but apparently it's fucking good.

I leave the hospital in one of Ash's Ferraris so doped up on pain meds I ramble and cackle like a fucking loon. It would be way more embarrassing if Ash wasn't shooting me all of these little looks and biting his lip like I'm fucking delicious or something.

"You are delicious. I'm going to get you home and spread you out. It's been way too fucking long since I've tasted that pussy."

Avery gags in the backseat.

Right.

I forgot she was in the car as well.

"Oh, I know you've forgotten all about me, Mouny. I'll forgive you because of the blood loss. Just this once."

I fucking love her.

"I love you too, Mouny."

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

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**T**he ranch feels different now we're not just hiding out here.

It still feels like home, but it's not the secretive hiding place it was before. I take a few weeks to heal up in bed and it's fucking amazing to do that without worrying about being attacked. We get a lot of takeout delivered. Illi and Odie come over for dinner a few nights a week, and when Jackson and Viola find out about it, they tag along too. I unpack my bags and find places for my things to live in. I get the overwhelming sense of belonging here and it takes me a week or two to come to terms with that.

I still sleep with my knife but it's not the first thing I grab when I wake up in the middle of the night anymore.

Avery still isn't sleeping. She's still my perfectly snarky, evil genius best friend but there's shadows in her now that weren't there before. I hate it, I hate that she still doesn't want to talk about what happened in that room with the Jackal, but I don't push her. I just spend a shit-load of time with her and guard her fiercely.

It's why her announcement at family dinner shocks the shit out of me.

Illi, Jackson, and my guys are talking about car parts, and Odie has roped me into a conversation about college I'm still not ready to have while Viola smirks, when Avery clears her throat delicately.

The talking stops instantly.

"I know Morrison has been talking about doing a tour and the assumption is that I'll be tagging along. I just wanted to let you all know that I'll be staying here. I have some remodels being done on the ranch that I need to be here for." She says, and then she takes a sip of her wine like she hasn't just ruined dinner.

Ash's eyes narrow at her. "Why would you need to stay behind? You've had the rest of the place done while we were at school."

Avery's back straightens. Good lord, here we go. "I don't have to ask your permission, Ash, I'm not going. This place is secure, Senior and the Jackal are dead, Illi is here if anything happens. I'll be perfectly fine."

Harley and I share a look while Ash grips his knife like a psycho. I hold up a hand. "She's right, she'll be safe here and she's been forced into a constant security detail for years. I'll miss the absolute hell out of you, Aves, but I also get it."

Illi tips his head at me like I've made the right call and I grin at him. "You'll call if you need me to come home."

He laughs. "Kid, you won't have to come home because if anyone gets close to her, I'll sell their body parts on the black market. I hear kidneys are going for a good price these days."

Jackson and Harley both snicker at the look Viola gives Illi but nothing can distract Ash from his temper tantrum.

"You've never cared about being stuck with us before, you've always preferred to have us all together. You bought this fucking house to fit us all in comfortably. You're already talking about where you're going to put Posey's room for when she comes to stay. Fuck, you've been looking into how the fuck we can adopt her. What's the real fucking reason Avery?" He hisses, and I slip my hand into hers under the table. I fucking hate it when they fight and doing it now, in front of everyone, is only going to end in blood.

"I'm not leaving him." She hisses back, and there it is; the same fight I've been listening to for the entire freaking year.

Ash throws his cutlery down onto the table and leans forward in his chair. "You are not staying behind with that gutless fuck Crawford and-"

Avery interrupts. "I'm not talking about Atticus, I'm not leaving Aodhan."

Well, fuck me.

Fuck me sideways and eight times on a Sunday, what the hell does that mean?

The whole table just kind of sits there in silence while we figure out what the actual fuck to say to that. Harley recovers first.

"He's fine, Floss. I spoke to him this morning, he's alive and getting back into the swing of things."

She nods. "I know. I'm going to visit him tomorrow, we've been talking.

I would just rather not leave him right now while we're both still... recovering."

Right, what the actual fuck happened in that room? What the hell is going on, I need some fucking answers. I give her hand a little squeeze and she smiles at me but it's a little forced.

Now I don't want to go on tour either.

Illi and Blaise manage to steer the conversation back to safer topics and we get through the rest of dinner. Avery insists on scrubbing all of the dishes herself by hand, fuck the two dishwashers her kitchen has apparently, and I walk everyone out.

Illi and Odie are busy telling Viola a long-winded story when Jackson stops by the door with me. I tense, waiting for his usual snarky teasing bullshit but he gives me a wry grin instead.

"So... the Devil is in your pocket now too? You're a very popular young lady. Must be all the self-sacrifice. You're pretty fucking quick to throw yourself in front of bullets for people."

I give him a look. No one outside of the hospital room has been told about Nate, I was fucking clear with my family, so unless Atticus has told him... how the fuck does he know?

He grins at me. "I told you, I wiped your name from existence. He had to get it from someone who already knew it."

My mind blanks out with rage and I just stare at the fucker for a second.

"You knew? You gave it to him?" I snap when I finally remember how to speak, and Jackson rolls his eyes at me.

"Look, if the Devil shows up at my door, you'd best fucking believe I'm going to tell that motherfucker whatever the FUCK he wants to know. Besides, he's your brother right? He was helping you out by killing people for you? I thought you'd forgive me for telling him your name. You're welcome, *Starbright*."

I don't even think about it, my knife is just suddenly in my hand and I flick it open and press it to his femoral artery because it's the closest and the one all guys freak about. "Don't. You. Ever. Fucking. Call. Me. That."

Jackson swallows, his eyes wide as he slowly nods his head.

I press just a little harder for a second and then calmly say, "You're lucky you're family and that the Devil is my blood, otherwise I'd kill you. To be clear, you ever rat me or any other member of our family out again and you'll beg for me to kill you once I'm through with you."



He nods again, a little jerk of his head, and says, “You know, I really do see the family resemblance.”

I slip the knife back into my pocket and bare my teeth at him in a savage grin. “You have no idea.”

Avery won't talk to me about what's going on with her.

She tells me she's not ready yet, that she has to figure it all out in her own head first before we can talk about it, but it's all slowly eating me up inside. I have to bite my cheek and remind myself that this isn't about me, it's about her and if she needs time then fuck it, I need to give her time.

Even if it's killing me.

I make it down to the sitting room in time to see her and Harley off as they leave to go see Aodhan. If I weren't completely certain she still loves Atticus I'd think she was dressing up for Harley's cousin because she looks fucking devastating in her long Chanel coat. You can't tell if she's wearing a dress or not underneath and the long stretch of her legs will probably cause Harley all sorts of trouble for the night because men are going to come running. She's wearing one of her new pairs of Louboutins, the ones Blaise had gotten her for Christmas, and the slash of red lipstick and perfectly styled curls completes the look and tells me for sure that this girl is on the warpath of some kind. Whether she's dressing to impress or she's just trying to get some of herself back, I don't know but I love it.

“Harley's going to take me to visit Aodhan and Jack, and I think Illi will meet us there too. He said he has business there tonight but I'm sure he's just playing mother hen for you.” She murmurs as I very carefully hug her, I don't want to ruin all of her hard work or pull at my newly healed skin.

“I'm a little jumpy about you heading back into the Bay. I'm actually surprised Ash didn't insist on going as well.”

She leans back so I can see the eye roll. “He did. I told him to fuck off.”

I wince. It's never a good thing when Avery drops the F-bomb and I feel like it's all I hear out of her these days. “I'll try to keep him busy so he doesn't text you the whole time. Call me if you need anything.”

She smirks at me as Harley jogs down the steps looking fucking edible in a pair of jeans and a tight white tee. Yum.

“You should fuck him, might cheer the arrogant dick up a bit. You’ve probably healed up enough to do it if you take it easy.” Avery snarks, and I choke on my own damn tongue.

“Since when do you wanna weigh in on our sex lives? Especially Ash’s?” Harley says, eyebrows nearly in his damn hairline.

Avery tucks her arm in his and slides her phone into her pocket delicately. “Lips and I talk about it all the time, we just choose to do it away from you idiots. Besides, Lips loves me and wants me to be happy. Ash mellowing out a bit would make me very happy. Fuck him for me, MOUNTY.”

I turn on my heel and leave them to it. I’m not exactly embarrassed but yeah, I totally don’t need to be thinking about Ash’s dick and drooling in front of his twin freaking sister, especially after the few weeks I’ve gone without sex on doctors orders to heal up. Avery and Harley both laugh at me as they leave but, fuck it, that’s not unusual and I’m glad Avery sounds happy for once. This year has been fucking hell on that girl.

I wander around the ranch looking for Ash but the asshole must be hiding. I find Blaise swimming in the pool so I sit on the edge and dangle my legs in, my toes skimming the heated water.

“You should hop in.” Blaise drawls, looking like a fucking dream with the water sliding down his chest in tiny rivulets.

I shake my head. “I don’t want to tire myself out, I’m just barely getting around as it is. I’d rather just watch you.”

He smirks and swims over to me, his arms arching through the air and, lord help me, there’s something about the colors and patterns of his tattoos that pull me in.

“You look lost, Star.”

I shiver. “I can’t find Ash. Do you know where he’s hiding?”

He pulls himself out of the water using only the strength in his arms and my panties just fucking combust for him. He grins at me like he knows all about the inner workings of my brain and I pull a face back at him.

“He’s hiding on the balcony in our room, smoking a joint and being a morbid dick. What do you need him for?”

I wrinkle my nose. “I’m supposed to be finding and fucking him for Avery.”

Blaise tips his head back and roars with laughter. “That lucky dick, using his sister to get laid. If I start pouting and throwing tantrums will you fuck me too, Star?”

I groan at him and he pulls me up and into his arms, sitting on one of the poolside lounge chairs, ignoring the fact that he's getting me wet and I don't see a freaking towel anywhere. I'm pretty sure this chair is the same one we kissed on, right before he carried me to his room and fucked me for the first time.

I hum under my breath happily at the memory.

We lay there quietly and I let my eyes slip shut, content to just be there with him, relaxing and carefree as if we're just normal eighteen year olds who haven't just been through hell together.

"Well isn't this just fucking cozy."

I glance up to find Ash scowling and broody, a glass of bourbon dangling from one hand. He looks like the spoiled rich asshole I truly thought he was when I first laid eyes on him. Okay, he kinda is exactly that, but he's also mine.

"Your sister is trying to get you laid. I'm calling that a party foul and against the rules." Blaise snarks, and I groan at him. He laughs and folds me into his chest.

Ash stretches out on the chair next to ours and when he puts his glass back down on the ground after taking a sip, I thread our fingers together.

"Does that mean the dry spell is over and you feel up to it, Mounnty?" He drawls, and I curse the stupid flush my cheeks get.

"I'm not sure you have gentle sex in you, Ash. You might have to wait another week or two."

He chuckles at me, a possessive twinkle in his eye, and then he and Blaise start bickering over pointless shit and I zone them out. With a sigh, I press my head down onto Blaise's chest and look up at the stars, Ash's thumb running over my knuckles as he talks.

I know we're not completely safe, I know there's more than enough monsters hiding in the shadows for us, but right at this second I *feel* safe and loved and like the whole thing, all of the blood and death, pain and heartache, the whole lot was worth it.

My family was worth it all.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

J Bree is a dreamer, writer, mother, farmer, and cat-wrangler. The order of priorities changes daily.

She lives on a small farm in a tiny rural town in Australia that no one has ever heard of. She spends her days dreaming about all of her book boyfriends, listening to her partner moan about how the wine grapes are growing, and being a snack bitch to her two kids.

For updates about upcoming releases, please visit her website at <http://www.jbreeauthor.com>, and sign up for the newsletter or join her group on Facebook at [Breezie's Wolves](#)

