

DYLAN PAGE



*torment*  
PART ONE

THE BLEEDING HEARTS SERIES

# TORMENT: PART ONE

# THE BLEEDING HEARTS SERIES BOOK 1

DYLAN PAGE

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FIRST EDITION

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*To my parents,  
Who encouraged and inspired me,  
And loved the little “Peter Pan” child that I was.  
I may have grown up, but the imagination never died.  
I hate that neither of you are here to witness this,  
But I know that you would both be so proud.  
I love you. I miss you.  
Mum, Dad... this is for you.*

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

**\*\*Warning:** This book is meant for mature readers, 18+.

Torment Part One is a dark romance and contains scenes and situations that may be upsetting for some readers. Includes several triggers and sensitive material such as: domestic abuse, profanity, gang violence, PTSD, depression, anxiety disorders, and sexual assault.

Please do not read if you are uncomfortable with any of the above. Thank you.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblances to actual events, locales, or persons living or dead, are coincidental.



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*But most importantly,*

*For always telling me I was good enough to do this.*

# Chapter one

*Present Day*

*Mina: Sixteen Years Old*

*June*

I TRY to open my eyes, but it's like there are weights attached to my lids. I feel strange... like I'm floating... like my senses are in suspended animation, as if they're on vacation and don't want to come back to reality yet. I giggle at the thought. Hmm, a vacation would be nice. A sandy beach, the ocean, a man with eyes to match the waves and hair as gold as the sand, at my side...

A continuous beeping breaks through my fantasy. What the hell *is* that?

I can hear voices too, speaking in low, deep rumbling murmurs. But they are close by. The air smells like cleaning products and is heavily sterile. I'm lying down... yes, I'm in bed, for sure. The mattress is kind of hard, uncomfortable, and the blanket covering me is thin and overused to the point where any sort of weight or warmth it once held is gone. Why am I in bed? Wasn't I on the floor?

*Oh my God...*

*Wait...*

“Mum?” I try to call out to her, but for some reason, my voice is so hoarse, I can only croak. My throat feels insanely dry, like I haven’t had water in days.

A hand suddenly grips one of my own and I can hear footsteps rush in my direction. *The men. Skeleton masks...*

My eyes fly open as blind panic gives me a sudden burst of adrenaline. The room is dark, save for one dim light from somewhere behind me. I blink, clearing my vision, and cast a quick look around, searching for a sign of the men in masks. But all I see is white walls, white floors, and the machines by my bed, which have all sorts of monitors that are beeping and whirring away, and the window on my left reveals a black sky littered with stars. *Am I in a hospital?*

My gaze drifts down to see Shay sitting beside me, his back to the window, gripping one of my hands tightly in both of his own. At once, my fear trickles away at the sight of my stepbrother, and my feelings of fear and panic morphs to one of relief and safety. My dry lips crack as I smile at him, relieved to have him here with me. The longer I look at him, however, I slowly start to notice little details about his appearance that seem off; like how his silver eyes are red and puffy, as if he’s been crying, a rarity for him. His hair is strewn around his face like he’s been gripping it in his hands. As my mind sluggishly starts to catch up to me, he lets out a shuddering sort of gasp, and kisses my knuckles. It’s then that I notice the large, dark figure beside him. James grips his shoulder and leans over me, kissing my forehead.

“Hey, Baby Girl,” he whispers, as though he’s afraid to speak any louder. “You thirsty?”

I nod and lick my parched lips. James brings over a water bottle and I greedily suck on the straw until it’s empty. He moves through a doorway across the room, revealing a small washroom, and comes back with more. I finish half of it and sink back into the pillows piled up behind me, “Man, I don’t know what drugs they gave me, but I might ask if I can bring some home,” I mumble, feeling pleasantly lightheaded.

They both chuckle softly and I close my eyes and smile at the sound. I like making them laugh. And now that I'm apparently as high as a kite, I find I like it even more. When I look up at James again, however, I notice that he, too, has heavily red-rimmed eyes. His face is gaunt, and he looks exhausted, like he's aged ten years in a day. Even his peppered dark hair looks like it's grown more greys at his temples. He runs a shaky hand through the waves and closes his dark eyes, looking like he's minutes away from collapsing. I've never seen him like this. Never seen him look so vulnerable. It kind of scares me a little. Ever since I met James, he's always been the strong one, an impenetrable force in our household. I don't think I've ever seen him cry, but it's clear to me now that he has been.

In this moment, he is the exact opposite of the man I met so many years ago.



*The Past...*

*Mina: Seven Years Old*

*July*

“It’s okay, Mina, it’s just a motorcycle,” my mum held my hand in hers as we watched the huge, black Harley drive down the cul-de-sac towards us. We had been waiting on the front stoop for her new boyfriend to make his appearance, and finally, he was here. But the sound of his motorcycle sent a shiver through me, as the deafening roar of the engine reminded me of what I imagined a monster might sound like. Some of our neighbours who were out, cast stern looks over their shoulders as the loud motorcycle drove past, and their frowns deepened at the sight of the huge brute of a man seated on it. Mum gave my hand an encouraging squeeze as the bike glided to a halt at the curb before our little bungalow, and I raised my gaze to the dangerous-looking man sitting astride it. He wore aviator sunglasses and no helmet; dressed in dark jeans, a leather jacket, and dark boots.

My mother released my hand and practically skipped forward. Terrified of being caught in the open, I hurried behind her, and clung to her sundress as she greeted the scary looking man. She obviously wasn't scared of him, but I had never seen anyone like him before.

"James," she said breathlessly, as he set his kickstand and climbed off his bike with a lazy swing. He stepped forward, wrapped a tattooed hand around her waist and tugged her close for a deep kiss. Disgusted, I released the hem of her dress I'd been clutching and covered my eyes.

*Kissing is so gross!*

The last time I'd seen anyone kiss my mummy was my daddy, but that had been three years ago. But he was gone now...

The man who was now kissing my mum finally released her, and he peered over her shoulder at me. I trembled, intimidated by his black leather jacket, his dark wavy hair that had hints of grey at his temples, and the tattoos on his hands that looked like stormy waves. He stepped around my mummy and crouched down, elbows on his knees as he got to my level, and removed his sunglasses revealing eyes as black as crow feathers. He grinned at me. "You must be Mina," he rumbled in his deep voice, but it was gentle, not what I was expecting from someone like him. The friendliness in his tone encouraged me to take a tentative step forward, but I fiddled with my long, blonde braid nervously, as this beast of a man greeted me.

James reached out a hand to me and I found myself entranced by the beautiful ink on his skin. I'd never seen tattoos before, let alone someone who appeared to be absolutely covered in them. Though I was shy, I was a curious kid, and despite my reservations about him at first, I truly believed that all people were indisputably good. He was smiling so kindly; his face handsome and open. Timidly, I placed my tiny hand in his massive rough one, and allowed him to pull me closer to his motorcycle.

He explained to me how it worked and even promised to take me for a ride on it down the block and back again, once he got me a proper helmet and protective gear. Soon, all my previous doubts and fears over the bike were gone, and I was itching to go for a ride as soon as possible, absolutely thrilled at the idea.

When James lifted me up and placed me on the seat, I turned to my mother and grinned at her, proud that I was no longer afraid. She smiled back at me in a way I hadn't seen since Daddy died. Mum's smile was sunny and bright. Her eyes, which were identical to mine, upturned and bright green with long dark lashes, sparkled in the afternoon light. We had the same pale complexion, but her hair was long and chocolate brown, while mine was almost a white blonde.

I wanted to grow up looking just like her. To me, she was the most beautiful woman in the world. I always admired my mother's beauty, and resented that I inherited my dad's colouring.

James O'Hare was the complete opposite of my daddy.

I missed him.

I could still remember bits and pieces, like how he came home at the same time every day at five, and we would spend a good hour playing, reading, or just snuggling on the couch together. I remember how he liked to barbeque on weekends. He played golf with his friends on Saturdays, and every Sunday, he would spend the afternoon at an exclusive club downtown where he and his friends would play racquetball, watch football games, and play cards. He had a funny laugh. He had blond hair, like me. And he liked to wear suits and ties. Now, his old golf clubs were collecting dust in a corner of our garage.

He'd gotten sick, cancer my mummy had called it, and suddenly, Daddy couldn't play wrestle with me like he used to. He napped a lot. I wasn't allowed to hug him as tight as I wanted, and his beautiful blond hair, so much like mine, fell out. He couldn't read to me. He didn't laugh anymore. And

then one day, I woke up, and he wasn't there anymore. It was just Mum and me.

Mummy worked at a local diner as a waitress, but she said we still had to move out of our beautiful big house to a smaller one. She said we just didn't have the money. She worked as much as she could, which meant I spent most of my days over at her friend, Trish's house, playing with her kids until Mum's shift was over. Working at the diner was how she said she met James. When she first told me about him, she said how he came in almost every day that she worked, bringing her flowers, expensive chocolates, and gave her lifts home on his bike since our junkie car was continuously breaking down.

I asked what else she had liked about her new boyfriend. Her face went pink and a small, secretive smile curled up on her full lips. She told me how sweet and gentle he was, how he always called her beautiful, *and* he had a full time job; something to do with sales for his club. When I asked her about his club, she didn't seem to know. She said she figured it was probably like the one Daddy had gone to.

She was now wearing a brand new diamond engagement ring on her finger, the stone cut like a heart and bigger and prettier than any piece of jewelry she'd ever owned. I liked how it sparkled. Mummy was going to marry James O'Hare, and was planning on moving us in with him and his thirteen year old son by the end of the month. Mum was eager to begin this new chapter in our lives, and so she stood there beaming, watching as James showed me his bike.

My earlier hesitations were now gone, and I was feeling completely comfortable with him. I missed receiving fatherly affection, so I clung to James, begging to at least let me ride with him around the cul-de-sac before he left. He had just laughed and shook his head, promising that he would once I had a helmet.

"I'll see you next weekend at the barbeque, Babe." James gave my mother another deep, tongue-filled kiss, which only made me cringe and avert my eyes until they were done. "I'll pick you both up at ten."

James picked me up off the bike, settling me on his hip. “You be a good girl for your momma now. I’ll see you next weekend.” He gave my round cheek a kiss and I couldn’t help but giggle as he put me back on my feet, before he drove off down the street, earning more angry looks from the neighbours.

But as I peeked up at my Mummy’s face, I liked how her old, beautiful smile was back. It had been three years since I saw it, and I wanted it to last.



“Where is Shay?” Mum asked as James drove us to the park where his club was waiting. He was driving a big black pickup and I sat in the backseat, laughing hysterically as I bobbed up and down. It was like I was on a theme park ride with the way the seat was making me bounce at every dip and bump in the road. James cast me a smile in the rear-view mirror at the sound of my giggling.

“He’s already there. Got a ride with one of his friends.”

Mum bit her lip, uncertainly. “Will he like me?”

James cast her a sideways glance. She was repeatedly smoothing out her flowery summer dress and straightened her dark hair. She had no idea how beautiful she was. When I saw him reach over and place a hand on her thigh, I quickly distracted myself with the sights of nature outside the window. They were incredibly touchy-feely with each other and always kissing. *Ugh! Why did grown-ups do that? Aren’t boys where cooties come from?*

“He’ll love you, babe, just... don’t push it with him...” he said, flicking the ash from his cigarette out the window.

“What do you mean?”

“Shay is... he’s had some problems since his momma ran out on us. He was six. Never got over it. Abandonment issues. Doesn’t help that I have to work all the time. My job with the club keeps me busy...”



I frowned as I listened to him talk about his son and my heart went out to him. I couldn't imagine my mummy leaving me behind somewhere. What would I do? The thought tore at my heart. If my mum left me, and with my daddy gone, I'd have no one.

“What kind of problems?” Mum asked.

James glanced sideways at her. “Lots of fighting... been kicked out of two schools... he attends St. Matthews now.” St. Matthews was a school for troubled youth. Even *I* had heard about it through the rumour-mill during recess. Kids whispered about its dark reputation and how the teenagers that went there were responsible for breaking our swings, mugging us for lunch money, or beating up some of the older ones. Even from the back seat, I noticed how Mum shivered before peering back over her shoulder at me. I was playing with a long strand of my wavy, baby blonde hair around my finger, trying to make it look like I wasn't eavesdropping. She seemed satisfied and faced forward again.

“He participates in club matters now. He's being initiated.”

“Initiated?” Her voice rose a bit, the way it does when she's getting upset. I tense up a little in the back, remembering the last time she'd spoken in this tone. I had gone through her makeup drawer and used a red lipstick of hers to draw some pictures on the tiled walls around the bathtub. When she found me, her pitch went up as she screeched, sounding remarkably like a seagull, as she stared in disbelief at what I'd done.

James smirked at her. “Don't worry about him, Em. If he disrespects you, you tell me. Alright?”

Mum seemed even more nervous than before, as she started smoothing out her dress again. I could only imagine what Mum had been thinking. Once, a girl at my school had pushed me off a slide, and Mum marched into the principal's office, demanding that she be suspended. It sounded like Shay was a bully, too. Mummy wasn't going to like him. But to me, it just sounded like he was sad and angry. I mean, he didn't even have a mum. I felt bad for him.

“I’ve arranged a moving truck for your things to come by on the thirtieth,” James said, changing the subject as the truck rounded a bend of trees, the sign for the public park greeting us in the distance. “Have you started packing?”

“Almost done. Just Mina’s room and the kitchen stuff is left...” Mum’s voice was quieter now, and when I peek at the side mirror, I caught a glimpse of her reflection. Her brow was furrowed and she looked anxious.

“Don’t stress.” James’ hand squeezed her knee. It was only for a moment before he let go, flicked the cigarette out the window and pulled into the full parking lot, searching for a spot. The park was one of the most coveted spots in the city during the summertime. There were trees everywhere, a clean flowing river that ran by, great for fishing and swimming or canoeing, picnic tables and grills set up for families or events, playgrounds, and trails that meandered through the forest nearby for some short hikes. Families were there, enjoying the sunny day, as were a few larger congregations of people... one of them being his club. They had a spot in the distance that occupied several picnic tables, some grills, and was nicely shaded by some trees and was close to the river. I knew it was them right away, because I recognized the blue Celtic Dragon emblem on the backs of their cuts, just like the one James wore.

“Are you hungry for some burgers, sweetheart?” He smiled over his shoulder at me.

At once, the tension in the truck vanished as my mind immediately shifted to the picnic. I bounced up and down in my seat, grinning wildly and practically shouted in response, “Yes!”

Laughing, he pulled us into a free spot. As soon as he parked, I tore out of the truck, my baby pink sundress fanning out around my knees as I raced along in my white Keds. When I spotted the playground, I instantly forgot about the picnic and made a mad dash for it, determined to get a turn on the swing before another kid claimed it.

“Mina!” Mum shouted after me. “Get back here! Stop!”

James came up behind me and swung me up in the air, tossing me over his tatted shoulder like I weighed nothing. I giggled hysterically as he carried me back, loving this kind of play. Dad had been big on play wrestling, but Mum wasn't. I hadn't realized how much I missed it until that point.

"Come on, ladies," James grinned, slipping on his black aviators, and gave me a little tickle in my side. I squealed happily as he set me on my feet and took my hand in his huge one. "Let's go get some eats."

The group was fairly large... all the men big and rough looking, all tattooed and pierced. Their women were all wearing fairly revealing clothes... jean shorts that cut off just below their butt cheeks and bikini tops. As we took in the women's attire, Mum instantly began to fidget with her flowery summer dress and broad sunhat. James wrapped an arm around her shoulder, tugging her in close as we approached. Many of his friends came over as we neared to introduce themselves, and they all had rather frightening moniker names; things like Bull, Blade, Arizona, and Ripper. Most of the older men had long, scraggly beards and wore bandanas over their bald heads. Mum shook everyone's hands, but clung to James' arm, whom they all seemed to show a level of respect towards.

I, however, bound forward unafraid as I introduced myself to the huge biker men. After meeting James and liking him so much, I hoped that the others would be as nice as he was. They all smiled down at me as I held out my hand and said brightly to each one, "Hi! My name is Mina. What is yours?" Even the women beamed wide as I made comments about their pretty makeup or their earrings. When a group of kids my age ran by, I was quick to join them and headed off into the small field beside our gathering to play kickball.

"Looks like someone's fitting right in," I overheard James laugh.

I looked back to see Mum take a seat at one of the picnic tables as James left her to get them both a beer and a plate of food. One of the older women came over and sat across from

her, welcoming her kindly. I lingered close-by, eagerly eavesdropping again.

“I’m Helen, Blade’s old lady,” the woman said, holding out her hand.

Mum frowned when she said *old lady*, but shook her hand anyway. Puzzled, I looked Helen over. Helen didn’t look old at all, not like my grandma who had a crazy white perm and wrinkles. Her hair was dyed a nice blonde colour, and her makeup was flawless. Why would she call herself that?

“Nice to meet you,” Mum said softly. “I’m Emily Westberg. I’m-”

“You’re James’ woman, right? He’s mentioned you a few times.”

At this, Mum perked up. “Oh? He has?”

Helen nodded. “I hear wedding bells are coming up soon?”

“Yes, I think maybe next year or so...” Her voice trailed off a bit at that.

“Really?” Helen sounded surprised. “I was under the impression it was happening soon?”

Mum shrugged, tucking a long lock of her dark hair behind her ear. “I don’t think so...”

“Hey, Helen.” James strolled up and placed a full plate of food before mum and a beer. He sat at her side. “How are you doing?”

“I’m fine, Sheik,” *Sheik?* I thought. Why did they call him that? “But I would appreciate it if you sent Marty home a little earlier in the evenings. I’ve been lonely.” Helen glared at him, but there was no coldness behind it.

“Club matters, darlin’.” He bit into his own burger and took a swig of his beer. “They take precedence.”

Mum looked bewildered. I was confused, too. Club matters? Dad always made sure to be home at a decent hour, and only went to the club once a week for an afternoon. Did James spend most of his time at his clubhouse? Why? I could

see the same questions milling around in my mum's similar green eyes.

Before she could say anything, there was an explosion of activity in the distance and we all looked over to see a group of young teens who were part of our entourage, break out into a massive fist-fight. There were about five boys all piled together, swinging fists, kicking, and pummeling the crap out of each other. Mum gasped and lurched to her feet at the sight. No one was doing anything to stop it. None of the parents, nor the kids' friends. I watched in fascination as one boy, in particular, with messy dark hair, seemed to be getting the most hits in against the others. I stopped what I was doing and stared as he weaved through the mess of limbs and fists, punching and cursing words I'd never heard before.

"Do something!" Mum exclaimed, and grabbed James' shoulder.

"They'll sort it out," he said easily, turning away to take another swig of his beer. I was shocked, but in an amused sort of way. If Mum ever saw me break out into a fight like this, she would have grabbed my arm and swatted my butt ten times over by now. None of the adults here seemed to be the least bit concerned. I was riveted by this different lifestyle, especially if it meant I was spared a spanking.

Mum, however, frantically searched through the mess of kids, her eyes tight and her expression gravely concerned. When she spotted me, standing there with the other little kids, watching the older boys beat each other down, she quickly rushed over. She picked me up and walked away, but I strained to see over her shoulder, wanting to know how it was going to end. I was silently rooting for that boy with the dark mop of hair to win. He was ruthless, fast, and he battered down the others again and again. It seemed like I was going to get my wish.

"Emily!"

Mum turned to James as he stalked towards us, looking put out.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

“I don’t want my daughter around that!” she cried, placing a hand on the back of my head to force my face into her shoulder, shielding me from the sight. I pouted. It was *so* close to being over and I wanted to see how it ended.

“Kids fight all the time, Em. This is nothing new,” James said casually.

“I have never seen kids fight like that!” Mum snapped at him. “Mina is seven! She’s never witnessed anything so violent...”

James looked down at me. I was still trying to look over my mother’s shoulder at the five boys. His dark gaze flicked up to Mum. “She doesn’t seem very afraid.”

“I don’t care. I’m her mother. And I don’t want her seeing that!”

All three of us looked back as one of the boys emerged victorious, the other four limping away with bloodied faces and wincing hard as they held their ribs. The winner of the fight turned and headed straight for us and Mum immediately gasped as she took in the sight of him. It was the boy with the dark hair that fell in a mess around his face, falling into his eyes and around his jaw. He was already an inch or two taller than Mum. He wore a pair of dark jeans and a black t-shirt, and when he raised his eyes at the adults, I noticed they were a silvery colour with a dark ring around the edge of his iris. They were beautiful. I realized as I drank him in that, besides his eyes, he was basically a miniature version of James.

“Shay,” James said, his voice deep and calm as always. “This is Emily. Emily, this is my son, Shay.”

Mum’s mouth dropped in horror. I could practically hear the thoughts screaming inside her head. *This* was James’ son, soon to be her stepson, soon to be my stepbrother. This boy, whose knuckles were swollen and bleeding, who now pulled out a pack of stinky cigarettes and lit up as though he had every right to. She clutched me harder to her chest, hiding me from the young teenager who glared her up and down, taking in as much of her appearance as she did his. Though she was clearly repulsed by him, I felt the exact opposite. I was

mesmerised. I twisted a little and peered over her other shoulder at him.

Shay's silver stare narrowed with displeasure as he looked at Mum, and the quiet tension rose between them. No one said anything but I could tell she wanted to take me and run. Her fingers were twitching and she shifted her weight side to side.

Finally, a small grin pulled up on the handsome boy's face, and he held out a bleeding hand for her to shake. "It's a pleasure to meet you, ma'am. I hear you are going to be my new mummy?"

Mum curled her lip and glared up at James, who crossed his arms and simply shook his head at his boy. Shay glanced down at his knuckles, seeing the blood there and leaned down as he wiped it off on the grass, and smirked up at her. "My apologies," he said, "I will do my best to keep my misconduct to a minimum. I wouldn't want to taint your fragile mind with my filth-

"Shay..." James said, a warning bite in his tone.

Shay shoved his hands in his pockets and held his cigarette between his teeth, using his tongue to flick it back and forth. He looked *so cool*. I desperately wanted to say hi to him, but Mum's hold on me just tightened further, almost to the point of pain.

She was seething. "I have no desire to bring my little girl around this beast!"

"Em!" James' tone lowered in warning.

"No! I will not do this! I demand you take me home!"

"That's enough, Emily!"

She cast Shay a scathing look. "If you want to continue this life of debauchery, you are headed down a very dark road, young man!" she snapped at him. "You are going to end up in prison if you don't change your ways!"

At this, Shay simply burst out laughing, dropping his cigarette onto the ground. He stepped on it and shook his hair out of his face. "Oh man, you have *no* idea, do you?"

“What are you talking about?”

“Do you really not know? Dad, did you not explain to her who we *are*?”

“Shay-”

“What do you mean? Who are you?”

He opened his mouth to speak, but James cut him off. “Put Mina down and come with me, Emily. We need to talk.”

“No! I want you to tell me now! What is he talking about?”

I let out a soft cry as my mum’s nails pinched my arm. Shay’s eyes flickered to the spot where they were digging into my skin. I wiggled in her grasp, trying to free myself from her vice-like grip.

“Not in front of Mina! Put her down and come with me-”

“I am not leaving my daughter alone with these people!” she practically screeched.

I let out a whimper in fear from my mother’s distress, unsure of what was going on. James ripped me out of her grasp and handed me over to Shay, who managed to easily hold me up against his chest. I wrapped my arms tight around his neck and buried my face into his collarbone. “Take her while I talk to Emily,” James said as he grabbed Mum by her bicep and tugged her away. She was throwing a fit at this point and drawing too much unwanted attention by other picnic goers in the area. Shay simply raised a hand and stuck up his middle finger at them, making them wince and turn quickly away. We watched his father pull my mum into the pickup and he started the engine with a roar. Even from here, I could tell she was shouting at the top of her lungs, and she actually hit James’ shoulder at one point. James backed out and took off, but we’d both seen the look of anger on his face. He was *pissed*.

Now that we were alone, the pain in my arm from my mother’s nails flared up, and I couldn’t stop the snuffle that escaped me. Shay jerked as though he had forgotten he was holding me. I was a pretty tiny kid, and even though he was a



young teen, he was still able to hold me up easily. He tilted his head back to look down at me just as I peered up at him. His silver eyes flickered over my green ones, and then moved around my face, like he was taking in everything about my appearance. My pale skin, my chubby, pink cheeks, my pouty lips, and my fair hair.

“Are you okay?” I asked him.

He furrowed his brow. “What do you mean?”

“You were bleeding.” I squirmed in his arms and he lifted me so that I was more balanced on his hip. Reaching for his hand, I held it as I looked over his roughened up knuckles.

“It’s nothing, kiddo; just comes with establishing dominance.”

“Dom... nin... nance...” I stumbled over the unfamiliar word.

“That’s right.” He chuckled. “What’s your name?”

“Mina Westberg. What is yours?”

The corner of his mouth lifted. “Shay O’Hare.”

I smiled. “James is your daddy?”

“That he is.”

“I like his motorcycle.”

“Do you? Want to check out my friend’s bike?”

I beamed at him and nodded eagerly, desperate to check out another motorcycle. Shay carried me to the parking lot where a deep orange and black Harley was sitting. When I squealed with excitement, he lifted me up and placed me on it. As I beamed up at him, a slow, reluctant sort of smile tugged on the corners of his mouth. I reached for the handles and just managed to grip them. When I glanced around, I noticed how the other kids were watching us warily, eyeing Shay with apprehension, like they were afraid of him. Huh, weird... he was being really nice to me.

“Who were those boys you were fighting?” I asked, curiously.

He shrugged his shoulder and crossed his arms over his chest. “Just some wannabe punks from my school. They challenged me. I accepted.”

“Why?”

“Because of who my father is.”

“James?”

“Yeah,”

I crinkle my nose and I tried to put together what he was saying. “Why do they care who your daddy is?”

“He’s Sergeant at Arms with the Celtic Beasts, Sweetness,” he said, his eyes twinkling with amusement. “And as I’m trying to build up my reputation, being challenged comes with the territory. A few of them want to join the Junior Chapter of my dad’s club. To do that, they need to come to me, as I’m the head of it. Sometimes, I’ll just talk with them, but these guys wanted to prove themselves to the older crowd.”

I didn’t understand at all, but I didn’t want him to think I was stupid. For some reason, I felt this uncontrollable need to want this boy to like me. “Did you hurt them bad?”

He laughed lightly, but there was a cold edge to it. “Pretty sure I managed to break a few ribs, definitely at least two noses, and pulled the arm out of the socket of the ringleader.” He spat on the ground. “Fuckin’ Cody Miller... stupid ass-hat...”

I was shocked. He used two swear words in one sentence. But I didn’t comment. Though the other kids seemed afraid of him, I wasn’t. I grinned up at him instead. “I’m glad you won,” I said and held out my arms so he could help me off the bike.

Shay’s silver eyes flashed and his smile broadened on his face. He reached out, scooped me up, and placed me on his hip again. That was when I remembered that the playground was close by and I twisted about in his arms to seek it out. There were a few kids and their mothers milling around it a short way off, and I longingly eyed the structure. It felt like ages

since I had last been to a playground. Mummy was always so tired at the end of the day to take me.

“Do you want to go over there?” he asked, noticing where my attention had turned to.

“Yes, please, Shay!” I said eagerly. James had thwarted my earlier attempt to go there, but his son seemed to have no problem with it. I planned to take full advantage of that.

He smiled at my excitement and carried me over. Other families moved out of our way, again, all apparently nervous of Shay. He set me down as we reached the edge of the park and I took off, climbing up the rope ladder with ease until I reached the top of the structure. I searched around below until I found him still standing off to the side, and waved. He waved back, but remained at the perimeter, arms crossed, and his silver eyes taking in every individual in the vicinity. Why was he watching everyone like that? Like he was so suspicious? He was broody for a thirteen year old boy.

I went down the slide and climbed up again, this time moving over to the monkey bars and easily swung myself along. I searched for Shay again and found him sitting on an empty bench. He sagged forward, his elbows resting on his knees and his head drooped. As I watched from my perch on the monkey bars, maneuvering myself so I was seated on top with my legs dangling, I studied him. His hair fell forward, his shoulders slumped, as if he had a hundred pound weight on his back. He looked tired... upset. Every so often, he glanced over at the parking lot, but James and Mum were nowhere to be seen.

Seeing him looking so tired, so sad, reminded me of what I'd overheard earlier in the truck. Shay was a troubled kid, with no Mummy, and now it seemed like my mum had already taken a dislike to him. I assumed that this was what was troubling him, and I wanted to fix it any way I could. All I could think of was to try to impress him, so I flipped off the monkey bars and ran over to the swing. Shay's silver eyes remained focused on the parking lot as I pumped my legs to gain some height.

“Shay! Shay! Look at me!” I called over to him.

He looked up and smiled as I swung up into the air. I grinned at him and pumped my legs hard to bring myself higher, and the moment the swing flew forward, I let go and threw myself into the air as I’d done a hundred times before.

“Mina!”

Shay’s scream broke through the air, startling me as I landed on my feet. I stumbled forward a bit and looked up to see him storming over, his expression panicked and furious. I took several steps back, my eyes wide with fear and confusion. *What had I done wrong?*

“Don’t do that again!” he half shouted in my face as he grasped my shoulders. It wasn’t a painful hold, but it was strong enough to frighten me and get my attention.

I blinked up at him in shock, my smile gone as he loomed over me. “I-I’m sorry!” I stammered.

“Jesus Christ! You could have hurt yourself! Do you understand that?”

“I-I do it all the time... I’ve never-”

“Don’t! Just... don’t! What if you had landed wrong? What if someone had run in front of you?” He gave me a little shake. “You scared the shit out of me!”

To my credit, I didn’t cry as this boy, who was actually a stranger to me, yelled in my face. I stared up at him and stilled. He was angry with me, obviously. Upset. I just didn’t know what to do to make it better, and I so desperately wanted to. I didn’t want him unhappy with me. From the first moment I locked my eyes onto Shay, I was captivated with him. His gentleness towards me up until this point had been comforting and made me feel special. The last thing I wanted was him to be angry over something I did.

Shay was breathing hard and after a minute, he shook himself, looking puzzled, before he glowered and stalked off. I watched as he sat heavily back down on the bench, leaning forward until he clenched his messy, dark hair in his fists. When he had yelled at me, several children and mothers had

retreated warily, clearly unsure of this unstable and dangerous looking boy. But as I watched him, my mind was going over everything I'd overheard that day.

I looked back at the swing, then to him, taking in what he had been saying. I didn't understand what I'd done that was so bad, but he was clearly worried about my safety. It was my fault he was now so upset. I didn't like that and I wanted to make it right. So, I did in the only way I could think of.

Shay lifted his head at the sound of my footsteps as I approached him. I stood a foot away, and held out a daisy I'd picked for him... a peace offering. He stared at it for a long time before looking up at my face. I kept my expression solemn and serious, hoping he could see that I was remorseful, and nudged his fist with the flower. Slowly, he opened his hand and I placed the daisy into his palm.

"I'm sorry, Shay," I whispered to him. "I didn't mean to make you scared."

He looked at the little flower that I'd given him, and held it carefully in his hands. He seemed confused at first, and, for what felt like ages, he simply stared at the little flower. When he slowly raised his head to look at me, his silver eyes were shimmering with unshed tears.

Wordlessly, he opened his arms, giving me the choice to say no. But my face broke into a huge grin and I leapt forward, wrapping my chubby arms around his neck and squeezed the life out of him. I was so relieved he had forgiven me and wanted to move on.

He hugged me tightly, albeit a little awkwardly at first, as if he hadn't hugged someone in some time, before he relaxed and just held on like I was a life preserver. I let him hold me for as long as he needed before he set me back down and tapped the tip of my nose with his finger. "Are you hungry?" When I nodded, he took my hand. "Let's get you a hamburger, huh?"

## Chapter two

*Present Day*

*Mina: Sixteen years Old*

*June*

“DID YOU GUYS CATCH THEM?” I whisper through my cracked lips.

“We did; we’re taking care of it.” James’ voice is unnaturally soft and gentle, but I can still sense a hard edge to his words. His gaze flickers to Shay. “You said you wanted to deal with them, right?”

Dark shadows swallow up his silver eyes and he gives a small, but steady nod. I shiver at the look on his face, like a cross between a demon and my savior. Unleashing Shay upon these men, being who he is, they are going to end up in pieces.

*Good fucking riddance!* I settle back into my bed, the feeling of crippling fear and anxiety temporarily abating. Once I know those masked men are gone... and I mean, *gone*, gone... this suffocating feeling in my chest will go away for good.

“How’s Mum? Is she in another room?” I crane my head as I search behind James for some sign of her. She had been

there, too. I remember hearing her screams, the blood... *Oh God! Where is she?*

Shay's grip on my hand tightens and he shifts in his seat, peering over his shoulder at his dad. James' smile immediately vanishes and he shoves his hands into the pockets of his black leather cut, "Sweetheart, you need to rest. Your knee..."

My attention immediately shifts. I try to sit up as I look down the bed at my legs, but the blankets covering me are hiding them. However, I can feel how my right leg is completely encased in what feels like a cement block. A cast. *Oh fuck... my leg! My fucking leg!*

My heart starts to race, the machines beside me beeping like crazy as I start to freak out. I pull my hand from Shay's grip and rip the covers back to see that my leg is wrapped in hard plaster, from halfway up my thigh all the way down to my ankle. My eyes fill with tears as it hits me just how broken I really am. While my mind finally catches up to how serious my situation is, I suddenly start to feel the pain and initial terror that had overwhelmed me upon waking up. It's like I've been beaten with a baseball bat. My right wrist is heavily wrapped, reminding me of the feeling from when one of the assailants crushed it within his grasp, and how much it had hurt. My fist is also bandaged, and I recall how I'd bitten into my own flesh to keep quiet, the taste of blood in my mouth...

When I move, my body screams in protest, and I let out a sharp hiss between my teeth from the pain. I hear the scraping of Shay's chair as he drags it closer to my side and stands over me, his expression filled with hopelessness and desperation. I know he wants to make it all better, my big protector. But this is something he has no power over, and I can only imagine how it's killing him.

James presses a red button on the wall and only a couple of seconds pass before a nurse comes in. As she checks me over, the boys stand back to give her some space, and I lie there, trying desperately to piece together just what the fuck happened tonight.

My memory is a jumbled mess.

I remember coming home after my dance recital... I remember eating dinner and being so disappointed with my mother for missing it... how she had stumbled downstairs after sleeping off yet another drunk-fest... doors breaking in... a desperate struggle with a masked man in my room... and then... *nothing*.

“Are you hurting, honey?” the nurse asks me. She’s pretty. Probably only a few years older than Shay, with curly red hair and lovely blue eyes. I nod and she immediately sets about fiddling with the IV bag that’s connected to the needle in my hand. I wince at the sight. *Ugh! I hate needles!* But at this point, with how much pain I’m in, I’ll gladly tolerate it if it will ease my discomfort. She tells James, as she checks over the monitors, that the doctor wants to talk to him about further surgery options for my leg, before she leaves us in this sad, little room. My racing heart starts to slow, my eyes drooping sleepily. Mmm... this is better... comfy... happy... *man, these drugs are great!*

Shay is instantly at my side, hunkering down in the chair again. James, however, rubs his eyes furiously and stomps off to the washroom where he shuts himself in, locking the door with a sharp snap. Moments later, I hear him crying softly. Knowing that my stepfather is breaking down behind closed doors disturbs me so much, I can feel my own eyes sting with fresh tears as it temporarily snaps me out of my blissful high. *What the fuck happened tonight?*

I turn back to Shay, knowing what I need to feel safe again. I try to shuffle myself over on the bed, but with the wires in my hand, my leg in a cast, and my sore muscles, I barely move an inch before I flop back against the mattress, exhausted.

As always, Shay knows exactly what it is I need, and he effortlessly, and with amazing gentleness, lifts me and moves me over so that there is a sliver of room for himself. Carefully, he climbs into bed and pulls me into his arms, being cautious of my IV and my leg. Burrowing my face into his shirt, I breathe in his familiar scent and relax. He strokes my back in slow, reassuring circles, and his other hand slides up and cups



the back of my head gently, as he slowly runs his fingers through my hair. It's in Shay's arms that I can finally let go and cry. It's here that I feel the safest. He would never let anyone hurt me, and if he had been home tonight, I wouldn't be lying in a hospital bed right now, feeling like I'd been beaten within an inch of my life.

I don't know how long we lay like that but eventually, James emerges from the washroom, and he leaves without a word or second glance. Most likely to check in on Mum or something.

Long after I stop crying, Shay keeps holding me, and I know he'll stay here all night, despite the fact that visiting hours are probably long over. He occasionally kisses my temple and continues to stroke soothing loops across my back, and I feel the effects of the drugs work their magic as my eyelids become heavy and drowsiness sets in. I try to fight it, wanting to see Mum before I pass out again, but my mind drifts into darkness, and I fall asleep safe and loved in Shay's arms.



*The Past...*

*Mina: Seven Years Old*

*July*

“Honey, wake up...”

I rub my eyes with my fists and blearily open them to see my mother standing over my bed. As my eyesight adjusted to the dim light, I realized it was still nighttime. “Mummy?” I whisper in confusion and clutch my stuffed bunny, my most cherished childhood possession. “What’s going on?” I looked up at my mother, noting how she was dressed in jeans and a sweater and had a duffle slung over her shoulder. Why wasn't she in bed, too?

“Nothing, just hold onto me, sweetie. We're going for a car ride.”

Mum scoops me up from the warm, comfort of my bed. Still sleepy, I wrapped my arms around her neck, my little stuffed bunny held tight in my hands. I wearily closed my eyes again as my mother carried me downstairs and into the garage where her beater of a car waited for us. I was vaguely aware of being strapped into my booster seat in the back and a light blanket being thrown over my little figure. Mum tossed the duffle bag in beside me, climbed into the front seat, and started the engine. I slumped my head back against the soft, fabric seat behind me, the rocking motion of the car and hot air from the heaters helping put me back into a slumbering state.

The barbeque had been several days ago, and when James and my mother had returned to the group, Mum had looked terrible. She had tears in her eyes, and was a little shaken. She also had an angry red mark on her cheek that I didn't notice until later. She had found me sitting on Shay's lap, munching away on a hamburger and corn on the cob. She glared at him, and he simply wrapped an arm around my waist in response, while James growled something in her ear that no one else could hear. Mum dropped her head and remained close to him for the rest of the outing. I, meanwhile, assumed everything had been sorted out, and went about from person to person to chatter with them, to offer to grab them another drink, or to pick more flowers for people. I had been having the time of my life.

Shay led me over to the water so we could dip our toes in and throw rocks into the fast moving current. From time to time, I would glance over my shoulder to see my mother and James watching us from a distance, and it looked like he was murmuring something to her. Mum looked a little upset and when I tried to go to her again, Shay picked me up and walked us to a nearby ice cream stand, where he bought me a giant chocolate cone, and I forgot all about my mother's distress.

I enjoyed the barbeque. Shay and James were both incredibly nice to me and gave me the attention I'd been missing ever since my daddy had died. My mum worked like crazy and was often too tired at the end of the day to play... but James filled that parental hole, while Shay entertained me and made me feel like I belonged in their family. I was glad

when James told me that my mummy and I were going to be living with them by the end of the month. He even offered to bring me by his club from time to time to see all of his friends again, which I looked forward to. All the adults had been so friendly and funny, and I liked that they talked to me when I approached them, unlike most adults who couldn't be bothered with a seven year old.

But the past few days have been confusing and left me unsettled. Mum had called in sick to work, she'd hidden us inside our little bungalow, putting on endless movies for me to watch, and kept the doors and windows locked. I wanted desperately to go out and play, but Mum had snapped at me and told me we were staying put until she could get things sorted out. What "things" she was referring to, I didn't know, but obeyed her wishes and reluctantly remained inside all while wishing that I could go out into the sunshine. On the second day, she called Trish, her friend that I stayed with when she was working. I had been sitting before the television, watching My Little Pony, but I could still hear parts of their conversation from where my mum was sitting in the kitchen.

"No... I can't go to the cops... he said they had an in... I know! I know! I feel so stupid now... he said I can't... if I do he'll..." She inhaled shakily and let out a long breath. "...he said he'd come after me if I did that... I have to try, Trish... if I can make us disappear... I know! Please... I know all of this already, but what else can I do? He said he loves me... I believe it, but..." She sighed wearily. "I don't know fully what we're getting into... but it doesn't feel right. It doesn't feel safe. Not for me, not for Mina."

I could tell Mum was upset upon hearing the fear in her voice and my little chest squeezed with anxiety. I felt powerless and hated it when my mum was sad. The bruise on her cheek looked better, and when I had asked her what had happened, she just said she had tripped.

Mum hung up the phone and I tiptoed into the kitchen, finding her sitting at the table with a cup of tea cradled in her hands, staring off at the window over the sink, looking lost.

"Mummy?"

Mum turned and her expression softened at the sight of me. She held her arms open and I dove in, hugging her tight. “Hi there, Baby Girl.”

“Don’t be sad,” I whispered to her, wishing her unhappiness away. I hadn’t seen her like this since Daddy died.

“Don’t you worry about Mummy, okay, sweetheart?” She kissed my forehead. “Everything is going to be fine, alright?”

I nodded and gave my mother another squeeze. “Will we be seeing James and Shay this weekend? Shay said he was going to show me the bike he’s fixing up.”

At once, she tensed, but she held onto me and kept her tone light. “No, I don’t think so, honey...”

Now, we were going for a car ride in the middle of the night. I struggled to open my eyes, fighting the urge to sleep, and saw that the sky outside was still dark and littered with stars. Our little car headed down the cul-de-sac, and through our neighborhood until we made it to the main highway. As we turned onto it, Mum stepped on the gas. There was no one else on the street this late.

“Where are we going?” I asked, yawning.

“Going to see grandma for a bit. Would you like that?”

I smiled drowsily and nodded, sinking back into the seat as Mum sped us away into the darkness. Only a few minutes passed of quiet driving when several loud roars broke the comfortable silence in the car. My eyes shot open again and I twisted about in my seat, peering out the back, noticing several headlights of motorcycles approaching fast from behind.

“Mum, is that James?” I asked, excited. Was he coming with us to see grandma?

“Shit,” Mum hissed. She pressed harder on the gas pedal, accelerating with a brutal lurch that had the little, junk-car screaming in protest.

I fell back against my booster seat. “Mummy! You said a bad word!”

“I know, honey. Just ignore Mum right now. Your seatbelt is still on?”

“Yes.”

“Good, hang on tight, hon.”

The little car shot forward again and I felt a shiver of fear rush over me. The motorcycles picked up speed and I could hear them closing in behind us. What was going on? Why did my mum sound so afraid? Why did it seem like she wasn't happy to see James?

“Mummy! Slow down!” I cried, my anxiety shooting up.

“I can't, sweetie, I can't!” Mum said, her voice laced with panic. “Just hold on, okay? It's going to be alright!” She pressed down harder on the gas, but the car sputtered a bit, and our speed dropped some, making her swear again. The bikes closed in and as I peered out the window, I could see several headlights flanking our vehicle, with one pulling up alongside the driver window. The dark shadow of the man gestured to Mum, signaling her to pull over. She simply shook her head and pumped the gas pedal desperately and started weaving the car on the road, keeping the bikes from closing in on the sides. I cried out in fear at the rough swerves and clung to my bunny. Mum continued the erratic driving until high beams suddenly flooded the interior of our vehicle from behind.

I squinted out the back again and saw the dark pickup that belonged to James, tailing us closely and turned back to my mother. “Mummy, pull over! Please!”

“I can't, Baby Girl! I can't! Just hold on!” Mum shoved her foot down and the car shot forward, lurching a bit, and I cried harder, now absolutely terrified. Behind us, the pickup closed in and struck the bumper. We both screamed in shock and the little car's engine sputtered again.

“Please, God, please!” Mum hissed through clenched teeth, and as an exit approached, she suddenly swerved at the last minute, hoping to catch it. But the high speed sent our junker car onto a sharp tilt and we began to spin out. I screamed as the car flew off the side of the road. The sound of

crunching metal and shattering glass filled the air, accompanied by our cries as we rolled twice over. Our car skidded in the thick underbrush that lined the ramp, stopping on its wheels. The windshield was cracked and the roof and sides were heavily dented in, sandwiching us in on all sides. Mum struggled with her seatbelt as she fought to climb into the back of the car where I sat in a daze, my senses all slowly working to catch up to our situation.

“Baby! Are you okay? Honey, please talk to Mummy, are you alright?” I looked up at her, my vision hazy, but could see that she had a bloody forehead and nose, and her expression reminded me of the time she’d gotten sick to her stomach from a restaurant we’d gone to and spent most of the night throwing up. But she forced her shaking hands out to reach for me as I sat slumped over in my seat, my bunny still held limply in my hands.

From above, I could hear the rumbling of engines closing in as the bikes and the truck parked close by, their lights illuminating the space around us. Mum wrenched at her seatbelt, trying to work it free, fighting to unlock it as though it was stuck. Several shadows gathered around the car and after a short struggle, they managed to wrench the rear dented doors open. My eyelids fluttered, feeling dizzy and terrified as a pair of rough hands pulled me free. I was still in my nightgown, barefoot, and I shivered in the cool night air.

“Don’t you touch her!” Mum screamed when I was removed from the vehicle. Her own door was then pried open, and two guys reached in and managed to cut her free from her seatbelt. “I mean it, James! Put her down now!”

I blinked up at James, who was brushing my hair aside as he checked my head and looked me over, searching for injuries.

“You okay, Baby Girl?” he rumbled to me in his deep baritone.

“Wh-what happened?” I whispered, “I want to g-go h-home...” I began to cry when I heard my mother’s screams. It was the middle of the night. Mum had crashed the car. My

head hurt. I was cold. My mother was cursing and shouting at James and the other men. I was terrified and confused. *What was going on?*

“Shay!” James shouted up to the roadside. “Blade!”

My body was shaking and my head swayed from dizziness as I looked up at the two shadows climbing down the embankment.

“Take Mina *home*,” he tensed on the last word. “Use my truck. Keep an eye on her. I need to help Emily...” He passed me off to Shay, who wrapped his arms around me and held me close as he climbed up the slope to the truck. I immediately felt a sense of safety in his arms and clung to him tightly. Shay pressed his lips to the crown of my head as he reached the top of the slope, his hand on my back, rubbing circles over my nighty to warm me up. Blade, a man I recognized from the BBQ, got in the driver’s seat of the truck that was parked nearby.

“You can’t take my daughter!” Mum was screaming in the distance. “Let her go! Don’t you dare, James! Don’t you dare!”

“Calm the fuck down, woman!” he roared back. “Because you decided to act so goddamned stupid, you hurt yourself *and* Mina! You aren’t in a position to make any demands right now!”

I tried to look back to see what was happening, but Shay shifted me in his arms so that my view was obscured. Wordlessly, he carried me over to his dad’s pickup and gently laid me out on the backseat. I clung to my bunny and shivered from the cold air as he climbed in, too, and arranged me so that I was curled up in his lap. Blade turned the heat on, shifted gears, and drove away from the crash site. For a while, neither of them spoke while I sat there, staring straight ahead, shivering, with silent tears running down my cheeks. I was in shock.

“How are you doing, Sweetness?” Shay asked. His silver eyes scanned over me nervously, and he tightened his hold.

“My head hurts... I’m cold... where’s Mummy?”

“My dad is helping her. Don’t you worry about it. She’s okay. We’re taking you home.”

“Mummy always locks the doors...” my voice broke at this, my chin quivering as the night’s traumatic events swirled through my mind over and over again.

“No, cutie, to your *real* home... with your new dad and brother,” Marty said in a low voice from the front seat.

I didn’t understand until half an hour later when we pulled up onto a property that was absolutely shrouded by trees. The driveway led up to a cabin-looking house, the porch lights left on to give away a bit of its appearance. It had a wraparound porch and behind it, I could make out several out-buildings; one that was certainly a garage, and another that was probably some sort of workshop.

“Is this where you live?” I asked, sitting up a little in Shay’s lap.

Blade pulled into the back and through the large, three doored garage and parked. “It’s Sheik’s place. And it’s your home now, too. You and your mother’s.” He climbed out as Shay opened the door and reached for me, carrying me over to the two story log cabin. As much as I wanted to explore inside, my head was hurting too much and I was beyond exhausted to follow through with my usual inquisitiveness to explore. Instead, I slumped over in Shay’s arms as he carried me inside through a hallway in the back, while Blade collapsed on the couch in the main room.

Shay stepped into a dark room, and settled me on the bed. The mattress was soft and I instantly rolled onto my side, clutching my bunny in my hands, and closed my eyes. Shay proceeded to cover me with several warm, thick blankets. I nestled in, finally feeling safe and wanting so desperately to fall asleep. I could hear Shay shuffling around the room, but the quiet sounds didn’t bother me. They were comforting. They reminded me I was not alone.



Suddenly, the bed sunk at my side and I blearily peeked through my lashes to see him wearing a pair of sweats and a loose-fitted t-shirt, and he was climbing into bed, too. Confused, I glanced around, the light of the moon illuminating a bit of the room. The walls had posters of bikes with half naked women on them (*ewww*), as well as several guitars hanging off the wall over an impressive computer setup.

“Is this your room?” I asked as he pulled the blankets over himself as he settled next to me.

“It is. Your room isn’t ready yet, so I’ll share with you until then,” he said, lying on his back.

“Thank you, Shay,” I whispered, completely exhausted. Before he could reply, I shifted over and nestled into his side, my face buried into his armpit. Though I’d only spent that one day with him at the barbeque, he’d been openly affectionate with me to the point where I felt comfortable touching him and vice-versa. I’d sat on his lap for the whole meal, and the rest of the time he was carrying me around in his arms or on his back.

His body jumped when I moved in to snuggle at his side, stealing his warmth. I felt utterly relaxed and protected here with him, and soon felt that wave of drowsiness set in; like that moment when you are on the cusp of being asleep, yet you are still awake.

His hand moved up and I felt his fingers weave through my long blonde hair. His movements were uncertain at first, but after a minute, the tension in his body eased up and he wrapped his other arm around my shoulders and hugged me close. I felt his lips on my forehead as he gave me a little kiss, before whispering, “You’re welcome, Mina.”

## Chapter three

*Present Day*

*Mina: Sixteen Years Old*

*June*

WHEN I STEP into the kitchen for the first time in five days, I feel strangely numb as I look around the space. It's been professionally cleaned, and I can smell the bleach. The dining table has been replaced, and a new bouquet of fresh daisies are sitting in the middle. Most likely, Shay picked those out for me as a "Welcome Home" surprise. As nice as it is, I can't help the shiver that races up and down my spine now that I'm back here. Nor am I able to repress the anxiety that is eating away at me as I look around and bits and pieces of my memories from the night of my attack start to trickle back into my mind. My breath catches and I angrily bite down on my lip and squeeze my eyes shut as I fight to keep from remembering. I don't want to think about that now... I'll break.

Shay steps up behind me and wraps his arms around my waist, resting his chin on my shoulder as he hugs me against his chest. "You okay?"

I try to say ‘yes’, but my voice catches in my throat. Swallowing back the sob that is fighting to work its way free, I just nod instead. James steps around us, carrying my hospital bag in one hand and heads down the hall to my room. Having gathered myself, I try to follow, but I’m not used to using these stupid crutches yet, and I sway a little as I unsteadily move out of Shay’s arms. He swoops in to catch me.

“Don’t,” I tell him. “If you keep babying me, I’ll never get the hang of this.”

“Mina-”

“No. Let me do this, Shay,” I plead to him. I can’t stand how vulnerable I feel right now... physically and mentally. And Shay has been treating me like I’m a delicate little flower these past five days. Every stumble I make, his hands are on me, righting me up. Every time I feel an urge to cry, he embraces me tightly and rocks me like a baby. As nice and as comforting as it is, I need him to step back a bit. “I need to figure out how to do this myself. You can’t be with me when I go back to school, or on nights when you’re needed at the club.” Knowing that James has put in a new security system helps reassure me a bit about the notion of being home alone. Even if the thought *does* actually scare the shit out of me, I need to get over it. He said they had caught the guys. Shay left the hospital on day two to “deal” with them, as he put it. It was over and done with. But we still have no idea who sent them. Even with the new security system, I can’t help how afraid I’m feeling. Just being back in this room again has my head reeling and my emotions are twisted in a jumbled mess. I even feel a wave of nausea wash over me as my gaze swiftly takes in the polished floorboards beneath the kitchen table.

I start to take another step forward and hesitate, unsure of myself as I stare at the hallway before me. Huh, I don’t remember it being this long before. Nervously, I peer over my shoulder to see Shay still standing incredibly close, his eyes watchful of every movement I make. “Maybe, if you could just... stay close? Just in case?”

The anxious expression on his face instantly melts and softens. “Of course, Sweetness.” He walks behind me, his

hands extended as he prepares to jump in and catch me should I fall. His presence gives me that bit of strength I need to move forward, but soon, I get the hang of it. Slowly, I make my way down the hall to the back of the house, where both our bedrooms are. When I enter mine, I note that it's been cleaned and fixed up. I have a new bedroom door, my clothes are all neatly hung up in my closet again, and my bed is back together and made up with fresh sheets and blankets. James has unpacked most of my stuff, and is currently putting my toiletries from my hospital bag away in the washroom Shay and I share, as well as getting together my laundry to clean.

I feel my cheeks turn pink at the thought of him seeing my underwear, but ignore it as I sink onto the edge of my bed with a grateful sigh. I'm too tired and mentally drained to really care about things like that. After all, he's cleaned my clothes for years, since I was seven. I drop my crutches onto the floor and lie back against my pillow. As nervous as I am to be back here, I gotta say, after being in a hospital bed for nearly a week, it feels amazing to be back in my own once again.

"Are you hungry?" Shay asks from my side. I open my eyes and look up at him as he stands beside my bed, looking around as though searching for a sign of a threat.

I shake my head. "No, just tired. Still drugged out..."

He smirks a little at that. I've been heavily medicated and I guess I've been making an ass out of myself at the hospital. Apparently, I hit on one of the doctors, telling him that I was going to bake us a wedding cake, and I told everyone that I was worried I wouldn't be able to play soccer again with my busted leg, even though I've never played it in my life. Shay's been teasing me relentlessly for it.

He reaches out, and with a single finger, he brushes a lock of my hair off my forehead and tucks it behind my ear. "Your phone is just on your bedside table. You need *anything*, you call me, okay?"

"Are you leaving?" *Oh God*, my anxiety spikes at the thought of being alone in this house so soon.

“No.” Shay’s silver eyes flash and his jaw clenches tightly. “I’m just going to start on some dinner for tonight. Dad’s already told the club that we’re taking a hiatus for a bit.”

Relief. I mean, if they went right back to the club again after what happened, I’d have even more of a reason to hate that place and everything that it stands for. The guys are *always* at the club... that’s where they were the night of the attack. If they left me now, it would only cement my resentment for that place. Right now, they’re all I have left, and I need them.

“Okay...” I breathe a sigh and sink back into my pillows again, closing my eyes. If Shay and James are here, I should have no reason to be afraid.

Shay lingers at my bedside for a minute before taking one of my soft, plush throw blankets and covers me with it. His soft lips kiss my forehead, then the tip of my nose before he tenderly strokes my cheek and leaves me to rest. Thank God for James and Shay.



## *The Past*

*Mina: Seven Years Old*

*August*

Ever since that fateful car crash on the highway with my mother, we had officially moved in with the O’Hares. James brought Mum home later that night, which was about a month ago, and she looked terrible when I saw her the next morning. She’d sustained worse injuries from the crash than I had, and looked incredibly disoriented. James had put her in the bedroom upstairs and locked it, informing me that my mother needed time to recuperate from the accident. In the meantime, he had arranged for our things to be moved over from our old bungalow, and he and Shay helped me set up my own bedroom across the hall from Shay’s. James even took me out and got me new bedding, which I picked out myself, and he bought me a dollhouse, too.

While my mum recovered, the guys spent almost every hour with me. James made me pancakes for breakfast, while Shay showed me the house and the property.

They lived on acreage, and the surrounding area had endless trees and a small creek that flowed nearby. They had a workshop, a garage, and way in the back, was a small shed that had a lot of old tools, tubs of cleaning supplies, and other equipment I had never seen before, but assumed was meant for maintenance on their bikes. The cabin itself was cozy. The main floor was long and had a huge stone fireplace, a comfortable sitting area with a huge TV, and an open kitchen. The back of the house had my room, Shay's, and a bathroom, which we shared. Upstairs was the master, a guest room, and a private bathroom for the adults.

Mum was kept in the master bedroom for a whole week before James pulled me gently aside and murmured that I could see my mother, but I had to remain at the doorway and not approach her.

“She is very hurt, Baby Girl... she needs the rest. But you can see her and talk to her. I'll be right beside you.”

When he unlocked the door and opened it, I saw Mum laying upon the bed, her body covered with a patchwork quilt. She really did look horrible. Her face was bruised and her hair matted, but when she saw me standing in the doorway, she lurched forward, as if she was trying to get out of bed, but couldn't.

“Ah, ah!” James murmured, “Remember what I said?”

Mum sagged back amongst the pillows and nodded, tears running down her face as she stared at me. “Hi, sweetheart! How are you? Are you okay?”

“I'm great, Mummy! James has made me pancakes for breakfast all week!” I said, beaming. I absolutely loved pancakes, and he was a master at them. This morning he'd even added chocolate chips.

“Oh, that's wonderful, honey.”

“And Shay takes me to play at the creek. He’s going to show me how to fish.”

“That will be fun.”

I stare at her face, noting the tears that slid down her cheeks, despite her cheery tone. “Are you okay, Mummy?”

“I’m fine, honey, just a little sore...”

“Want me to get you some medicine?”

She flashed a half-hearted smile. “I’m alright. I had some this morning. You promise me you’re okay?”

“I am. I’ve been having lots of fun. Shay has been playing games with me and James bought me a dollhouse!”

Mum’s eyes flashed to the man standing behind me, her expression one I couldn’t understand. “That was kind of him...” she said slowly.

“Time’s up, Mina. Go down and play in your room for a bit, yeah?” James murmured. “I’ll be by in a little bit to make you some lunch.”

It was now a month later, and I opened my eyes to the small ray of sunshine that was peeking through the curtains of my window. The rays shone across the middle of my bed to the floor. I yawned, stretched, and sat up in my pink, frilly bed and smiled. Today, my mother and James were getting married. The past month, after we officially moved in with the boys, it had been peaceful and fun. The house was full of laughter. Mum seemed to have calmed down after the accident, and she and James were back to their gross kissing and snuggling selves. It had been wonderful with everyone getting along again. I felt a huge sigh of relief as all my anxiety was lifted from my shoulders. We had dinners, family movie nights, and James took me for a ride down the short driveway on his Harley, moving at a snail’s pace and refusing to go faster, despite my urging. He and Mum went on plenty of dates, leaving Shay and I at home together, which had been fun, as Shay was proving to be a great babysitter.

He had become my favourite in all of this. Even though he was six years older than me, Shay indulged me quite a bit,

agreeing to play dolls, and reading me endless books that I had stashed on my bookshelf. He agreed to play board games, sang me songs and played on his guitar, or showed me funny videos on YouTube on his computer. He'd stepped into the role of big brother with enthusiasm and I was loving it! Being an only child for the first seven years of my life had been lonely. Now, things were looking up for our family, and I was excited at the prospect of having James and Shay around.

The ceremony was held at a small church with only James' close friends, Shay, and I in attendance. I got to wear a frilly, white dress, throw flowers, and hid my face behind my hands when James kissed my mummy. Everyone had laughed when I did, and then we had all gone to the club to celebrate.

I liked James' clubhouse. The guys there had several TV's, couches, machines that flashed cards and other weird games I didn't know. There was a bar and I was allowed to order food if I wanted, and James showed me his private office and bedroom that he used when he had to work late, as he explained it. The guys at the clubhouse were all friendly and fatherly, as most had kids of their own. They picked me up, placing me on their knees as they played cards, calling me their good luck charm. The women were doting, oftentimes playing with my hair or painting my nails when I came by.

On the wedding day, I watched as my mother, who was dressed like a princess, danced with her new husband in the garden at the club. They smiled sweetly at each other as they swayed to the music, James holding one of her hands over his heart as he gazed down at her. There was a clearing in the back, surrounded by woods, and picnic tables were set up with decorations, music, and a BBQ as everyone celebrated. I spent the first hour running from person to person, greeting everyone I'd met and befriended over the past few weeks with a giant grin, a hug, and then would scamper away to find someone else to talk to.

I stopped at one of the picnic tables and gulped down a water as I watched all the adults dance together. My legs swung off the edge of my seat, my feet not even close to



touching the ground, and wished I could dance, too. As the idea came to me, I immediately looked around for Shay.

As great as he was at home, at the club, he tended to disappear with his friends. At that moment, I caught sight of him and his usual group of club buddies, sneaking off into the woods. I knew where they were going. On one of the visits to the club last week with Shay and James, I had followed him and, hidden amongst the trees and shrubbery, I watched as the teens hung out at a ramshackle looking shed farther back in the small forest, where they smoked smelly cigarettes and goofed off. I never told him that I knew where they went.

Seeing as I was all alone with no partner, I simply got up and marched out to the dancefloor by myself and danced along with the music. I had just started taking ballet lessons, but this wasn't the right kind of melody for it. So, I swirled in a circle, my arms held out, loving how my frilly white dress flowed around me. When I got too dizzy and fell back on my butt, I saw the adults who were watching laugh in amusement, and I smiled sheepishly. I needed to work on being more graceful. Before I could get up, James appeared out of nowhere then, and scooped me up, balancing me on his hip, and led us into a quick-step. I giggled as he held one of my hands out like he had done with Mum, and clung on as we spun about together.

When the song ended, James leaned close to my ear. "Have you seen Shay?" he asked.

*Yes*, I thought. But for some reason, I sensed that the teens didn't want the parents to know where they snuck off to, and my loyalty would always be to my new favourite person. "No," I lied, one of the few times in my life.

James sighed and shook his head, but carried me off to the side where Mum was sitting, drinking a large glass of white wine and fanning her flushed cheeks. He handed me off to her, gave her a firm kiss, and headed inside the club with his three closest friends on his heels. I felt her body tense a little beneath me, and when I spun about in her lap, I caught sight of the frown on her red lips before she quickly plastered a wide smile on her face. "You look beautiful, Mummy."

She squeezed me tightly and rocked us slowly side to side in her seat to the song that was playing. As much as she was smiling and chatting with everyone, however, I could sense some sort of unease about her, and didn't know what else to do besides hug her back.

"Why don't you go get yourself something to eat, hm?" Mum whispered.

"Okay. Do you want me to get you something, too?"

"No, thank you, honey."

I slid off her lap and headed towards one of the tables laden with food, when several teenage girls around Shay's age emerged from around the corner of the large, concrete warehouse that was the club. I recognized a few of them. They were pretty, wore a lot of makeup and tiny revealing dresses, but walked with a confidence that I couldn't help but admire. They looked older than they were, and acted like it, too. I'd seen them with Shay's friends and saw how they interacted with them... *flirting*, it was called. I had even seen them kissing some of the boys, like Cody and Aron. *Yuck*, I thought. Why any of those girls would willingly kiss one of those boys was beyond me. When they spotted me standing by the food table, they grinned and headed my way.

"Hi there, Mina," the ringleader of the group, a girl named Dana, said as she stepped up. Dana was pretty, with raven black hair and blue streaks, hazel eyes, and her makeup was flawless, if a little dark. Though the girl was smiling at me, I felt myself involuntarily shiver at the look. It didn't seem genuinely friendly. But I didn't want to be rude. The fact that these older kids were even acknowledging me was thrilling.

"Hi, Dana. You look so pretty in that dress," I said, admiring the ice blue silky skin tight dress the girl wore. "Like Elsa."

"Well, aren't you sweet?" She grinned and glanced up over my head as though looking for someone.

I studied the other girls. "How do you all get your makeup so perfect?"

One of the girls, a redhead who was swaying a bit on her feet, giggled. “YouTube videos, sweetheart.”

“I’m not allowed to wear makeup yet. James says I can’t until I’m thirty.”

All the girls laughed at that, except Dana, who was still scanning the crowd.

“Shay shows me YouTube videos,” I went on, loving the attention from the cool older girls. “But he shows me things like cats attacking people... or ballet videos. I just started ballet a few months ago,” I said proudly.

“Are you any good?” one of the blondes to Dana’s right, a girl named Olivia, asked.

I shrugged then and looked down. “No. I’m too little, still. I suck.”

They all sniggered and I could feel my cheeks turn pink.

“Shay shows you videos, huh?” Dana said, her eyes still off. “You hang out a lot with your big brother?”

I nodded, grinning broadly now as I looked back up. “He plays games with me all the time,” I said, loving the chance to talk about my brother. “He takes me places, too, like to the ice cream parlor, or to the river, or the park.”

The girls glanced at each other, eyebrows raised. Dana’s smile went tight. “He does, hey? Well, isn’t that sweet...”

I may have only been seven, but I could still pick up on the hostility behind the girls’ tone. It caught me off guard. None of these girls were kids of members of the club. They only came by because they knew the boys from the school they all attended. Clearly, they had heard about the bash that day and decided to crash.

“Ugh!” The redhead stomped her foot, sounding irritated. “They aren’t replying to any of my texts!”

“Are you looking for the boys?” I asked, putting it all together. Why else would they be here? Certainly not to congratulate my mummy or James. They wanted Shay and his friends.

“We are, cupcake. Do you know where they went?” the friendly blonde, Olivia, asked.

I looked over my shoulder. Mum was in the same spot, sipping that large glass of wine, with a crowd of other women around her. There were a bunch of couples on the dance floor, but James and his three buddies were still inside the clubhouse. I may have kept it a secret from the grownups, but I knew that Shay and his friends liked it when these girls came by. In the end, if it would make Shay happy, then I’d help them. I looked up at Dana. “I can show you.”

Dana smirked. “Thanks doll. As payment, we’ll share a drink with you.” She opened her bag a bit to reveal two bottles, one looking like water and the other looked to be apple juice. But I knew that they were liquor because they looked just like the bottles James kept in a high cabinet that he said was off-limits to me.

“I’m too little for that. But I’ll show you where they are, anyways,” I said, eager to please the girls.

“Thanks,” Dana said, not sounding like she was grateful at all. She had her phone out and was texting someone, but shoved it in her bag and followed as I snuck them around the side of the clubhouse and into the trees.

The path to the shed where the boys were took a bit of time, as it was nicely hidden so that the adults wouldn’t pry into their business. The girls were chatting amongst each other as they walked along, following me through the underbrush.

“I like your dress,” Olivia said. “Were you the flower girl?”

“I was,” I said proudly, smiling over my shoulder at her. I liked Olivia. She seemed to be the nicest and didn’t make me feel as uneasy as others in the group. “I did a good job, too. I didn’t get scared when everyone was looking at me. But it was gross when James kissed my mum.”

The girls all laughed hard at that, especially the redhead, who was stumbling worse than ever now that we were on uneven terrain, and was taking large swallows out of her own

private liquor bottle. In truth, James kissed my mother all the time, but I'd never seen them do it so publicly in front of a crowd before. I didn't like it. Why would anyone want to kiss a boy? *Yuck!*

"You don't like boys?" Dana asked, "What are you, a lesbo?"

"Knock it off, Dana," Olivia snapped at her.

"What? Just askin'..."

"What's a lesbo?" I asked curiously, having never heard that word before.

"It's nothing, cupcake. I'm sure when you're older your mum will explain," Olivia said.

"So, how much farther?" Dana asked, unscrewing the cap to one of her bottles.

"Not a lot," I stopped and pointed up a small slope. "It's behind that hill in the middle of a bunch of trees. You'll see it when you get to the top." Nervously, I glanced over my shoulder back the way they came. If I was gone for too long, no doubt my mother would come looking, and that meant Shay could possibly get into trouble. Mum and Shay never stopped bickering, and she loved to try to pin any conflict or trouble on him. "I should go back."

"Naw, you can't walk around the woods alone. Come hang out with us." Dana draped an arm around my shoulders and urged us along.

"Dana, stop screwing around." Olivia's voice was biting.

"What are you talking about? I'm being nice to the brat!" Dana snapped.

At once, I bit my lip, trying not to let her see it wobble. A brat? Dana thought I was a brat? Why? I thought I had been helping her. I hadn't said anything wrong, had I? I fought back the tears forming behind my eyes, not wanting to look like a crybaby in front of the big girls. Dana forced me along at her side, her nails digging a bit into my shoulder as we made it

over the ridge and the shed finally emerged in the distance between the trees.

“Hey, what do you know? You aren’t full of shit!” Dana laughed and looked down at me. “Here’s your payment, brat.” She held out the bottle for me to take a swig.

“No, I’m too little, remember?” I felt incredibly uncomfortable being held at this girl’s side and just wanted to go back to the party and maybe get a piece of that huge, beautiful, yummy-looking wedding cake.

“C’mon, a swig won’t kill ya.”

“I can’t-”

“Mel, hold her.”

“Dana, stop it!” Olivia snapped, reaching for me, but the drunk redhead named Mel, swooped in and grabbed my shoulders to hold me still as Dana gripped my chin and tried to force my mouth open. I cried out and scratched the older girl’s arm, fighting to free myself.

“Ow! What the fuck! You little shit! You cut me!” Dana’s furious eyes inspected the scrapes on her forearm. Her blazing hazel eyes flashed towards me and she practically snarled, “I was being nice, you dumb little bitch!”

“Dana, back the fuck off!” Olivia reached around Mel, trying to get her to loosen her grip. “She’s just a kid!”

“Hey, Liv, you wanted to be in our group. This is what comes with being popular. You don’t take shit from *anybody*. Don’t like it? Then shut the fuck up and leave!”

Olivia glared at her, looking torn. I stared up at her with pleading, wet eyes, but then she simply backed away and averted her disgusted stare.

“Good. Now come on, open up!” Dana stepped forward again and held the bottle high.

I cried out and kicked, but Mel held my arms easily and Dana’s grip on my chin was painful, as her nails were digging into my skin. She tipped the bottle over my mouth and the brown liquid poured down onto my face. I sputtered and spat,

trying not to swallow any of it, but tasted a bit on my tongue and instantly cried out, retching from the horrible, bitter taste. Why would anyone drink that? It smelled horrible, burned my nose and I desperately tried to spit out the awful, stinging flavour.

“Shay!” I cried, gagging as I tried to scream around another mouthful. The girls were all laughing hard and because Mel was drunk off her ass, she lost her grip and dropped me. I fell to the ground, leaves and dirt sticking to my now soiled and stained dress. I sobbed and wiped my face, gasping hard as I tried to catch my breath, spitting out more of that awful taste. My face was twisted from the sharp burn, and though a little bit had trickled down my throat, I’d luckily managed to cough most of it out.

“Ungrateful...” Dana shook her head and took a swig herself. Out of nowhere, she kicked my side, and a flare of pain shot through my ribs. I cried harder as I curled up on the ground. “Stop sniveling. You can get out of here now. I don’t want a crybaby hanging out with us.” She kicked me again.

“Mina!”

His voice was the most beautiful sound I’d ever heard in my life. Shay came running out from the trees with several of his buddies right behind him. The five boys took in the scene before them, piecing it together. I looked up at Shay with tears running down my cheeks, which I tried to furiously wipe away so he wouldn’t think badly of me, too. His silver eyes narrowed and his lip curled, his face twisting into pure rage. Oh God! Was he mad at me also?

He stomped forward and reached out, bundling me up in his arms and cradled me to his chest. When he held me with such gentle tenderness, I realized I wasn’t in trouble, and I broke down, bawling my eyes out. He turned to Dana. “You fucking cunt! I don’t give a shit that you’re a girl. You touch her again, and I’ll fucking kill you. Do you understand?”

Dana was undeterred. “Who gives a shit about her, Shay? She’s not your real sister; she’s just some kid...”

“Shut the fuck up, you dumb slut!” he spat at her. “You’re done. Do you understand me?” He slowly looked around at the small group of girls. “All of you. You’re done. When you get to school on Monday, I strongly advise that you all stick together in a group...”

The girls all shifted at that and I glanced at them through my puffy, tear-filled eyes. They looked scared.

“You’ll all wish that I just beat the shit out of you. But no, I’m going to make sure you are ruined. You all might as well pack up and leave town. No one is going to want anything to do with you, *any* of you...”

“Shay,” I coughed a little from the sting in my throat and tugged on his shirt to get his attention.

He looked down and cuddled me closer. “Shhh, it’s okay, let’s go. Gav, Aron, you two take care of Dana and Mel. Leif, Cody, escort the rest off the property. If any of them try to trespass, kick the shit out of them.”

The girls all balked and stepped back as the boys immediately moved forward to do Shay’s bidding. I tugged on his shirt again. “Shay!”

“What is it, Sweetness?”

“Don’t hurt Olivia. She was trying to help me...”

He glanced up at the blonde who Cody was tugging along behind the others. He whistled sharply to him. “Yo, Code, ease up on, Liv. She gets a pass this time.”

Olivia visibly deflated and started crying in relief, but followed the others out of the woods. Shay carried me back, his arms shaking hard. I timidly looked up at him and saw the red in his cheeks and how hard his jaw was clenched. He was angry, livid. More than I’d ever seen him.

When we reached the clubhouse, James and Mum ran forward at the sight of us and pulled me from Shay’s arms, bringing me inside. Mum was losing her mind, screeching about murdering someone and wanting to call the cops, while James washed off my face with a wet washcloth and started checking me over, all while talking with Shay about what had



happened. Shay's expression became sharper and even more lethal looking when I winced as James pressed on my ribs.

"Oh my God, baby, what did they do?" Mum reached for me, tears streaming down her face.

"That girl kicked me a few times, but I'm okay..." I whispered, my head low. I could feel my lip quivering as I fought the urge to cry again. I glanced over at Shay to see him clench his fists until he was shaking more than ever.

He looked tortured, like he was also in pain, and I instinctively wanted to make him feel better. I reached out, but gasped from the pain in my side and hunched over where I sat on the counter at the bar. Shay's booted footsteps stomped across the room and disappeared down the hall that led to the front door, which opened and slammed shut with a bang. I had no idea where he was going, or why he was leaving, but I couldn't think about it any longer.

"We need to get her checked out at the hospital." James reached into his dress pants and pulled out the keys to his truck. Mum was still freaking out, wailing loudly as she wiped the dirt off my face and pulled leaves from my hair. Without a word to anyone else, James carried me outside, my mother hot on his heels, and he placed me in the backseat of his pickup. As he buckled me in, there was a sudden outburst from behind us in the parking lot. I followed James' gaze just in time to see Shay punch Dana square in the face, sending her flying back onto her butt.

"Oh my God!" Mum screamed as blood sprouted from Dana's nose. All her friends cried out in surprise, too, but none of them approached to help their friend. Gavin and Aron rushed forward and grabbed his arms, hauling him back when he lunged for Dana, looking like he was going to strike her again. His other buddies, Leif and Cody, were shoving the other girls back, urging them to move off the property.

"James! What is going on?!" Mum screamed.

Shay had told our parents that a group of girls had attacked me, but clearly she hadn't pieced together that it was *this* specific group of girls. She should have, but I recognized it

when my mum was in panic mode. Scream now, understand later, that's what she did. Right now, she probably thought Shay was just being the tyrannical, bad-boy, punk kid she claimed he was. But I knew better. Seeing Shay hit Dana like that confirmed it. He was fighting for me. He was protecting me. I wasn't angry with him like my mother was. I felt nothing but appreciation and love.

Shay was swearing and shouting, his face red and the veins in his neck bulging as he fought to continue what he had started. He had broken her nose, no doubt about it, but it didn't seem like that was enough for him. Dana scuttled back on her hands and feet, eyes wide. After putting some distance between herself and Shay, she staggered to her feet, sobbing and blubbing while the other girls ran down the drive, wanting to get as far from the boys as possible.

"You fucking come here again, I'll kill you. You try to undermine me, I'll kill you. You touch Mina ever again, I'll kill you. Understand, you cunt?" he snarled.

Dana, still sobbing, nodded and stumbled after her companions, her nose dripping blood on the ground the entire way.

Shay watched her go, and for a moment, it looked like he was going to storm after her, until James called out to him. "Shay!"

His tone was filled with warning, and looking like it took all the effort he could muster, Shay listened to his father, and stiffly let his arms relax until his friends released him. Everyone watched the girls disappear down the driveway and when they did, Shay glanced over at us as James finally turned back to me, buckled me in, and shut the door. Shay and his friends headed over as Mum climbed in the passenger side, her wedding dress filling up the space as she tried to move around the material to buckle in. James stopped before the boys. Mum's window was down, and I could hear him murmur something to them, but it was spoken too softly for me to make out the words.

“Don’t. The bitch fucking deserved it and more,” Shay spat at his father and cast a deadly look at the spot where the girls had disappeared to. “I don’t give a shit if she’s a girl. I should have killed her for what she did.”

James murmured something else. He didn’t sound all that angry that his son had punched a girl in the face, but more like he was trying to diffuse the situation.

“If the police show up, I’ll tell them she attacked a kid, and I stepped in to protect her. They won’t do shit to me,” Shay said in response to whatever his dad had said to him. He nodded to his friends, “I have several *witnesses* that will back me up if there’s a problem. Now, take Mina to the hospital. I’m going to Cody’s for the rest of the night...” He nodded to his friends and with a last, concerned look at me, the boys headed around the back of the club, most likely to grab some beers and then take Aron’s car to Cody’s place to hang out.

James didn’t argue, nor try to tell Shay what he could or couldn’t do. Instead, he just rounded the truck, climbed in the driver’s seat, and we tore off to the hospital.

It was late at night when we finally made it home. We were exhausted, and still in our wedding attire. We’d caught a lot of looks in the waiting room at the hospital, what with mum in her wedding dress, and tattooed, scary looking James in a black suit. Then there was me, in my frilly dress that was now stained by the amber alcohol and covered in dirt and leaves. Luckily, I hadn’t consumed more than a few sips worth, and my ribs were a little bruised. I’d been given some pain medication and sent home.

Mum took me into the bathroom, removed my ruined flower girl dress, and gave me a hot bath before changing me into a nighty. She tucked me into bed and James gave me two of the pills the doctor had prescribed before turning on my nightlight. They both kissed my forehead and left.

But now I was awake, my room dark save for the dim, warm glow of my crescent moon-shaped nightlight. For a moment, I wondered what it was that had awoken me, but then the stumbling sound happened again. It came from the hall, the

footsteps heavy and uneven, as they approached. I held my breath, briefly uncertain and afraid, wondering if a monster was shuffling to my room. I gripped my stuffed bunny tight as it paused outside my closed bedroom door, but then it moved away, going into Shay's room.

*Shay.* I exhaled a long, deep breath. It was just Shay, probably just returning home after hanging out with his friends. I could hear the sound of his door as it thudded shut, and then the muted sounds through the walls of him shuffling around, getting ready for bed. I sighed and relaxed back onto my pillow, looking out the window by my bed for a minute as I took in the sight of the stars above the trees, before closing my eyes as I let myself relax again into sleep.

I couldn't have been out for very long when I started dreaming. I thought Shay was there in my room with me, sitting at my bedside while I slept. I peeked through my lashes, smiling a little as I whispered his name. My big brother, my defender; I was so grateful for him for saving me today. Mum may have been fuming about him hitting a girl, but I felt a strange satisfaction from it. He'd been looking out for me, eliminating a threat to his family. Now, I dreamed that he was watching over me as I slept, like my own personal guardian angel, and any thought I'd had before of monsters was wiped from my head.

I dreamed that he had knelt beside my bed and started to gently stroke my hair. But when he leaned over and kissed my forehead, I realized I wasn't dreaming at all. He was actually here. I stirred, forcing my eyes to open a bit more. "Shay?" I whispered, confused. Why was he in here?

"Hey, Sweetness, didn't mean to wake ya. Just wanted to check and make sure you're okay. Are you hurting?"

I yawned huge, my eyes drifting closed again. "The doctor gave me some medicine," I mumbled as drowsiness overcame me.

"Get some rest." He kissed my forehead again and I allowed myself to drift.

"You need to rest, too," I whispered to him.

“I was trying to, but my bad dreams kept waking me up...” he said in a hushed tone. I knew about Shay’s nightmares and his inability to get a decent night’s sleep. Over the past month, I’d heard him up in the middle of the night, pacing his room, or calling out in his sleep. He sometimes would just get up and watch a movie out in the family room, or play some games on his computer, the sounds muffled through the walls separating our bedrooms. He told me he had insomnia... something that kept him from sleeping, some nights only getting two or three hours. The days after these stretches were always when he acted out the worst, when he got into the most fights. For a time, he said he’d tried pills, hoping they would help, but they stopped being at all effective as of this summer.

I guess tonight was just another night of sleeplessness for him. I wasn’t sure how much time had passed since he had arrived home, but I could smell alcohol on his breath. I groggily looked up at him and noticed how haggard he looked, his dark hair a mess, and he had dark bags under his shadowed eyes. Why he came into my room, I didn’t understand, but I wanted so desperately to help him the way he had helped me.

“Want to try sleeping here?” I asked him.

One of his dark brows rose high on his forehead. “I don’t think that’s a good idea, Sweetness.”

“Why not?” I yawned again, “It will be like a sleepover. My bed is big enough...” I shuffled over, the effects of the painkillers hiding any discomfort in my ribs, and pulled the covers back a bit so he could slide in. Shay hesitated, his silver eyes flicking to the doorway that was closed, and back to me again. Finally, mind made up, he climbed in and tucked my pink comforter around us. He curled up beside me, and after a minute, I could feel the tense way he’d been holding himself slowly ease up. I rolled onto my side, facing him, and closed my eyes, letting my mind wander off into sleep again.

“Shay?” I whispered as I snuggled up to his side. I felt his arm wrap around my shoulders.

“Yeah?” He yawned, relaxing even more.

I bit my lip, hesitant. It was my fault that all of this had happened today. And *he* was the one who had gotten into trouble for it. I felt sorry, and the feeling was gnawing away in my stomach, making me feel awful, “I’m sorry I brought those girls to your secret spot.” I inhaled deeply, trying to be brave as I tried to make things better. “I thought it would make you happy to see them. That it’s what you would have wanted. But, I made a mistake. So, I’m sorry.”

Shay shifted a little in the bed. When I opened my eyes, it was to see him leaning over me, studying my face in the low light. Whatever he saw, it made him frown. “Don’t you dare apologize, Mina. It wasn’t your fault.”

“But-”

“No. No buts. Listen to me now,” he said, his voice sounding as serious as Mummy’s when she’s trying to tell me something important. “You are a good girl, you know that? The fact that you did what you did, because you thought it would make *me* happy...” He trailed off for a moment, like he couldn’t think of what he was trying to say. When he spoke again, his voice was cracking, “No one does anything because they want me to be happy, Sweetness. No one. But you do. *You* do.” He reached up and stroked a lock of my hair, running his thumb over the strands. Leaning forward, he pressed a kiss to my forehead and flashed one of his rare smiles. “You have no idea what that means to me. So don’t you ever apologize for it. You got me?”

I nodded quickly, so happy that he wasn’t mad at me. I reached up and circled my arms around his neck and hugged him tightly. His arms wrapped around me, giving me a little squeeze back, then guided us back into the pillows and blankets. We fell asleep like that, hugging each other, feeling safe as long as we were together.

When my eyes opened again, the sun was shining through my window, casting that beautiful, golden, morning glow across my bed. Beside me, Shay was sleeping soundly, looking like he’d been out for hours. I smiled at the sight. I’d helped him sleep through the night. The feeling that gave me made

me feel so good that I could do something for him, something no one else could. I could keep his nightmares away.

## Chapter four

*Present Day*

*Mina: Sixteen Years Old*

*June*

A PIERCING SCREAM wakes me up in the middle of the night. When I open my eyes, I'm sitting up in bed, and my blankets are a tangled mess around me. My arms are flailing as if I was in the middle of fighting someone off, and I've shifted so much in my bed I'm almost dangling off the side. It hits me then... it was me... *I* was the one screaming...

Not even a second later, my door bursts open with a crash, and I cry out in fear, until I see Shay come barreling in, a huge, curved, bowie knife in his hand. I flinch back in my bed at the sight, but quickly remind myself... this is *Shay*. My protector. He would never hurt me. I wasn't being attacked. It was a nightmare, just a nightmare.

His sharp gaze sweeps the room for signs of a threat. After I returned from the hospital, I found my old crescent moon nightlight that I used to use as a kid, and strung it back up on the wall, the light from it helping him see in the dark.



“It was a bad dream again.” I hiccup. Tears that I didn’t even realize I had were sliding down my cheeks, and my voice catches in my throat.

At once, Shay melts out of attack-mode, and he slinks over to my bed. Sitting at my side, he reaches over and places his knife on my bedside table and leans over me, a hand on either side of my body as he studies my face. Finally, he lifts his hand and with his thumb he gently wipes the tears away.

“Would-would you stay with m-me again?” I whisper. I feel so stupid for asking this of him. I’m going to be seventeen in a few weeks, for crying out loud. I shouldn’t need my big brother to curl up beside me so I can get a decent night’s sleep. It’s been nearly a week since I’ve been home, but every night, I wake up from the nightmares, and the only way I’ve managed to get a few hours of rest in is when he’s with me.

To my relief, Shay nods and flashes one of his rare warm smiles, for which I’m grateful. I don’t need his teasing right now. Besides, I know he prefers staying in here, anyway. For years, we slept in the same bed together, but back then *he* had been the one seeking comfort from his bad dreams and insomnia. It all ended shortly after my thirteenth birthday when we were caught by our parents. For the past almost four years, we’ve been apart at night. Now, it was like the perfect excuse to resume old habits. Only this time, the roles were reversed. *I* needed *him*.

He helps move me over so he can fit in beside me, and slides under the blankets, making me feel safe as I huddle up to him, with the wall at my back. It’s like I’m in a safe little cocoon. Cautious of my cast, he pulls me in to cuddle and I feel myself relax as I rest my head on his chest, listening to the strong beat of his heart beneath his shirt. Only then, wrapped up in his arms, do I feel safe enough to allow myself to fall into sleep.



*The Past...*

*Mina: Nine Years Old*

*July*

A new pattern had started at home, and that was the fact that Shay started sneaking into my room at night, crawling into bed with me, and we'd fall asleep together. Mum and James had no idea we shared a bed every night, and Shay had made me promise not to tell.

"We'd get into serious trouble, Sweetness," he said to me near the beginning of this new routine we'd started the night of our parents wedding.

"Why? It's just like a sleepover, right?" I asked him. I snuggled into his side, my bunny tucked under my arm, and rested my head on his chest, listening to his heartbeat.

"It is, but your mum won't see it that way. She hates me, remember? She'll find a reason to make this look bad."

I didn't get it, and I think he could tell by my silence.

"Listen, Mina, if your mum finds out I'm sneaking into your room at night, she'll start to look at you the same way she does me. She thinks I'm a bad guy, remember? You know I'm not, but she won't be changing her mind about me. And this will make her think you're a bad girl."

My head snapped back and I stared at him, the glow of my nightlight helping me make out the expression on his face. He was dead serious. Alarmed, I squeaked, "Maybe you shouldn't come in here, then? I don't want to get into trouble..."

"It's the only way I can get any sleep, Mina." His tone changed, like he was pleading with me. "You help me sleep. If I leave, I'll go back to my room and have my nightmares and restless nights again. Do you want that?"

I shook my head, vehemently. "No!"

"Then the best way around this is to just keep it a secret between the two of us. What do you think of that?" The corner of his mouth lifted.

Hmmm... I liked the sound of that, sharing a secret with Shay. It made me feel special. But I was still apprehensive.

“Mina, we’ve been doing this for about a month now. If we tell your mum, she’ll know we’ve been lying to her for some time, and that will make her even angrier. You’re a good girl, right? And good girls don’t lie. If she finds out, then she will lose her trust in you and see you as a bad girl. Do you want that?”

I shook my head so hard, my braid swung back and forth like a whip. I didn’t want my mother to think I was bad. I didn’t want to let her down if she found out I’d hidden this from her for a month already. And I wanted to help Shay sleep. By keeping this a secret between us two, it made me feel closer to him, too... important. So, I held out my pinky finger to him. “I won’t tell. Promise.”

The corners of his mouth lifted into a smirk and he hooked his pinky finger with mine.

Now, it was almost two years later and it was the annual summer BBQ for the club. We took James’ truck to get there. For pretty much the entire ride, Shay and I were messing around in the back as he tickled me, and I screamed in delight all while trying to kick him away. At fourteen, he was already starting to make a name for himself with the club, the Celtic Beasts. He was known to favor knife-play and had sent several initiates of an opposing club to the hospital, something I’d overheard him and James talking about one night when I was supposed to be sleeping. Every fight he had been in, he won. All I knew was that he carried several knives around with him most of the time, and hid his collection underneath his bed. He showed them to me one day, telling me that I had nothing to be afraid of because he knew how to use them. I’ll admit that they frightened me. But I was in awe that he claimed to have such a skill of wielding weapons like these.

He was almost six foot now, and was starting to pack on muscle. He had gotten a lip ring on the left side of his bottom lip, which made him look more menacing to bystanders, especially when his messy, dark hair hangs in his face. He was handsome. Even though I was only nine, I could look at my stepbrother and admit that he was a good looking guy.

The Celtic Beasts had reserved the same section in the park as they had the first time Mum and I had attended the gathering. Only now, we were accepted members of the group. The last event the Beasts had held was supposed to be in the Autumn for some sort of Biker Charity Ride thing. But it had been cancelled because Shay had had some sort of altercation with a rival gang, and the whole club had been in an uproar. Shay had to go to the hospital and get stitches on his head, but word was that his opponent was going to need several dozen up the side of his face. I remember hearing Shay laugh at Mum's reaction when James whispered into her ear what Shay had specifically done. No one would tell *me* though, even Shay, though I begged to be told.

"Heads up, Sheik," Blade, a.k.a. Uncle Marty, murmured to James, using his road name to address him. "The Black Spades are here. I'm going to let Bull know..." And he stalked off, moving around the group until he found Shawn, and murmured in his ear.

James' head snapped up and he peered at the other groups in the park, finally spotting the ones he was searching for. The Black Spades were another club, one that had a long, dirty history with the Beasts, one filled with violence and death. One night, as we lay in bed together like always, Shay told me about them, telling me that the group was a major thorn in the Beasts' side. It was these guys that he often got into conflicts with... that or he was let loose on them by the older chapter so that he could annihilate new initiates. And Shay did it willingly and eagerly. He boasted to me about the fact that he was unbeatable in a fight. I believed him, remembering what I'd seen the first time we met.

The Black Spades were seated at some picnic tables across the field and diagonally down the path. A good distance away, but both groups eyed each other warily, like packs of lions waiting to pounce.

As Shay walked me over to the Beasts, he held my hand tightly and flipped off the Spades over his shoulder, not even bothering to look their way. Several of their younger recruits were in high school, and attended St. Matthews with him, he'd

said. He was fighting with them constantly. One in particular, a handsome blond boy that looked to be his age, was glaring daggers at the sight of Shay as we walked past.

“Shay, who is that?” I asked, looking over my shoulder at the handsome teenage boy. My stepbrother glanced back to see what I was so fixated on and he glared at the sight of the blond boy watching us.

“He’s a prick, and not someone you need to concern yourself with, Sweetness. Come on, let’s get you something to eat.” He tugged my little hand and led us over to our own gathering. I smiled happily and waved at the familiar faces, all who waved back at me as Shay got us each a plate with corn on the cob, macaroni salad, and hot dogs. I was wearing a pale yellow sundress and white flip flops, my hair done up in a French braid with a white ribbon on the end. I felt pretty and was so glad it was summer so I could wear my dresses again. But despite how girly I was dressed up, the moment I saw a group of kids belonging to the members of the Beasts run past kicking a soccer ball, I eagerly ran after them, joining the game until my mum called me back over to eat something.

She was sitting quietly at one of the picnic tables, wearing a tiny pair of jean shorts, a revealing tank top, and her hair was pulled back into a high ponytail. She had her makeup done, and wore her sandal wedges. My mummy was so beautiful, but today, she didn’t smile. In fact, her face had a sort of shadow over it that never seemed to go away, even with the sun shining down on her. The only time the corner of her mouth tilted up the slightest, was when I ran over to her to tell her something about the soccer game, or to give her a little kiss on the cheek. James lingered near, talking with the men in the group, drinking a beer, and looking like he was completely at ease. But every so often, his dark gaze which was hidden behind his black aviators, would turn towards the group of Black Spades across the way, and his body would turn rigid, his muscles clenching under his dark t-shirt.

“Shay!” I called when I spotted him.

He was sitting with two of his friends at one of the tables eating a hamburger. He looked up as I ran over to him, hiding

something I'd made for him behind my back. "What's up, Sweetness?" he asked, smiling down at me. He reached out and tapped the tip of my nose, playfully.

"I made this for you," I held up my gift and he and his friends immediately started chuckling.

"As nice as that is, I don't think it's really my style..." He grimaced slightly when I climbed up on the seat beside him. I placed the crown of daisies I'd woven together into his dark messy hair, ignoring him and his buddies. They were constantly joking around and teasing me. After two years, I was used to it by now, and would just roll my eyes and ignore them on most occasions. I plopped down beside him and reached for the plate of food he'd gotten me, taking a huge bite of my hot dog.

"It's not," I admitted. Shay and flowers just didn't make sense together. He was too dark, broody, and masculine. "But I don't have any money to buy you a real crown," I said and took a sip of my fruit juice.

The corner of Shay's mouth twisted up, his lip ring glinting in the sun. Wordlessly, he wrapped an arm around my shoulders and tucked me in close to his side, holding me there while they ate.

"Jesus, man," his buddy, Gavin, murmured, "wish my little sister kissed the ground I walked on..." he raked his hand through his black dyed hair and flashed a smile to me.

"She's not my sister," Shay snapped, narrowing his eyes at his friend. "We aren't blood related."

His other friend, Aron, smirked, glancing my way, and back to Shay. "We know, man... trust us. You remind us all the time." His tone was sarcastic and laced with underlying meaning. I furrowed my brow at the two boys across from us, and looked up at Shay, craning my head back to try to match his silver gaze.

"What are they talking about? You *are* my brother," I said, hurt by his denial.

“No, hon, I’m not. We aren’t related, remember? Different parents,” he said seriously.

I lowered my head, trying not to show how hurt I was by his words. I had looked up to him as an older brother these past two years. He treated me like a beloved little sister. He was the one who cooked me supper when our parents were out late at the club. He helped me with my schoolwork. He carried me around and played and spent most of his spare time with me. And now, he was denying it all. Did he say this so that he would look cool in front of his friends? My lip trembled and I went to move out from under his arm, but he suddenly gripped my shoulder, holding me close.

“What we have is more special than a brother-sister relationship, Mina,” he said, snaking his hand up to tilt my head to look at him. “You’re my girl, right?” He grinned.

He was apologizing, seeing that he’d hurt me. Well, I’d take it, even if I was still stung. So I just nodded, afraid that if I tried to speak, my words would catch in my throat. I idolized Shay. I had no idea what he did for the club. In fact, I didn’t really understand the purpose of the club at all, at that time. I was sheltered from it. Only on the rare occasions that James brought me in, like when I would bring some fresh baked cookies for the group, or show them all what I’d learnt in ballet that week. They even hung some pictures I had coloured for them up behind the bar. But, for all I knew, that’s what they did there. Drink, watch sports, and gamble a bit. When Shay went, I assumed it was for much of the same thing.

“Good.” He bit into his burger and got to his feet. “Anyone want to grab some beers?” he asked his buddies. “Cody probably already stashed a bunch by the river...”

Aron was on his feet at once, but Gavin stopped to pat my head before he followed. I sat alone at the picnic table, feeling a little resentful towards Shay at that moment. But I looked over my shoulder at him as he walked away with his buddies, I saw that he hadn’t removed the crown of daisies I’d made for him. That was something, at least. I turned and took a small bite of my salad and stared off into the trees close by, my gaze

lazily moving around the canopy as I looked for birds or any other animals that might be trying to hide.

“Psst!”

I jumped a little at the unexpected sound, looking towards the shrubs where I thought it had come from. I stared hard for a moment, waiting, when the sound came again.

“Psst, come here! I need help...” a voice whispered.

Feeling a little wary, I peeked over my shoulder at the rest of the group. The adults were all laughing and drinking... the teenagers had gathered by the riverside, chugging back their stolen beers, and most of the other kids were either at the playground, or were playing a game of kickball.

“Come here, Sunshine,” the voice whispered again. It didn’t sound threatening... in fact, it was friendly enough. Had someone in the group fallen and needed my help? I got up and slowly headed over to the bushes, pushing the leaves aside as I stepped into the overgrowth. For a moment, I couldn’t see anyone, until a figure about twenty feet away appeared, standing close to a large tree and a thick set of bushes. It was the boy that Shay had told me not to concern myself with, the handsome blond one. He’d called him a bad name... *a prick*... whatever that meant.

And he really was attractive, looking to be the same age as my older brother. Correction, *non*-brother. His golden hair was close cropped, shorter on the sides, and sat in a fauxhawk on his head. His skin was tanned, and his eyes were a piercing blue. He was tall and athletically built, too, and his square jaw was lined with dark scruff, just like Shay had started growing. He wore a pair of dark jeans and a white t-shirt decorated with a huge emblem that had the words ‘Black Spades’ written across the bottom in black cursive.

The boy smiled and waved me over. He looked nice, friendly, and his smile reminded me of Shay’s. Shyly, I wandered toward him, fiddling with the white bow at the end of my long braid. I stopped several feet away, biting my bottom lip, feeling nervous as he stared down at me with his haunting blue eyes.



“What’s your name?” he asked, his tone gentle. He crouched down on his heels, his forearms resting against his knees. He was stooped so low, he was looking up at me slightly.

“Mina, what’s yours?” I asked.

“My name is Keenan,” he tilted his head to the side, his piercing eyes fixed on me in a way that had my heart suddenly pounding in my chest. Huh, weird. Never felt this feeling before. “How old are you? Twelve? Thirteen?” he asked me.

I giggled. The idea of someone thinking I was a teenager was silly. “No, I just turned nine this summer.”

“Nine, oh, to be young again...”

“You’re young.”

He shook his head. “Trust me, being a teenager is overrated. If I was given a chance to be a kid again, I wouldn’t hesitate to take it.” He paused for a moment, his hypnotic gaze studying me closely. “Tell me, how are you associated with the Beasts?” He nodded towards the bushes behind me that concealed us from my family and friends.

“My mummy married James O’Hare two years ago,” I told him.

“Ahhh,” He tilted his head back slightly, as though things were clicking into place. “So Shay is your stepbrother?”

I frowned. “He says no...” I said, my voice flat. I didn’t want to talk about it. The sting was too fresh. Had I not been a good little sister to him? Why didn’t he want me to be his sibling? I stared hard at Keenan, taking in the stunning shade of his irises, and blurted out, “You have really pretty eyes.”

He raised his brows, momentarily surprised, and then let out a lovely, musical laugh. “Pretty eyes, hm?” he chuckled, keeping his voice low. “Got to say, of all the compliments I’ve received in my lifetime, and I’ve had many, that one is now my favourite.”

I grinned at him. “Well, it’s true. They remind me of a documentary I watched about the Arctic. The colour of some

of the icebergs is the same shade as your eyes,” I told him, remembering the program Mum had insisted we watch recently the other week. I liked stuff about the polar bears and seals, but the stunning shades of the icebergs and glaciers had been absolutely breathtaking.

His smile broadened at that. “You like documentaries?”

“Yes, nature ones. I don’t care about the ones about people.” I made a face, scrunching up my nose. A shadow flew overhead and landed on a tree close by. I looked up and spotted the beautiful black bird as it cawed at us loudly, and I instantly thought of my father. “Bad crow,” I said, but smiled at it, despite my words, and found myself lost in thought for a moment as I thought of my dad. He had loved crows. I remember that. Every time he saw one, he’d murmur, “Bad crow,” at it, but he always smiled at the sight of them.

Keenan glanced over at the bird, then back to me. When I turned to him, I caught the look on his face, like he had been studying me while I gazed at the crow. “Are you okay?” I asked him.

He raised a brow, confused. “Why wouldn’t I be okay?”

“Didn’t you need help?” I asked, thinking about his words when he had called out to me.

“Oh, right.” He nodded and stood up, holding out his hand for me to take.

I glanced at it and looked up at him, unsure. Keenan’s smile widened, showing off his white teeth. In a heartbeat, I put all my trust into this strange, beautiful boy, and slipped my hand into his. He gripped it tightly as he led me away, deeper into the trees. “What do you need help with?” I asked him as we walked.

“I want to woo a girl, but I don’t have an eye for pretty flowers. Think you can help me?” he asked, pointing out the mass of wildflowers that were blooming at our feet.

I giggled at his words and smiled up at him. “You want to give a girl flowers? That’s so nice.” My heart fluttered at the

thought. It seemed like something a prince would do for a princess, like in the Disney movies I loved so much.

He pursed his lips, but continued to grin at me, and didn't say anything.

“Well, you are doing the right thing by picking them for her. Store bought flowers are overrated. It's much more meaningful when you pick them yourself. That's what my mum says, anyway...” I released his hand and moved about, plucking some bellflowers first. When he didn't move, I turned and narrowed my eyes at him. “Don't be lazy!” I scolded. “You have to help.”

He chuckled and stepped forward. “Yes ma'am!”

“Pick some of those ones, the daisies...” I instructed, pointing them out. I watched as he obliged and then continued bossing him around, telling him what ones to collect. When we finished, I made him sit on the ground with me as I arranged them into a bouquet, trying to make it look as pretty as possible for the lucky girl. I prattled on about the ballet classes I'd started and how I'd taken an interest in baking at home. He listened to me, asking questions, and made me feel completely at ease around him. I didn't understand why Shay hated him so much. If anything, Keenan reminded me of my older brother. Scrap that... older *friend*.

“Now, take some of those thick grasses. You need to tie them around the stems of the flowers to keep them together,” I told him, handing him the bouquet, making him finish it himself. He fumbled tying the grass with his big, calloused fingers, and I took pity, reaching over to knot it myself. Finished, I beamed up at him. “I think your girlfriend will love these,” I said, excited that I got to help this boy create something special for his girl. It was super romantic, I thought.

But Keenan simply smirked as he looked over the flowers and turned his glacier eyes to me. Wordlessly, he held out the bouquet, offering them to me as he held them up before my face.

“But... your girlfriend?” I asked, surprised.

“You were the one I wanted to woo,” he said, the corner of his mouth lifting slightly in a beautiful, crooked grin.

I blushed hard when he winked and, with a shaky hand, took the flowers from him. I ducked my head to hide my smile. To have the attention of a boy, even one who was six years older than me, was actually surprisingly thrilling. None of the boys in my class had ever done something so sweet for me. All they did was pull my hair and push me into mud puddles. But Keenan, he treated me like a princess. I felt so grown up in that moment, “Thank you, Keenan,” I whispered, holding the flowers tightly.

“You’re welcome, Cutie.”

“Mina!” A shout from the distance broke the moment and my head snapped up, looking back the way we’d come. “Mina! Where are you?” I knew that voice anywhere. It was Shay.

I sighed heavily, sensing his frustration for wandering off, and frowned. “I have to go...” I loved Shay, but ever since the attack from Dana, he’d become a little overprotective when we were out and about.

“Come on.” Keenan held out his hand and helped me to my feet. Before I could take a step, he picked me up like I weighed no more than a doll and carried me on his hip with one arm tucked beneath my bottom, his other hand at my waist, and headed back.

“MINA!” Shay’s voice was closer now, and it sounded panicked, terrified.

Just as I was about to open my mouth to call to him, Keenan reached up with his free hand and started tickling my side. I threw my head back and giggled, squirming against him, trying to break free, but he held me tight, continuing his playful attack.

“WHAT. THE. FUCK?!” Shay’s thunderous roar broke into the space and Keenan slowly stopped the play, but kept me in his arms. Shay stood at the edge of the trees, spotting us from thirty feet away as we walked over. He tore into the

shrubs, his silver eyes glinting fiercely, and his brows pulled down dangerously as he glared in our direction. “Put her down... NOW!”

“I think she’s rather enjoying herself with me,” Keenan smirked, stopping in his tracks. There was about twenty feet between us now, and Shay’s fists were shaking at his side.

“I mean it, Mathers, put her down now and I won’t break your pretty boy face!” he snarled.

Keenan’s other hand reached up, pressing onto my back, further holding me to his side. I stared between the two young men who were glaring daggers at each other, sensing the tension in the air. I held tightly onto my flowers with one hand, and my other was wrapped around the back of the blond boys’ neck to steady myself.

Shay let out a long, deep breath and took a step forward. At the motion, Keenan took one back, and smirked again at him. The other hand that was resting on my back slid up then, and he reached under my braid and grasped at the back of my neck. The strong, domineering hold took me by surprise, and I instinctively stilled in his hold. Shay’s eyes caught the movement and he stopped, freezing in place. Keenan’s grip didn’t hurt me, but I could sense a rather foreboding threat behind it, and I felt a ripple of fear in the pit of my stomach. And Shay, as furious as he looked, I could see something else in his gaze and that frightened me even more, like he was... scared? I always thought Shay wasn’t afraid of anything. Why was he now at the sight of Keenan and I together?

“So, I finally found your weak link, O’Hare...” he said, his voice triumphant. “Who would have thought, of all the beauties I’ve seen you with.” He shook his head, chuckling. “*Never* would have dreamed of this...” He turned and smiled at me, and I trembled in his arms.

“Keenan?” I whispered, my little voice breaking slightly.

It was very subtle, but his eyes twitched the tiniest bit when I whispered his name, and his grip on the back of my neck eased up just a bit.

“I swear to God, Mathers, if you hurt her...” Shay’s voice went deeper, becoming more of a growl than anything.

Keenan turned back to him. “Hurt her? I’m not a monster like you,” he said, sounding as confident as ever. He turned back to me and flashed another handsome smile. “She’s a pretty little thing...” He leaned in and pressed a soft kiss to my forehead. In the background, I could hear Shay let out an exasperated snarl from deep in his throat. I was so confused. *What was going on?*

Shay took another step forward, but Keenan matched him and pulled me so close that my face was almost pressed into his neck. Shay stopped. His face was turning red and he shoved his messy dark hair out of his eyes. Keenan chuckled again. “I can’t wait to see what she looks like in a few years. She’ll be popular... how many are you going to have to fight then, O’Hare?”

I was completely lost with this conversation. What did he mean by that? Why was Shay so concerned that he might hurt me? Keenan had been nothing but gentle with me and I’d been at his mercy for the last half an hour. But he hadn’t done a thing. That is, not until we had an audience, specifically, Shay. And now, I was being squeezed against him, his grip at the back of my neck firm and controlled. I couldn’t turn my head, even if I tried.

Shay suddenly let out a loud, shrill whistle. At once, several of the teenage members of the Celtic Beasts burst into the forest behind him, backing him up. Keenan did the same, and his own friends quickly joined his side. Everyone was looking from one boy to the other, to me who was still held tightly in Keenan’s arms, and back to Shay again.

Gavin stepped close to Shay’s side, his dark eyes narrowed and his black hair fell over his forehead. “Let her go, fuck-face. You have no idea who you’re messing with by putting your hands on her-”

“You see, that’s the problem.” Keenan’s smile disappeared and was replaced with a frightening scowl as he glared at the boys across from him. “I know exactly what I’m doing. You

guys have been coming after us the past few months while we've been reorganizing our club. Our new Prez wants me to deliver a message... a *warning*. Stop." He glared hard at Shay in particular. "Know that, if you come after us one more time, I now know what you hold dear..."

I trembled and felt several tears slide down my cheeks. "Keenan?" I whimpered. "You're hurting me." His grip on the back of my neck had hardened to the point that a sharp pain shot up and down the muscle there, and over my shoulder. My heart was racing in my chest, and the fear in my belly was growing. He tucked his chin so he could look down at me and released his hold on my nape, only to run his hand over my blonde head, stroking my braided hair.

"Sorry, Sunshine," he murmured. Then, keeping his eyes on Shay, he lowered his mouth to my ear and whispered so only I could hear, "But you see, your big brother hurt people, and a lot of them were people I care about... you did nothing wrong. You understand that? You're a good girl. But your brother is not good. And he needs to understand that his actions have consequences..." His words sent a chill through my veins. I had always known Shay was troubled in a way, and that he was involved in a lot of fights, but I *never* thought of him as bad. My mum did, but she had been stubborn about her feelings towards him ever since their first meeting. Keenan went on, "Your brother has hurt people, Mina. *Lots* of people. Some of them he hurt so bad, they ended up in the hospital..."

My eyes flashed to Shay's, and I could not hide the horror I felt as my mouth dropped and my eyes widened in shock. *Shay has put people in the hospital? To the place where my dad..*

Shay was watching me, his expression fierce, furious, like when he's ready to fight.

"I have no reason to lie to you, Cutie. I'm only explaining things," Keenan raised his voice so that everyone could hear him now. "Your brother has done wrong. If he continues to, then he will be reprimanded. Does that make sense? If someone does something bad, they need to be punished, right?"

“Yes,” I agreed. It was a lesson all parents taught their kids. If you’re bad, you get a time out, or grounded. Maybe even a spanking, depending on the severity of your behavior.

“That’s right.” He went on, “But not today. Today, he has been given a warning. That’s fair, don’t you think?”

“Yes,” I whispered.

“Now, I’m going to put you down... and when I do, you head on back to your brother and enjoy the rest of your picnic. Alright?”

“Okay,”

“And Mina... keep those flowers. I meant what I said when I gave them to you.”

“Okay, Keenan...”

“Good girl.” He gave me another chaste kiss on my forehead and slowly lowered me to my feet. Before I could move, he gripped my upper arm firmly, but gently, keeping me in place. He called over to Shay, “You touch another prospect and we’ll make sure you wish you had listened to me today, O’Hare.”

Shay was seething across the way, but stiffly nodded. For a moment, I wasn’t sure if I wanted to go near him when he looked like he was about to explode. But his silver eyes slid from Keenan to me, and they softened. He held out his hands. “Come here, Mina.”

Keenan released my arm and I slowly walked across the space between the two groups of terrifying teenage boys. I didn’t want to make a wrong move and possibly cause them all to start fighting. I could feel all their eyes on me as I moved and at this moment, all I wanted was to go home and hide in my room and bawl my eyes out. In a way, this experience had been more emotionally terrifying than when Dana had assaulted me. I’d had physical pain then, but those girls had been a joke, in comparison. These boys, they were *dangerous*... I could feel it. Dangerous and angry at each other. And for some reason, I found myself in the middle of the two groups. I didn’t understand it. But I forced my feet to



move forward, seeking the only comfort and security I knew, and that was with Shay.

As soon as I was within reach of him, Shay lunged and hauled me up into his arms, hugging me against his chest, and forcing me to wrap my legs around his waist. He held me up with one arm and pressed his other hand against the back of my head, pressing my face to his neck as he squeezed me close. Without another word, he turned and headed back towards the edge of the woods, flanked by the others of his group. I peeked over his shoulder to see Keenan watching us, his expression cold, as he and his own allies headed the other way. But when he caught my gaze, he grinned, puckered his lips, and blew a kiss my way before he turned and disappeared through the trees.

When we stepped out into the picnic area, the adults were already gathered and were panicking as they argued with each other. A loud shout broke out at the sight of the boys emerging from the forest and mum burst forward, tears streaming down her face and she ripped me from Shay's grasp.

"Oh my God, sweetie, are you okay? Where were you? I was so scared! Don't *ever* wander off like that again!" she cried, hugging me so tightly, I felt like the air was being squeezed from my lungs.

I was choking on guilt. I hadn't realized everyone had thought I was lost. I didn't mean to cause a panic. James came hurrying over then, followed closely by some of his friends who I liked, like Uncle Marty and Uncle Shawn and their wives. Mum was beside herself, but James took me from her arms and gave me a tight hug of his own.

"Where were you, Sweetness?" he murmured.

"It was the Spades," Shay said from behind them. At once, there was an unsettling hush amongst the adults.

"What the *fuck*?" James spat, looking up over my head at his son. "What are you talking about?"

"I found Keenan Mathers with her in the woods..." he started to say, but at that moment, Mum completely lost it then

and burst into a screaming fit.

“A teenage boy had my daughter in the woods? *In the woods?! Oh my God! What was he doing? Baby, did he touch you? Did he hurt you? Let me see!*” She reached for me, and at this point, I was so overwhelmed, I started crying and shaking uncontrollably.

“Emily, calm down, let him finish!” James snapped as he handed me back to her. Mum sat at one of the tables, rocking back and forth, holding me in a stranglehold grip. The other women gathered around, looking me over as though checking for injuries. The men, meanwhile, all looked murderous. “What did you see?” James asked, his tone like ice.

“He was carrying her, and when I found them, he stopped and wouldn’t let her go... not until he sent a message...” Shay’s voice still sounded pained. “...he was warning us off attacking their prospects... he said if we touch any more of them, well...” He petered off, but everyone seemed to understand what he was saying. Mum was sobbing hysterically and James’ hands clenched tightly into fists. I thought about how tightly Shay had held me when I had made it back to him. Despite how dismissive he had been about being my big brother, there was no denying the affection behind his hug. I was certain now that those had just been words. He hadn’t meant them. Seeing him so distraught and afraid was unnerving. Shay wasn’t afraid of anything... except for his nightmares. But seeing me in Keenan Mathers’ arms had clearly gotten to him. He seemed... shaken.

“Mina, what happened?” James was sitting at Mum’s side, and he reached over for me, but Mum refused to let go. “Honey, can you tell me what went on with that boy?”

“He-he just asked for my help,” I choked through my tears. “He asked for my name... how old I was... how I was with the Beasts...”

At this, several people around them shifted.

“...then he asked me to help him make this...” I held up the bouquet of flowers. At once, Shay lunged forward and ripped them from my grasp, despite my protests, and threw

them hard back into the trees. I felt a weird tug at my heart as the flowers disappeared into the woods and looked up at my stepbrother. He was breathing heavily, continuously running his hands through his long messy hair again and again. Even Aron and Gavin, who had been teasing and joking earlier, looked beyond pissed off and upset. “Then-then we heard Shay calling for me... and he carried me back. That’s all...”

“Are you sure, baby?” James leaned forward, his face serious and scary. “He didn’t hurt you? He didn’t touch you anywhere?”

“No, just carried me, kissed my forehead, and that was it...” I didn’t bother mentioning that he actually had hurt me a bit when he was grabbing my neck. But when I had told him it was hurting, he had immediately eased up. I was sure it had been an accident and didn’t want to be the source of any more trouble than I’d already unintentionally started.

“Oh my God,” Mum sobbed and continued rocking us both. She kissed my cheek again and again and James straightened, his eyes moving to the group.

“We’ll discuss this at the clubhouse tomorrow night,” he said, and turned to Shay. “In the meantime, stay away from the Black Spades. Got it?”

Shay nodded, his silver eyes never leaving my green ones. He stepped forward and pulled me from my mother’s lap. Mum immediately balked, but James held her back. “He needs to get her home, Em...”

“I want to go home, too! I don’t want to be here. I want to be at home with my daughter!” she exclaimed, tears streaming down her face.

“I’ll take you home soon. Just let Shay take care of her, okay?”

She glared up at James. “She’s *my* daughter! Mine!”

James’ nostrils flared slightly and his dark eyes seemed to spark with rage. “I know that! We’ve been over this, babe, let’s not start again. Not here. Shay will take care of her.”

Mum was fuming, but Shay was already carrying me away, heading back to the parking lot. He was flanked by Gavin, Aron, and three of his other buddies, and we headed in the direction of one of their trucks. We had no choice but to pass the Black Spades, and there was endless cursing and threats being called back and forth between the groups. Cody even attempted to approach them, his fists shaking hard before Leif and Aron stopped him. Shay ignored them completely. I couldn't help but peek up to see Keenan amongst them, smoking a cigarette lazily, watching me like a hawk. I felt my cheeks redden and looked away, my mind replaying the terrifying confrontation over and over again. I clung to Shay, who embraced me back.

"You scared the shit out of me, Sweetness," he murmured as he headed over to Aron's truck. "Don't you ever... don't... do not *ever* wander off like that again... FUCK!" he shouted, making me jump in his arms. He stopped for a moment, holding me close. "If anything ever happened to you, I'd lose it. You are so special to me, do you not realize that?"

I said nothing as my tears continued to fall down my face and I kept my nose pressed against his throat.

"I wouldn't be able to handle it, Mina. I couldn't..."

"Did you really hurt his friends?" I asked suddenly, as Keenan's words flashed through my head.

Shay tensed and said nothing, and to me, that just confirmed that the accusations the Spade had made against him, were true.

"I want to go home now..." I whispered.

## Chapter five

*Present Day*

*Mina: Sixteen Years Old*

*June*

IT HAS BEEN six days since I came home from the hospital. I stumbled around the house on my crutches most days, slowly getting used to them, but it's a major pain in the ass trying to move around when three quarters of my leg is wrapped in plaster. Lucky for me, the only room upstairs is the master bedroom, the connecting private bath, and James' office. I never had any reason to attempt to climb the stairs. My wrist is still heavily bandaged, too. I tried removing it the other day, but Shay wouldn't hear of it, despite the fact I told him that I was feeling better. Though he wasn't as bad as he had initially been, he's still treating me like I am made of china.

James and Shay haven't left me alone for even a minute. But as grateful as I am, as much as I loved the fact that I wasn't alone in this house, I could tell that some shit was going down at the club by the way James' cell was constantly going off. Shay seemed restless, too, often pacing out on the front porch, or speaking in harsh, whispered tones to his dad whenever I was out of the room. From the little tidbits I'd

overheard, James and all the senior members of the Celtic Beasts were trying to figure out who had sent the men who had attacked my mum and me. They were looking into the usual suspects, and the ones at the top were the Black Spades, who were denying any involvement whatsoever. James and the others were trying to piece together everything from that night, trying to find some hard evidence to link the Spades to the attack by spying on them, and asking around the underground (people who are often involved in illegal activities usually spill tidbits of information to each other).

Shay, however, seemed more agitated and fidgety, like he wanted to jump on his Harley, meet up with his close friends, and go out to bust some skulls. Every time I stumbled or hissed in pain when I accidentally bumped my foot on something, I saw how his eyes tightened and his fists clenched, like seeing me this way was physically hurting him.

As much as I appreciated them staying here, and as much as I physically and mentally needed them, I also just wanted an hour to myself. Just *one* hour...

I needed to see if *he* had tried to contact me.

At the back of my house, beside a large boulder that sat under my bedroom window, was a smaller pile of rocks hidden amongst thick, high grasses. I longed to hobble back there on my gibbled leg, so I could move the small stones aside to see if there was a folded note concealed beneath them. There was zero chance of me making it to the old theatre for a rendezvous, and most likely, he knew that. If he was to try to reach me in any way, it would be through our old note system.

At the thought, my heart raced a bit in anticipation. I needed to hear from him. I wanted to know if he cared to check on me, that he was thinking about me. After all, the last time I spent any time alone with him was at the beach, and that had been... intense.

But there was no way I could check while James was moving around the property, catching up on yard work and maintenance on the cabin-styled home we lived in. And most definitely not with Shay shadowing me everywhere I went. If

either of them found the hiding place where my messages with *him* were exchanged, if they found out how long we had been corresponding with each other, or discovered the shoebox that was stuffed with hundreds of notes he'd given me over the years that I had hidden underneath a floorboard beneath my bed... well, let's just say that Shay would most likely end up killing someone.

So here I was, lying on my bed in a foggy haze as I was still taking some drugs for the pain, and though I could move on my crutches, I still spent most of my time lying on the couch or in bed. I was bored. Holy shit, was I bored. I watched endless movies, read book after book after book, and texted a bit with my friends from school. I was going to miss the last few weeks of my eleventh year, but it had been arranged for me to take my finals through an online program at home, which I intended to do as soon as I wasn't high on pain medication.

I tried keeping my mind as occupied as possible so that I didn't have to think about things that were going to cause me to break down. I wasn't ready to face any of it. Not yet. I needed to feel stronger before dealing with everything that had happened, and before I thought about what had been stolen from me that night, or about mum...

So, I spent most of my time daydreaming about crashing waves, soft sand, and the smell of pine in the air as I remember the feel of his soft hair beneath my fingers...



“Really, I’ll be okay,”

“Are you sure? Because I can put it off for another day or two-”

“No, James. Go. It’s been too long since you’ve been to the club. You and Shay are going crazy, I can see it.” I laugh lightly as I finish my breakfast, munching away on some toast and eggs my stepfather had made for me. He and Shay are standing on the other side of the table arms crossed and their

faces etched with concern. But the fact that they are both dressed in dark shirts, jeans, and their black leather cuts, looking like the badass bikers they are, makes the whole scenario kind of hilarious in my eyes.

Since I've been too handicapped to do the usual household chores that were originally my responsibility, I've had a front row seat watching these two sweep, vacuum, dust, and do laundry. When they do it in their black leather, with the amazing Celtic blue dragon on the back, it makes me bite my lip to keep from laughing out loud. But the best was when I caught James wearing my mom's red gingham apron one morning while he was trying to follow her recipe for chocolate chip banana bread. He was good at making lots of things... like steaks, pasta, and breakfast food... but baking was *not* his forte, and the apron was covered with flour and spatter, plus the bread caught on fire somehow.

They needed a day out. Badly.

"I'll be fine," I tell them, and flash a rare smile, hoping it will convince them that I'll really be okay. I don't think I've truly smiled since the attack. When I do, it's forced and half-hearted. But I do my best acting now to be as convincing as possible for the boys, hoping I look like the Mina from before, and not the injured, afflicted girl that I've become.

James seems convinced, and gives me a smile as he clears my plate for me, knowing I can't with my crutches. "We'll be back before dark, but keep the house armed while we're gone," he says as he quickly washes the utensils and plate. He dries off his hands, grabs the keys to his bike, and moves over to me. Cupping the back of my head gently, he gives my crown a chaste kiss. "If you need anything, you call, alright? I don't give a shit if it's because you're scared or... or... if you've fallen while taking a piss and need help getting up. Understand?"

I genuinely laugh at this and nod. "Gotcha."

Giving my head a final pat, he heads out, letting the screen door crash shut behind himself. I can tell he's eager to get back



on his bike again by the way he's been staring longingly at it from the sitting room window the past few days.

Slowly, I shift my gaze to Shay, knowing he'll be harder to convince than my stepfather. Sure enough, his silver eyes are locked on to me, scrutinizing and studying as though he can read what's going on in my mind. For a moment, I feel a flicker of panic bubble in my stomach, but I quickly quash it. If he had found my box of notes, or the exchange spot for the messages, he would have come to me immediately. *It's A-OK, he doesn't know*, I tell myself.

Shay moves around the table slowly, his black, leather biker boots clomping loudly on the hardwood floor, before stopping right beside me. I hold his stare, trying to appear confident and sure of myself. But the way my stepbrother stares me down, I feel a weird blush rise up my cheeks and I shift uncomfortably. At twenty-three, Shay's become a serious chick-magnet at the club. He always had an easy time getting women, and for just a split-second, I find myself admiring him physically. His dark, almost black hair, is in its usual stylish mess around his face, falling over his eyes. His chin has a layer of dark whisker, and his skin is already tanned, though it's just mid-June. His muscles bulged under his t-shirt and the leather cut completes his bad-ass biker look. For a few seconds, I find myself seeing what those other women see when they look at him...

And I quickly shake *that* thought away. *What the hell is wrong with me?* Must be the meds I'm on. I fight back the blush and smile up at him. "It's okay, Shay."

He lets out a long, harsh, sigh, running his hands through his messy waves, shoving them back off his face. He looks so torn, his eyes tight in the corners and his mouth pressed in a firm line. After a brief pause, he bends down on one knee so that he is looking up at me slightly, and holds onto the small of my waist. "You need me, I'll be here," he says, his voice sounding so tortured, it catches me off guard. He leans in and hugs me, his nose pressing against the hollow of my collarbone. "I'll be here in a heartbeat. You know that, right? I'd do anything for you."

Tentatively, I reached up and lightly touched his dark, wavy hair and his hard shoulder, “I know.” I whisper.

He shudders a little when my fingers touch his head, and murmurs, “I’ll be home before dark. I promise.”

I feel a weight lift from my heart at his words. I do need this time alone, but if I was stuck in this house alone after dark, I’m pretty sure I’ll have a heart-attack. Just the thought of it has my palms turning clammy.

“Thank you, Shay.”

He gives me one final squeeze before he lets me go, casting me one last regretful look before he stomps away, heading outside after James. After he locks the door behind himself, I breathe a shaky sigh of relief and look at the clock over the stove and wait...



*The Past...*

*Mina: Eleven Years Old*

*December*

“I made your favourite. Rocky Road cookies!”

“Ah, sweetheart, you slay me.”

“May I come by the club and drop them off? I made enough for the guys.” I was already wrapping the cookies up in Tupperware and stepping into my snow boots, eager to get going.

“Of course. We’ll all see you in a bit.” James’ voice was filled with affection. I was always welcome at the club, especially when I brought baked goods for him and the other guys. Shay, at seventeen, was there almost all the time now, and I wanted to see him, too. I missed seeing him as often as I used to. I hung up the phone and shoved my arms into my pink parka and shouted up at the landing above. “Mum! He says we can come by!”

“Coming! Coming! Hold your horses!” Mum stepped out of her bedroom, tying her long, dark hair back off her face. She was dressed for the cold weather in a sweater and jeans, and joined me by the door. “Anxious to see Shay?” she asked, casting me a disgruntled sort of look. She and Shay bickered all the time, but she knew I idolized him, and tried her best to hide her dislike around me.

“He’s been so busy with his new job at the club, whatever it is. I think he said it was security or something...” I scrunched up my nose and I tried to remember what he’d said. He was always so cryptic when it came to club matters. My nights with Shay were few and far between. He wasn’t home as often as he had been in the past, but he still tried to make it to as many of our game and movie nights as possible. I was glad he was still trying to keep that tradition alive, but sometimes, his job at the club took him away. The only time I was guaranteed to see him was when he snuck into my room in the wee hours of the night or morning to sleep, and I was usually too out of it to have a conversation with him, or I never woke up until morning only to find him passed out beside me.

I pulled on a fuzzy white pom-pom hat that was too big for my head and almost fell over my eyes. But it was super comfy and warm, so I quickly combed the static out of my long blonde hair. Gathering the cookies, I followed my mum outside to the old bug James had bought for her after she crashed her old vehicle. It was always breaking down, completely unreliable. It’s only use was for local transportation. Once, Mum had tried to take it out on the highway, but as soon as she pushed past 50 miles per hour, the thing conked out. So it restricted her to town only. But I was glad to see her in good spirits today, and I knew why.

Christmas was only a week away, and it was a time of year my mother always looked forward to. Her drinking was minimal, as were her mood swings, and she and James were getting along much better lately, much to my relief. I hated it when they fought.

We quickly climbed into the car and after several tries, she got the engine going, and turned the heat on full blast to ward off the cold December air. Luckily, it roared to life and we headed off to the club.

The Celtic Beasts Clubhouse was on the edge of town on private land, and it was only about fifteen minutes from our home. I was so excited to get in and see my big brother that I was practically jumping up and down in my seat. As soon as we parked, I jumped out, the containers of my mornings work in hand, and hurried up the steps to the main door of the rather ominous concrete structure. I knew better though. The inside was cozy and warm. Before I could knock, the door opened and Shay's friend, Cody, grinned down at me. Cody Miller had grown into a good-looking guy, with dark hair and eyes and a dimpled grin. When he saw it was me standing there in my pink parka, rosy cheeks, and huge smile on my face bearing baked goods, he chuckled and reached out with a thick, muscled arm and tugged me in. "Hey, Precious, what treats did you bring us this time?"

"Cookies!" I beamed up at him and he led me inside as Mum followed.

Cody lifted me up into his arms, leaving my feet dangling off the ground facing me forward as he trudged down the hall into the main, spacious lounge. I didn't object. The guys liked to haul me about like I was a ragdoll or something. I'd just gotten used to it over the years. A few of the older guys were there, having some lunch and beers, and Shay and all his buddies were in the back corner, gathered around a pool table, laughing and cussing each other out. But when Cody stepped forward with me in his arms, they quieted down. I smirked. Most likely trying to spare me from the bad words they were using. As much as everyone tried to keep their potty-mouth's under control around me, they slipped up more than they realized and I enjoyed calling them out on it.

Shay's face broke into a huge grin that made my stomach jump around like I'd swallowed a bunch of frogs or something. He dropped his pool cue, and hurried forward, snatching me from his friend, his arms wrapped around my

thighs so that I was looking down at his face. I giggled and basked in his attention, taking in his handsome face. I was proud when I caught the club girls checking him out. Shay and all of his friends had grown up gorgeous, tatted, and muscled. Shay's body was becoming a canvas. His right side has a shoulder armour tattoo that turns into a looping Celtic tribal design down his forearm. His left side has a Celtic dragon on the shoulder tracing down his entire arm. He also had a massive Celtic cross over his entire back. I was fascinated by his ink and often found myself studying them when uncovered, usually at night when we were lying in bed together.

“Well, if it isn't the prettiest girl to come bearing gifts!” His silver eyes flicked down to the containers that I still held in my hands.

“I made your and James' favourite.”

“Rocky Road!” He placed me carefully on the ground as I held out one of the Tupperware boxes to him. Shay opened it and inhaled before snatching one up and taking a huge bite. “Goddamn, Mina. These get better every time...”

“Don't hog 'em, asswipe.” Aron shook his longer, honey blond hair out of his eyes and winked at me. I rolled my eyes in return, far too used to their playful teasing ways by now to let it affect me.

Gavin reached around and snatched two cookies for himself, then dodged Shay's arm quickly while hurrying to the other side of the table with a smug look on his face as he took a bite. “You're the best, sweetheart,” he moaned around the treat. “Seriously, whatever guy is lucky enough to land you as his girl, I'm jealous of.”

“And that's the end of that,” Shay snapped at him and turned back to me. “You going to hang out for a bit, Sweetness?”

I glanced over to see where my mum had disappeared to. James had an office near the back of the building, along with the VP and the President of the club. “When Mum wants to leave, I'll go with her. I don't know if she's staying long.”

“Well, you can hang out with us until then.” He reached for me but I stepped away, intending to quickly visit James first. When I looked back to Shay, I was startled at the dark shadow that crossed over his features when I’d moved away from him. It was only for a brief moment, and then he smiled, all trace of aggression gone. He relaxed his expression and smiled at me.

“I need to bring James some cookies, too. I’ll be right back,” I said a little timidly, still caught off guard by the dark look I saw. Leaving one of the containers with him, I crossed the room towards the hall. As I passed the tables where the older guys were sitting, they reached out and affectionately patted my head when I stopped to say hi, sharing the treats with them, too, before continuing down the hall to my stepfather’s office.

But as I neared, a girl wearing a scantily clad dress came hurrying from James’ office. I didn’t recognize her but she looked like she was in her twenties, her hair dyed a white blonde and she wore heavy makeup. She looked upset and embarrassed and didn’t even seem to notice me standing there as she hurried by in her insanely high stilettos. I looked over my shoulder, watching as the girl disappeared into the common room of the club where all the other guys were hanging out. Huh, Okay? Shrugging, I kept going. But as I neared James’ office, I heard the familiar shouting and screaming that always caused my heart to clench and my breathing to quicken.

“...the FUCK do you think you’re doing?!” Mum was screeching at the top of her lungs.

“...Didn’t know you were coming by...” James’ voice sounded uncomfortable.

“Oh no? So that makes it all okay then? You fucker! Screwing some slut behind my back... again!” Mum was hysterical. I froze and shrank against the wall, listening to them as they yelled. This was becoming a little too frequent in our household, and I hated it. But I couldn’t help but want to listen in. I just wanted to know why they seemed to be always going at each other. I thought things were better lately?

“Look, I don’t know what else to say... I didn’t want you to see that...”

“But you knew Mina was coming by! What if she had walked in on you?!”

“I thought she was walking! I woulda been done by the time...” but before he could finish, there was a loud smack, followed by his cursing.

“You fucking pig! You bastard! What the fuck is wrong with you?” Mum was shouting. Judging by the sound, I put together that she had slapped him. It wouldn’t be the first time. “You keep me prisoner! Why? What the fuck do you even need me for? Why won’t you let me leave...?” She began to sob uncontrollably and I longed to run in there and make my mother smile, but I was terrified of being caught listening. I started to slowly back away, deciding that it was probably best that I made myself scarce.

“You aren’t going anywhere!” James hissed and behind the door, I could hear the sounds of struggle, heavy footfalls, and a loud grunt. My heart hammered in my chest at the sound of their physical fighting and I fought the tears and fear back as I moved away.

“*Fuck. You.*” Mum was practically spitting. “I’m leaving. I’m taking Mina and we’re gone!”

“You can’t take Mina,” I froze at James’ words, forgetting that I was trying to give them privacy.

“Like hell I can’t!”

“You fucking try to take her from Shay and I, and I will fucking end-”

But before he could finish the office door swung open and I was caught in the direct sights of my mother, staring up at her like a deer in headlights. Over her shoulder, James was red in the face, livid, and both of them froze at the sight of me standing there.

I stared back, feeling my lip quiver as I took in the sight of them. Tentatively, I looked over Mum’s shoulder at James and held out the Tupperware. “I-I was just coming by to bring

you these..." I mumbled, embarrassed and upset, as I placed the container on the ground. "I'm sorry!" I turned to leave, but my mother stormed after me and snatched my upper arm, squeezing hard through the thick sleeve of my coat.

"We're leaving!" she snarled angrily and stomped down the hall, lugging me behind her. I stumbled as I tried to keep up with her brisk pace.

"No, you're not. Not like this!" James roared and stomped after us. "Shay! The door!"

Mum burst into the lounge where the men were gathered, and she glared at all of them. "No one fucking stops me!" she growled and yanked me to my feet when I tripped. "No one stops us!" But when she turned to head to the door, it was blocked by Shay, Cody, and Aron; his other buddies flanking one of the fire exits at the side. Shay's dark brows were pulled low over his silver eyes as he glared at Mum, his arms crossed over his chest.

"Let Mina go, and you can leave," he said in his furious, deep voice.

"Fuck you, you shit!" Mum spat at him and dragged me closer, causing me to whimper a little when her grip on my arm tightened hard. "Mina is *my* daughter! And we're leaving this shithole behind us!"

"You aren't leaving, Emily," James said from behind us, his voice back to calm and collected, but there was a dark edge to it. I lifted my wide, frightened eyes from Mum, to James, to Shay and his friends, and back again. I had no idea what was going on and the whole situation was scaring me. "You need to calm down first. You're in no state to drive that shit-mobile anywhere-"

"If you replaced my car with a *new* vehicle, rather than some beat up piece of shit, then I wouldn't have this problem, you ass!" she snapped at him.

He chuckled. "Why? So you can crash a brand new car? Along with the other one you totaled?"



I could sense my mother's rage and was trying desperately to think of a way to calm everyone down. I reached up and tugged at the sleeve of her coat, which she hadn't taken off the entire time we'd been here. Mum glanced down at me, her eyes softening. I wrapped my free arm around her waist and huddled into her, hugging her close, hoping it would calm her. But it only seemed to fuel her fire. Mum clutched me and backed up towards the bar. Everyone in the club was watching us, and it seemed to me like my mum was behaving as a cornered animal would, like on a documentary we'd watched about rangers in Africa trying to corner a wild leopard so they could attach a tracker to it.

Shay took a step towards us.

"Don't!" Mum snarled at him. "Don't you come any closer!"

"Let Mina go then," he said in a deadpan tone.

"Move away from the door and let us leave!" she cried desperately and her grip hardened on my arm. I let out a pained sob and stumbled again when she moved quickly to the side, trying to put more space between us and them. I was starting to panic now, and my breathing was coming out in quick gasps as I tried to get air into my lungs.

At once, Shay's eyes flashed angrily. "You're hurting her-"

"You don't have her best interest at heart! She's not yours!"

"Em," James' voice was closer, his voice filled with warning. I was being held so tightly against my mum, her hand pushing my head into the side of her coat, so that I couldn't see around myself. I had no clue how near the others were, but judging by the sound of their footsteps and their voices, they were closing in. "C'mon, babe, I get it, you're upset. But you shouldn't be driving like this, let alone bringing Mina with you-"

"Don't, James! I know what sick twisted shit is going on in this club and I won't fucking take it anymore!" She was

practically panting now. “I know what I see! And I know that Shay wants-”

“Enough, Emily!” James shouted. “Shay has been nothing but a good big brother to her. You need to let this go. Do you really think we’d hurt her?”

“Fuck you!” she screeched. “You’re blind! I see it! I fucking see!”

“You’ve been hitting the bottle a little too much lately, babe,” James spat at her, his voice filled with disgust. This was something that had been occurring a lot more lately, my mother’s drinking. It was one of the many things she and my stepfather argued about. That, and the club.

“Mina,” Shay’s voice gentled as he spoke to me directly. “Mina, don’t you want to hang out with me? Isn’t that why you came here today? To see me?”

“Don’t you try to manipulate her!” Mum screamed at him.

“Mina, I want to see you... come on, I’ll get you some lunch and we can watch some TV with the guys. Does that sound like fun?” he went on, speaking like she didn’t even exist.

I tried to twist in my mother’s hold to look at him, but she just pressed her hand harder against the back of my head, keeping my face buried into the material of her winter jacket. At the move, Shay let out a deep growl.

“Stop it, Emily,” Cody’s voice rang out then. “Just let the girl go and this can end.”

“You can’t order me around! Who the fuck are you?”

“He is a prospect and a part of the security for our club. I grant him every right to intervene,” James snapped. “And as such, he also deserves the same amount of respect you would give *any* member of the Beasts...”

Mum was breathing hard and her back hit the edge of the bar, blocking our retreat. At that, there was suddenly an explosion of activity and I found myself in the middle of a sort of tug-of-war between my mother and Shay, while James was

attempting to pull her off of me. Shay's friends ran in and worked at prying Mum's fingers off of my arm, but she was determined not to lose her hold. She kicked at the men, cursing and screeching loudly. Everyone else was shouting and swearing, too, while I, caught in the middle, burst into frightened tears. Finally, Aron managed to rip my mother's hold from the sleeve of my pink parka, and James hauled Mum away down the hall towards his office.

She was screaming the entire time. "I'm calling the police! I'm filing a report! You can't do this! She's my daughter!" But then her shouts were cut off at the slam of a door.

Shay bundled me up into his arms and hurried to the back corner, his friends surrounding us. I bawled my eyes out as he took a seat on the old, brown couch, me in his lap, and he unzipped my coat and removed my hat before checking the arm my mother had squeezed the life out of. It was already bruising, and my jeans were ripped at the knee from when I'd fallen to the floor in the midst of the yanking and pulling. My skin was scraped a bit and one of the pretty club girls hurried over with a first-aid kit and handed it off to Shay. He cleaned the cut and covered it with a Band-Aid then pulled me in for a tight hug and kissed my cheek hard.

"It's okay, Sweetness," he murmured, rocking me in his lap. "It's okay... don't cry... Shhh..."

"Hey, Mina, want a chocolate milkshake?" one of the girls asked.

"And I have some nail polish with me today, I can paint your nails!" another one offered.

I looked up at the two girls, tears streaming down my cheeks as I took them in. I was a little wary of the women that hung out at the club ever since Dana, but these two were smiling with genuine warmth in their eyes and I thought I recognized them as regulars at the lounge, which meant they were safe. So, I nodded and they both hurried off to fulfill my wishes. Shay chuckled and gave my cheek another kiss before using the pad of his thumb to wipe my tears away.

“While you’re getting pampered, precious,” Cody grinned, “how about you watch me kick your brother’s ass at pool?”

Shay made a scoffing sort of sound at the back of his throat and kept his arms around me. My sniffles started to die down. “I’m sorry...” I whispered.

“What on earth are you sorry for?” he asked, incredulously.

“I... if I hadn’t come by, they wouldn’t have fought... I don’t know...” I mumbled, my eyes on the ground.

“No,” he said firmly. “None of this is your fault, understand?”

But how could it not be? During the shouting match, I could sense underlying threats and unspoken words being tossed back and forth that I didn’t catch, and all of it seemed to be centered around me, though I couldn’t imagine why. My mum wanted to leave with me, but for some reason, she wasn’t allowed to. Why not? And what had happened between my mother and James that had caused the arguing in the first place? This was supposed to be a happy outing, but now it was all one big mess. I had hoped with it being so close to Christmas that things would continue looking up, but now it appeared as though the fighting was starting all over again.

“Hey,” Shay said sharply. I slowly raised my eyes up to his, and he cupped my face gently. “None of this was your fault. Okay?”

“Okay,”

“Hey, cutie!” The girl who offered to paint my nails, Jess was her name, came running back over. “I have three colours: sparkly blue, this bright pink one, or a deep plum. Which one do you want?”

I chose the sparkly blue and soon found myself sitting on the couch with Jess and the other girl, Bethany, drinking a huge chocolate milkshake while the two women painted my nails, brushed my hair, and braided it. The boys played pool and ordered a bunch of food to share and after a little bit, I temporarily forgot about the fight and was smiling and

enjoying myself, feeling lucky to be included with the older group.

It started to get dark before Mum and James made an appearance again. By that time, Jess was sitting in Aron's lap, while Bethany was flirting it up with Leif. Shay was sitting on the couch with me in his lap, and Cody was sitting with us, holding my feet on his thighs. When my mum emerged, I noticed her eyes were red and puffy, and when she saw me sitting with the men, she curled her lips angrily. But James reached out and gripped her arm, the dark look he cast her as frightening as the shadowed one I'd seen on Shay earlier, and she bit her bottom lip.

"Mina, we're going home now," she called over.

"Mina will come back with Shay and I," James said firmly, earning a look of pure loathing from mum. She looked like she was about to argue, but he gave her elbow another tight squeeze and she nodded limply, her shoulders sinking. I immediately felt torn and went to get up off of the couch. I felt a surge of protectiveness wash over me at the miserable sight of her. I wanted to make things better. I wanted to see her beautiful smile again.

"Mummy, wait, I'll come with you-" I said and tried to move, but Cody and Shay held me still.

"No, Baby Girl, you will come back with Shay and me. Your momma needs time alone to think about what she did."

I was confused. What did my mother do? Was it because of the confrontation earlier? I looked back and forth between them, feeling a bubble of anxiety starting to rise in my chest. Seeing my mother look so defeated, dejected, and sad was eating me up inside. I struggled again in Shay's lap, but he held me tight and Cody gripped my ankles so I couldn't move my feet to put on my boots. Mum's eyes took in the sight and she shook her head and put on a wobbly smile. "No, sweetie, it's okay. I'll see you at home, alright? I'll have dinner ready."

"I want to come with you,"

“No.” Her voice, though firm, was full of defeat. She sounded tired. “I’ll see you soon, okay?”

I sank back and watched as she turned and stepped outside. No one stopped her from leaving this time. James strolled over to where we were all hanging out and smiled down at us. “I like the nails, Baby Girl.” He grinned at me.

“Thanks,” I said quietly. I was feeling guilty sitting here having fun while mum was obviously in distress, and I didn’t understand any of it.

James crouched before me so he was at my eye-level. “You’re a good girl, you know that?” he said.

I didn’t reply, just waited to see where this was going.

“You’re good. And you’ve always been good. We’ve always looked out for you, Mina. Always. Because we love you. You got that? We...” His eyes flash up to Shay for a brief moment. “... love you. We’re family. That’s why sometimes I have fights with your momma. Because she doesn’t understand that sometimes the things we do are for your protection and well-being. A family is loyal to each other. They stick together. Do you understand that?” I gave a small nod, but James seemed satisfied. “Good. Now, get ready to head home. I’ll get the truck warmed up.”

## Chapter 21

*Present Day*

*Mina: Sixteen Years Old*

*June*

IF I THOUGHT WALKING inside the house on my crutches was hard enough, it was nothing compared to trying it outside. We were located in the middle of a wooded plot of land, and James liked to keep the terrain as natural as possible, except for keeping the grass immediately around the house maintained to a reasonable length. The area was littered with rocks, leaves, and twigs, and my crutches caught on the dips and protrusions from the soil. It was the first time I'd been outside in days, and though I was determined to get to the back of the house, I couldn't help but stop, just for a minute, to soak in the sunshine that shone through the gaps of the leafy canopy. The weather was cooperating with the season, and normally I'd be ecstatic about it, but I was stuck in my cast for another five weeks, at least, and even then, I might need further surgery. This meant I'd be most likely spending my summer hobbling around, unable to go on walks, swim at the lake, and enjoy the usual activities someone my age would normally be doing.

The boys had left about half an hour ago, feeling like that was enough time to ensure they weren't going to come back unexpectedly while I was investigating my old secret spot in the back. I didn't want to chance Shay changing his mind and turning around only to catch me with the note in my hands, so despite the fact that I wanted to soak in as much sunshine as possible, I had to move my ass.

I finally made it to the back of the house and went straight to the boulder beneath my window. Carefully, I lowered myself onto the large stone, getting as comfortable as I could so I could read without having to worry about losing my balance. My fingers tremble slightly as I shift the smaller rocks aside but my eyes widen when I see what is waiting for me. There's no note. Instead, there's a clear plastic ziplock bag, and inside is a small, black cell phone. It's very basic looking; not like a fancy iPhone. In fact, this one actually had a keyboard and a smaller touchscreen at the top. I took it out, turning it over in my hands as I inspected it. I'd never seen a cell phone like this one before.

Curiously, I press the power button and the screen comes to life, but all it has on it is an inbox for texting and a call log. There's one number in the phone, and the name it belongs to makes me smile wide. I tap on the message inbox and see there actually *is* a message waiting for me. Eagerly, I settle back on the boulder and open it.

**Captain Stud Muffin: Hey Mina... I decided to upgrade our means of communication, seeing as you won't be by the theatre. What do you think of the burner cell? Don't you worry about the cost, I'll be covering it for you. Been trying to reach you for days, but your family hasn't left the house... took a chance Thursday night and left this for you. Are you okay? I heard about what happened... I know about what they did to you and your mother...**

I stop reading when he mentions my mum. Closing my eyes, I rest my head on the log wall of the house behind me, and



slowly count to ten, concentrating on my breathing. My hands tremble slightly, and I feel my eyes start to sting as I fight back the choking sob that's working its way up my throat. *Mum... poor Mum*, what they did to her...

*No, Mina! Don't fucking think of it! Not yet, don't go there yet!* My mind screams at me, commanding that I focus on my breathing, and count again until I feel my control come back to me. When I stop shaking, I continue reading.

**I want to see you... but I know that's probably an impossibility at this point. In the meantime, let's continue talking this way, yeah? I hated not being able to reach you...**

I feel my heart flutter in my chest at those words and I can't fight the small grin that works its way onto my face. Only this guy can give me butterflies like this. I feel like a stupid, typical schoolgirl, losing my mind over a guy, but I can't help it.

**Text me when you get this, alright? So I know you got it. Just message me our password, and I know it's you and not some random crackhead who found this phone in your yard and decided to fuck with me. Or worse, your stepbrother...**

I shiver at the thought of Shay finding this. I'll keep the cell on silent and buried beneath my floorboards with the notes. I know I should burn them to hide the evidence of our communication, but my heart won't let me. A lot of our messages were so heartfelt, so revealing and full of secrets back and forth to each other... I don't want to lose them. All the times that I felt alone, those times when I felt so controlled, so smothered by Shay and his tantrums, the weight of the responsibility put on my shoulders for dealing with him

most times became too much. When that happened, I reached out through my notes to my secret friend, and found solace in the words he wrote back to me. Many times when I'd been suffering for days because of Shay's random bouts of raging, dangerous hysterics that held me hostage, I'd pour my heart out on paper. His messages in return always made me feel better, whether it was by his sense of humour, charm, or just his responses to my worries.

Shay has never searched my room before, as far as I knew, and seeing as my box hidden beneath the floor of my bed has been undisturbed, I still feel safe using it.

**If I hear of any leads from the underground about the attack, I'll make sure secure channels pass the information on to your stepfather. In the meantime, you let yourself rest and heal. If you get bored, text me. If you need someone to vent to, text me. I don't give a shit what the reason is... I want to hear from you, got it? Just... don't ask for my opinion on clothes or shit like that... when girls do that, it fuckin' stresses me out. I never end up saying the right thing.**

I chuckle and roll my eyes. One time, *one* time I asked him if I should wear a red or blue dress to a school dance last year, and the note I received back just said, "Black". But I took his less than helpful suggestion to heart, and had gone shopping with my friends, buying a pretty black lace, empire waist party dress to wear. But, of course, the night was cut short when Shay finally snapped, claiming I'd been out long enough, and showed up at my school to take me home. Despite that, I'd had a pretty great time, and was glad I'd gone with the classic little-black-dress, judging from all the looks I received from the boys in my class.

I quickly read the last line in the text.

**I'll talk to you soon. Remember, message our password so I know it's you and that you've got the cell.**

Immediately, I type in the password I'd picked out for us years ago, something that we would write to each other once in a while to clarify that we were indeed still messaging with one another and not someone else who was trying to dig for information, or in his case, Shay posing as me to lure him into a trap.

**Mina: Bad Crow**

I press send and look back in the plastic bag. There's a charger cord wrapped up, too, so I drop the phone back in the bag and slowly make my way back around to the front of the house. I feel a little regretful when I realize that I will no longer be sneaking around behind the house to search through the rocks for a paper note anymore, but he's right. The burner cell makes sense. And we can reach each other right away, without worrying about him getting caught lurking on the property. He took a risk every time he came here, but he ensured me he had the security cameras around the place scoped out. I really don't know how he managed it each time. At least that concern was over. And now that our meetings at the old theatre are no longer a possibility, I feel a sense of relief knowing I have this as a means to connect to him.

When I get inside, I set the alarm to the house and collapse on the couch. Curiously, I check the phone and see I already have a reply. My face breaks into a huge smile, the first real one in nearly two weeks, and I open it and read.

**Captain Stud Muffin: I'll talk to you soon, love.**



*The Past...*

*Mina: Eleven Years Old*

*December*

It was a few days after the blow-up at the club, but things seemed to have settled down. That night, when we had made it home, Mum had a big pasta dinner and salad waiting, and then we all watched Die Hard before going to bed. James and Shay were talking like nothing had happened. My mum was quiet, but the next morning, she was pulling out Christmas boxes from storage and decorating the house with holly garland, wreaths, and played some classic Christmas music on the stereo as she worked like a fiend to make the place feel festive.

I walked side by side with her in town as we finished up our Christmas shopping. I had saved up so I could buy gifts for my family, and hoped that they would like what I got them. It was the first year I'd been able to save up and shop on my own for everyone without Mum having to loan me some cash, and I was very proud of myself. There was a chill in the air, the ground was covered with a dusting of snow, and all the lampposts on Main Street were decorated with holly garland and lights, giving the town a festive look about it. Mum stepped into the small mini mall with me in tow, and strolled up and down the aisles, looking at Christmas decorations and little knick-knacks. Mum loved shopping for Christmas things and every year, she added more festive décor to the house.

But after hours of browsing, my mind had started to drift from boredom, and I soon lost sight of her. I walked up and down the aisles, searching for her familiar royal blue coat and dark hair, but being so short, I could barely see far enough to make a difference. I was just starting to panic when a deep, familiar voice rumbled behind me. "Hey there, Cutie. You lost?"

I spun around and looked up at the large, rugged figure until I was staring into those stunning glacier blue eyes. Keenan Mathers. I couldn't help but smile at the sight of him, despite that the last time I had seen him, it had been rather tense. But over the years, as I had reflected on what had

happened, I decided I wasn't necessarily frightened of *him*... just the weird standoff between him and my brother. Keenan had been gentle and incredibly kind to me. I had no reason to be afraid.

“Hey, Sunshine.” He flashed me that beautiful crooked smile that I remembered so well. He looked the same, only more filled out with muscle and a few inches taller. I see a hint of what looked like a spider-web tattoo on his neck, which was peeking up under the collar of his shirt. His blond hair was longer now and it fell over his face, but his beautiful eyes, which had always captivated me, glittered playfully from under the strands.

“Keenan!” I beamed up at him.

He placed a palm over his heart. “I must have made quite an impression to be lucky enough for you to remember me.” He winked and I felt my insides jump excitedly.

I giggled and without thinking, threw my arms around his waist, giving him a hug. I'd always been an affectionate kid, and growing up with the men in James' club who were constantly hugging and petting me, I had become used to greeting people in such a fashion. For a moment, Keenan stilled as though surprised by my outwardly affection, but then he wrapped an arm around my back, holding me against him, and lightly ran his hand over my long hair. When I pulled back, I was grinning up at him. “Are you Christmas shopping, too?” I asked.

“I am. How about you, Cutie?”

“I'm all done. My mum was browsing around, but I got bored and lost track of her...” As I remembered my mother, I craned my neck around Keenan and went up on the tip toes of my boots to try to see her.

“I can help you find her, if you like,” he offered.

I shrugged. “I'll just wait by the front doors. She is kinda obsessed with Christmas things, so she could be a while longer, and honestly, I'm tired.”

“Well then, how about you help me shop?”

“Okay!” I beamed, taking his proffered hand. He tugged me away, and we wandered up and down the aisles, heading towards the back of the store.

“So, how is life, Sunshine?” he asked as we looked over the various items on the shelves... picture frames, vases, dust-catchers (that’s what James called the figurines and random décor pieces Mum brought home), fake flowers, and random Christmas decorations.

“Good. I’ve been taking ballet for a few years now, and I was granted the starring role in the town’s Nutcracker play.” I smiled wide. “It was the first time I got to perform in a show.” It had been a nerve-wracking experience being the star of such an important ballet. People in our town filled the seats of our new theatre house every year to watch *The Nutcracker* at Christmas time. I remember how sick to my stomach I was as I waited backstage for the curtain to rise so the opening number could start. But once I started dancing, my nerves melted away as I followed my steps, getting lost in the music and the story. Mum, James, and Shay had come to my opening night and the finale, and all cheered loudly from the stands. At the last show, Shay even surprised me backstage with a bouquet of daisies. He looked so proud of me. I beamed at the memory.

“I didn’t get a chance to see that,” Keenan sounded disappointed. “Wish I’d known you were the star. I would have been there opening night.” I scoffed at him and rolled my eyes. He glanced down wickedly. “Don’t believe me?” he asked.

“No offense, but you don’t seem like the theatre type.” Neither were James and Shay, but they were family. It was sort of expected that they would be there for at least *one* show. I barely knew Keenan. But what I did know was that he was a part of a rival club and when he smiled down at me, my stomach jumped around like there were butterflies fluttering inside. It was the same feeling I got around Shay sometimes.

He chuckled. “I’m not. But I would have liked to see you dance.”

I couldn't hide the blush on my cheeks, so I lowered my head. "Who are you shopping for? Parents? Friends? Girlfriend?"

"All of the above."

I felt a little twinge in my stomach. Of course he would have a girlfriend. Keenan was gorgeous. Why would he not have one? And she was probably just as beautiful, too. I scolded myself for my little spite of jealousy. I was only eleven years old. Keenan was seventeen, the same age as Shay. He would never see me as anything but a kid. I buried my resentment and smiled up at him, giving his hand a squeeze. "Girlfriends are easy. We're like crows... we enjoy sparkly things." *Daddy. That was something he had joked about whenever he surprised Mum with a gift.*

He tilted his head back and laughed loudly at that before shaking his head. "I guess that's true, in a way."

"It's a weird thing to say, I know," I confessed. "I just remember my dad saying it once or twice. I guess it stuck with me."

"James?" he asked, confused.

"No. My real dad..." my voice trailed off and my eyes turned away from him, shielding my pain at the memory of my father. When I caught sight of a jewelry display, I released his hand and raced over to it and started perusing. "Does your girlfriend have pierced ears? Maybe some nice earrings! Or a watch. Heart necklaces are okay, but they're overrated." I pursed my lips as my mother's words fell out of my mouth.

"Well, I don't want to get her anything like *that*," he said, his voice laced with sarcasm as he joined me.

My eyes flashed up at him. "I'm serious. If you are going to get her a necklace, make it something more personal, like a stone that says something special about her. Or a locket with a memory inside. It doesn't have to be a picture, even a coin or some keepsake from a date you had or something..." I thought about the locket that I had helped James pick out only a few days ago for my mother. Instead of a picture inside, he had an

engraving inscribed. But that part was a secret just for my mum, he'd said with a wink.

For a long moment, Keenan stared down at me, his expression amused.

“What?” I asked, wondering what he was thinking.

“You’re quite the little romantic, aren’t you? Got a boyfriend?”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah right! Shay would lose his mind! And I’m only eleven. I’m too young for dating.”

“Is he protective?”

“Just a bit.” I made another face. As I got older, James and Shay were constantly telling me to let them know if any boys tried talking to me. When I asked them why, they said it was so they could start polishing their shotguns. My eyes caught sight of a beautiful pink pearl necklace on a silver chain. “Ohhh, how about that?”

“A pearl?”

“Why not?”

“I haven’t taken my girl to the ocean or anything. It’s not personal to us.”

I sighed, frustrated by his ignorance. Boys really were clueless sometimes. I thought back to third grade when a boy in my class, Jamie, revealed that he had a crush on me. But his way of showing it was to pull my hair and trip me on the playground. “Dummy, don’t you know anything about girls? We like mermaids, and pearls make me think of mermaids.” I paused for a moment, thinking of one of my favourite Disney movies. “If your girlfriend likes Ariel, then she’ll like a pearl necklace.”

“I have no idea what she likes.” He seemed to be amused as I berated him and acted like my scolding was funny, judging by the way the corner of his mouth lifted and his blue eyes seemed to sparkle. “I cannot remember the last time I’ve been so casually insulted.” He said, sounding delighted and aghast all at once.



“Shouldn’t you know that stuff if you’re her boyfriend?” I furrowed my brow at him, ignoring his last remark. “If not, then why are you with her?”

“She’s a hot piece of ass.”

I scrunched up my nose as those words echoed again and again in my mind. That was what Shay said my mum was to his father. I’d heard him yell those words at her more than once. I shook the words away before muttering, “Men...” and heard Keenan chuckle.

“What about for your mother, then?”

He tilted his head in thought, like he was considering it.

“And since your girlfriend is just eye-candy to you...” I went on with sass, and he made a choking sound of laughter at my words, “How about crystal earrings, to make her a little more sparkly so you can show her off?” My voice was dripping with sarcasm and Keenan burst out laughing, causing several shoppers to look up at him curiously.

“Aren’t you a feisty little firecracker?” he said, grinning wide.

I smirked up at him. “Just calling it like it is, Mathers,” I teased, addressing him by his last name like Shay had.

He reached out and seized a lock of my hair and gave it an affectionate tug. “I’ll think about those options, Sunshine.” He turned and looked around the store, spotting the little café near the front, “How about I treat you to some hot chocolate while we wait for your mum to finish her shopping?”

I readily agreed, unable to say no to the promise of chocolate in any form, and took his hand again as he led us up front. He bought me a large, whipped cream, sprinkled affair and we sat at a free table, watching as shoppers paid for their purchases and kept an eye out for my mother.

“Isn’t your mum at all concerned that you aren’t with her?” he asked after several minutes, sipping his own hot beverage, which was just plain black coffee.

I shrugged. “Sometimes... she’s been stressed lately,” I mumbled, thinking about the other day at the club. “She gets distracted.”

“Hmmm...” he mused, watching as a pretty brunette sauntered by. The girl grinned at him the same way the girls at the club smiled at my brother and his friends, and put a little more sashay to her step, making her butt sway side to side, and he watched her leave.

“Pig.”

Keenan’s icy blue eyes moved to me. I grinned at him with a knowing smile. I don’t know why boys checked out girl’s butts, but it was so obvious when they did it. I felt some whipped cream smear onto my nose as I took a sip, and quickly cleaned it off with my napkin.

“Are you and Shay still mad at each other?” I asked him as thoughts of my brother reminded me of the last time we had all been together in the woods.

His eyes flicked to me and his grin vanished. “Mad at each other...” he said slowly, sounding a little puzzled.

“Yeah. Last time I saw you, you guys were fighting... is he still doing bad things to your friends?” This had been something that was very much on my mind since that day. I knew he liked to fight, but I didn’t think he took it *that* far. Hearing that Shay had seriously hurt people, to the point of putting them in the hospital, had been a shock. I wanted to make sure he was keeping his promise to Keenan. If not, I was going to make sure he paid for breaking his word.

Keenan stared hard at me, his gaze penetrating, but finally let out a long breath and a tight smile curled up on his lips. “Naw, it’s all good, Cutie. No beef there at the moment.”

“Good. Or else I’d have to return the Christmas gift I got him as punishment,” I said, deciding that would be a worthy price for him to pay.

Keenan chuckled and watched as I took another sip of my hot chocolate. I got some more whipped cream on my face; I could feel it at the corner of my mouth. Before I could wipe it

off, he reached out and removed it with the pad of his thumb, bringing it to his own lips to lick off. I raised my brows at him in surprise.

“I can use a napkin, you know. You’ll get my germs if you do that.”

He grinned wide and chuckled again. “I’m not worried, hon.”

I made a face and shrugged, taking another sip, but was more careful this time about not getting any more whipped cream on me. I let my gaze move about the store, keeping an eye out for my mother. Whenever I glanced back at Keenan, though, his blue eyes were locked on to me. He looked confused, a little worried, and I wondered what he was thinking. “What is it?” I asked him.

“Your doe-like eyes make you look like a china doll,” he said. “If Shay was protective of you now, he’s going to have his work cut out for him when you become a teenager.” He lazily relaxed in his chair, tilting it onto its back legs. I blushed hard at his comment.

“Yeah, right,” I scoffed, dismissing it.

“No, you’re going to be a real pretty girl when you get older, Sunshine,” Keenan insisted. I avoided his stare and fixed my eyes on the rows of busy lineups at the cash registers. “With your green eyes, blonde hair, and sweet smile...”

I could feel my blush travel from my cheeks all the way up to my forehead and down my neck. My heart was beating hard in my chest, and for a moment, my fingers trembled as I reached for my mug of hot chocolate, “Thank you.” I whispered, unsure of what to say. I received compliments all the time from Shay and his friends, but for some reason, hearing Keenan speak of me this way, gave me a funny feeling in my stomach.

“There she is!” I pointed out my mother who had *finally* emerged from the crowd and got into a lineup, “Thank you for the hot chocolate,” I said, pulling on my pink parka as I prepared to leave. In my peripheral, I could make out Keenan

watching me, his expression pained and troubled again. He looked over to my mother, to me, and back again. It was like he was deliberating something and was struggling to make a decision.

“You’re welcome,” he murmured, his eyes flickering over to my mum who hadn’t noticed us yet. He stood up in a rush, and seized my arm, swinging me behind him as he used his body to block my mother from my view. Before I could comment, he crouched down before me so that his face was at level with mine. “Thank you for helping me with my Christmas shopping,” he said gently.

I scrunch my nose again as I thought about our short shopping excursion, and frowned at him. “You didn’t get anything...”

“No, but you gave me some good ideas that will help. I appreciate it. You’re a good girl.”

His words rang in my memory. The last time I’d talked to him, he had called me that, too. I stared into his face, noticing how he looked a little sad as the corners of his mouth tightened, and wondered why. I reached out and cupped his cheek in my little hand, feeling the rough whisker on his jaw. His eyes widened for a moment, but he didn’t pull away. I fixed him with a hard look, determined and serious as I studied his concerned expression. Something was bothering him, something big, and he was struggling. I didn’t know what it was, or why, but like with most people who appeared upset or stressed, I felt an urge to help, in any way I could. The best I could do at this moment was to lean forward and give his whiskered cheek a little kiss.

His reaction caught me off-guard, because he reached out like a whip and hugged me tight, burying his face into my hair. He cupped the back of my head gently, his other arm crushing me close to his chest. “Gotta say, Sunshine, I’m a little jealous of your brother, right now...”

“Of Shay?” I furrowed my brow in confusion as he pressed me into him. I turned my head so that my nose and my mouth

were free from his coat and were touching the smooth skin on his neck instead.

“I am,” he laughed lightly, but it sounded like it was forced. “For the first time ever, I think.”

“Why?” I couldn’t mistake the ache in his voice.

“I’m jealous, because he is so damned lucky to have someone like you in his life. You’re a little ray of light, Mina. A ray of light in all of our dark, shitty lives...”

For the second time in a matter of minutes, Keenan managed to make me blush. I wrapped my arms around his neck and let him hold me for as long as he needed.

“I worry about you, Cutie,” he said, his voice hushed.

“Worried about me? Why?”

Keenan pulled back ever so slightly and peered over his shoulder at my mother, whose order was almost finished. Still hugging me, he lowered his mouth so that his whiskers tickled my face as his lips touched my ear. “I know things, Mina. I know things about your stepfather and your stepbrother... it makes me afraid for you.”

I felt my eyes widen in alarm. What the heck was he talking about? What things did he know? Why would he be worried?

“I’m afraid that your light will be snuffed out by them... and that would be a fucking shame. I want to be able to know that you can contact me if you need someone. Whether it’s just to talk, or if you need help, or-”

“Key...”

“No! I’m serious, Sunshine.” He was scaring me a little, but I listened with rapt attention as he spoke, hearing the determination in his voice. “I want to be able to contact you.”

“I-”

“Mina, you’re still young. Young and innocent and good. Do you remember what I told you about Shay?”

... *Your brother is not good*... I shivered at the memory.

“Your brother is headed down a dark road, Mina. He’s becoming a little... unhinged...” I thought about the other day when I saw that dark shadow cross over his face and how it had frightened me. Keenan went on, “I’m just worried about you, is all.”

“I’m okay. Shay would never hurt me.” I don’t know if I was trying to comfort him or myself.

“And I’m sure that’s true, but just in case, I would like a way for you to contact me. Even if it’s just you telling me everything is fine.”

“Like... pen pals?” I asked, smiling at the thought. Way back in the fourth grade our class had a pen pal program set up with another school across the city. The kids were rich and lived in the upper-class area of the city our town bordered, Ashland. The girl I had talked to had been really nice, and for a while, we sent letters back and forth and photos. She had been really pretty... biracial... her dad was a police officer, and her mum was an artist. But, like most pen pal relationships, it eventually fizzled out as we became more engrossed with other things in our lives and day-to-day activities. Having Keenan as a pen pal was a thrilling idea.

He pulled back a bit and flashed his beautiful, crooked smile at me. “Just like pen pals. You can tell me about your ballet, school, stuff at home, or even draw me some pictures. As long as I’m hearing from you, that’s all I’d like.”

“Well, I can’t draw,” I admitted. “All my animals look like blobs with stick legs, and the people look worse. But I will write,” I said eagerly. “And you have to write back.”

“I will,” he promised.

“What is your address?”

He shook his head. “Here’s the thing, Cutie, you can’t tell anyone about our notes, so no names or addresses.”

“Why?”

“Because your brother doesn’t like me. And because he doesn’t like me, your stepdad doesn’t, either. And your mum won’t understand,” His blue eyes glanced again over his

shoulder at my mother, who was watching a bag-boy pack up her purchases while she paid. Keenan gripped my shoulders and faced me again. “Do you understand? You cannot tell *anybody*. This will be our little secret. Just between you and me, okay? That will make it something special just for us two.”

I liked the sound of that. It was kind of like the secret Shay and I kept from everyone, about our slumber parties we had every night. But I liked the idea of this one better. So I grinned and nodded at him.

He tapped the tip of my nose with his finger, “Good girl.”

“How will I get the notes to you?”

“How about I hide them somewhere around your property?” he suggested. “Do you know a safe spot?”

I furrowed my brow as I thought it over. Was there a place we could hide our messages without Shay or anyone accidentally coming across them? Not the shed. James and Shay kept cleaning supplies and all kinds of weird looking tools and stuff in there. They used that place all the time. That was a big no, and anyways, I was forbidden to go in there. Also, the garage was off-limits as it was where their Harley Davidson’s and trucks were parked. Then it hit me. “My bedroom is on the main floor of my house at the back. Underneath the window, there’s a big boulder that I use when I want to sneak out.” I don’t add that I use it specifically for when Mum and James are fighting with each other in the main room and I just want to get away until things calm down. “How about we hide the notes under a rock or something beside it?”

Keenan’s face broke into a wide smile, “That will work. I’ll plant a note there beneath a rock on Christmas. Look for it then. But make sure *no one* sees you.”

“But you don’t know where I live-”

“Don’t worry about it, Mina. Christmas morning. *Alone*. Okay?”

“Okay,” I nodded, wondering how he would figure out where I live. I peered over his shoulder to see my mum gathering up her things, her eyes searching around the store, trying to find me. I looked back at him. “Merry Christmas, Keenan,” I whispered and leaned forward, lightly kissing his other cheek. I had a strange bubble of happiness in my belly from today. Seeing Keenan again had been unexpected, but wonderful. I’d almost forgotten how beautiful he was. I liked how he treated me. And now, we were going to be pen pals! Secret pen pals... the thought was exciting!

“Merry Christmas, Mina,” he murmured, and reached out to give my shoulder a final squeeze. “Whatever happens, don’t let anyone steal your light. Understand?” Keenan leaned forward and kissed the tip of my nose and flashed me his trademark, confident crooked smile. Suddenly, I found myself alone as he walked away like he was fleeing a crime scene. My head was spinning from my interaction with him. Why had he looked so conflicted? So tortured? Was Shay as bad as he made him out to be? Was he really concerned about my home life to the point that he was worried about me?

And when I’d kissed him and touched his cheek, I hadn’t expected his response to be so accepting and grateful of my actions. But it warmed my heart to know it had meant something to him. I hurried over to my mother just as she was moving over to the front doors to the store.

“There you are,” Mum said, distractedly. “Come on, help me get this stuff out to the car. We need to get home so I can get started on dinner.”

I helped carry several of the paper parcels, and followed her outside. I glanced around when we made it to the car, searching for Keenan, but it was like he had disappeared into thin air. Just as I was buckling myself in, I thought I saw a figure watching from behind the tinted windows of a charcoal grey SUV that was parked nearby. I don’t know why, but something made me watch it as my mother reversed our car and turned onto the street leading us out of town. The dark vehicle trailed us as we turned off onto Maple Drive, the private road that led to our home. When we slowed and turned



up the driveway, I peeked into the side mirror and watched as the SUV slowly crept by, continuing down the road.



I woke with a start when my bedroom door banged open and Shay barreled in, shouting, “Merry Christmas, Sweetness!” Next thing I knew, I was being lifted into the air and swung around in a dizzying circle. I giggled and when Shay finally stopped, my vision spun for a moment, but I grinned cheekily up at him.

“Merry Christmas!” I cried and hugged him hard, wondering why he hadn’t been in here with me. Last night, after we watched Christmas Vacation together as a family and went to bed, Shay had snuck in and crawled under my comforter with me as usual. It was a cold night, and my window was covered with a layer of frost. When I had shivered, he curled around me, my back to his front, and wrapped his arms around my waist, giving me a bear hug. With his added body heat, it didn’t take long before I drifted off.

“Ugh! Go take care of your morning breath so we can open presents!” He wrinkled his nose and set me on my feet, but he smirked as he said it, and I knew he was teasing.

“My breath doesn’t stink!” I pouted, hands on my hips.

“Could have fooled me!” He grinned and gave my braid a little tug.

“You should talk, coffee-breath!”

He chuckled and strolled out of the room.

As the realization that it was officially Christmas morning hit me, I bounced from my room to get ready. I loved Christmas! I liked how everyone stayed at home that day, and that we all seemed to get along this time of year... *most* of the time. I hurried into the washroom Shay and I shared, and brushed my teeth, washed up, and joined everyone in the family room. James was pouring himself a coffee while Shay

was searching through the fridge for something. Our Christmas tree was decked with homemade decorations, holly berries, and white lights, and it stood magnificently in the corner of the sitting area by the large, stone fireplace. I loved our tree. But the best part was the pile of presents stacked neatly beneath it. When I saw my mother, however, who was sitting silently on the couch, a warm hot drink in her hands, looking dazed and out of it, she held my full attention.

“Mummy? Merry Christmas,” I stepped up to her, worried and apprehensive as to what her reaction would be. She’d had a bad night last night and gotten into a big fight with James after the movie, about something to do with the club. By the time they’d screamed themselves hoarse, Mum had snatched the keys to her car and took off. James gave her an hour before he got into his truck and followed after, leaving Shay and I at home alone. I’d been worried that Christmas was ruined, but my stepbrother pulled me into his lap and read from ‘The Night Before Christmas’, sang a few carols with me, and then tucked me into bed. An hour later, I could hear James’ truck rumble down the driveway, then the stumbling and cursing as he dragged Mum inside and up the stairs. I heard her trip on the steps, laughing loudly, and about ten minutes later, I heard the faint sounds of her throwing up in the washroom. An hour after everyone had settled, Shay came in to stay with me.

Now, Mum’s glazed eyes moved to me and she reached to pull me close. For a long time, she held me, hugging tightly and rocking us back and forth while Shay and James cooked up some breakfast for everyone. I snuggled into my mother’s embrace and sat in her lap until we were called over to eat, which was scrambled eggs, pancakes, bacon, and some hash browns. When we were done, we all gathered by the fire and opened our gifts.

I was giddy as my family opened the presents I’d saved and bought for them. I got Mum a pretty mother-of-pearl jewelry box I’d spotted in an antique shop in town, and for James, a mug I had made myself at school in art class. I molded it, painted it, and after a round in the kiln, I picked it up and carefully wrapped it. He poured his coffee from the

mug he'd been using into the one I made especially for him, and pulled me in close for a hug and kissed my forehead.

When Shay opened the gift I got him, he inspected it closely, his brow furrowed. It was a set of gunmetal army looking dog tags. On one, I had his name, birthdate, and a set of longitude and latitude numbers inscribed. On the other, I had my name, birthday, and the same coordinates engraved.

“That location is the park where we have the BBQ each summer. I picked it because that’s where we first met,” I said excitedly, watching for his reaction and flashed a secret smile to James, who winked in return. He’d helped me figure out the coordinates and how to order the pieces.

Shay stared down at the dog tag that had my name on it. His face was expressionless and void for a moment, and I started to feel a wave of panic. He didn’t like them... maybe I should have left one blank so he could get a girlfriend’s information inscribed on it, rather than mine. He touched my name lightly with one finger before moving it over the numbers for the coordinates.

“I-I... if you don’t like it... I can exchange it for something else. Or I can return that one and replace it with a blank tag... that way you can choose whose name to put on it...” I stammered, nervously. But before I could say anything more, Shay reached out with one arm and pulled me into his lap where he sat on the floor, and crushed me to his chest. He didn’t say anything, but held me snugly and buried his face into my hair.

I let out a loud breath of relief. “So you like them?” I asked, laughing.

“I love ‘em, Sweetness.” He pressed a kiss to the crown of my head. “I’ll never take them off...” He pulled back so he could slip the chain around his neck and the tags rested over his heart. He held my face in his hands and his warm smile made any reservations I’d had vanish.

“Good!” I grinned. “I thought maybe for a moment you-”

“No other name I’d rather have close to my heart.”

Mum let out a snooty sort of scoff, but James cleared his throat and narrowed his eyes at her before smiling kindly at the two of us. “That was a great gift, Baby Girl.”

Shay spun me around so I was seated on the floor before him, my back to his chest, and my legs stretched out before myself and he plopped a present in my lap. “Your turn, precious.”

I was given some clothes from my mother, a new black leather book bag from James, and when I opened the little box from Shay, I squealed with excitement at the sight of the ruby stud earrings. I had gotten my ears pierced last year and was finally able to change them out. The ruby was my birthstone as my birthday was July 1st. I threw my arms around his neck and hugged him, thanking him again and again.

The rest of the day was spent in the living room while the turkey cooked in the oven, filling the house with its delicious aroma. I managed to persuade everyone to participate in several board games while we all listened to Christmas music. For a while, the house was filled with laughter and smiles again, and I prayed it would last.

It was later, when everyone was busy putting away their new gifts and setting up the kitchen for dinner, that I took the opportunity to sneak out of the house and hurry around to the back. It had been two days since I last saw Keenan, and though it was Christmas and he most likely had other obligations, I remembered how he had told me to check for his note. I didn't bother to zip up my jacket as I hurried. I was too eager to see if he had kept his promise. When I reached the boulder beneath my window, I studied the frost covered ground for a moment until I noticed a small, smooth, blueish-grey stone near the wall of the house that looked new. I peered over my shoulder, making sure no one was looking for me, and hunched down on my heels. When I lifted the rock, I found a folded up piece of paper sitting beneath it. Quickly, I grabbed it and stuck it in my pocket, hurrying back inside. It wasn't until later, while I lay in bed listening to Mum, James, and Shay move around the house, locking up for the night, that I unfolded the note to read.

*Hey there, Sunshine,*

*A very Merry Christmas to you. I hope you got spoiled rotten, because you deserve it, Cutie. I want you to write and tell me everything you got this year.*

*Thank you again for helping me shop the other day. I ended up buying my mother that pearl necklace you liked and she loved it. I couldn't take all the credit, though. I told her I had the help of a little Christmas Angel in picking it out. Is that too cheesy for you? Well, tough luck, kiddo. There's more where that came from.*

I giggled and kept reading.

*Enjoy the holidays and when you're back in school and dance classes, give it your all. You're destined for better things than this place, darling. I can see you living in the big city, dancing for a company as their prima ballerina. I know, I know... I haven't even seen you dance... but you have passion, Sunshine. I want to see you do great things.*

*Write me back, let me know how you're doing, alright? Leave your note under the rock, and I'll come check in a few days, okay?*

*From now on, when you write to me, call me by a cool nickname, like Stud Muffin, Hugglepuffer, or Captain Awesome... just in case this falls into the wrong hands.*

*Take care, Cutie.*

*XO*

I burst out laughing reading his stupid nickname recommendations. It seems like Keenan was a bit of a dork, and I kind of loved it. I quickly shoved my blanket over my mouth to muffle my sniggering. When I'd calmed down, I

folded up the note and buried it in the bottom of the messiest drawer at my desk. Later, I'd find a better hiding spot for my notes. I know he wanted me to be careful, and I would be. Most likely, he expected me to destroy them after... but the sentimental side of me couldn't bear to destroy his words. They made me feel giddy and special.

As I curled up in my bed again and turned off the lights, I lay in the dark with a ridiculous, huge grin on my face as I reread the note in my mind again and again, and made a promise to pick the stupidest nickname I could think of to address him as from now on...

# Chapter seven



*Present Day*

*Mina: Sixteen Years Old*

*June*

I WAS LYING in bed with every single light on in the house, feeling like I was a little kid again. Too afraid of the dark, and too afraid to sit in the main room alone in case whoever sent the attackers was going to send more to finish the job. Night had fallen about half an hour ago, I was alone in the house, and my blankets were fisted in my hands as I lay on my back, staring up at the wood panelled ceiling, my heart hammering in my chest and jumping at every little squeak and creak.

I bit my lip and fought the urge to cry. I was scared and pissed off. I was fucking furious with my stepfather and stepbrother. They *promised* me they wouldn't leave me alone after dark. And especially tonight, which just so happened to be my Junior Prom. Instead of getting dressed up and riding in a limo with my friends, I forced myself to find a way around the kitchen while balancing on one good leg, so I could make the guys some dinner... a Mexican chicken casserole and garlic toast. But as I sat at the kitchen table drumming my fingers over the light wooden surface, my green eyes flitted

from the clock over the stove to the gathering darkness out the windows, wondering where the hell they were.

The entire time I waited, my friends, Becca and Ashley, sent me endless selfies of themselves, wearing their pretty gowns, makeup professionally done, and photos of the gym all decked out for the event. It would have been so amazing to go, but with my head being loopy, my broken leg, and the feeling of paranoia constantly needling the back of my mind, there was no way I could handle it.

When it got to be so dark that I couldn't see beyond the soft glow from the porch light, I moved as quickly as I could around the house, ensuring all the locks were in place, and double checked the new security system to ensure it was still armed. It was almost nine when I called James. The phone rang and rang until it went to voicemail.

“Hey, it's Mina. Just wondering where you guys were. I'm guessing you had Church last minute, or something, and that's why you didn't bother to call or text to tell me that you'd be late...” I try to keep the snarkiness in my tone to a minimum, but I fail to hide the disappointment in my voice. “I made dinner for you guys, but I guess I'll just wrap it up and you can have it tomorrow. Please call me when you get a chance...” I hung up and immediately called Shay, knowing that he, at least, would answer. But it just rang until eventually, it went to voicemail, too. I didn't bother leaving a message for him.

I was hurt that he broke his promise so easily to me. Haven't I always been there for *him* when he needed *me*? Was it too much to ask for some support in return? What were they doing that was so important that they would break their promise to be home on time? Maybe, maybe Shawn gave them some sort of an assignment? What if there was an emergency Church meeting? *Maybe* there was another one of those parties going on at the club, and they were drunk and fucking around with the sweet-butts.

*Well, duh, Mina!* A nasty, bitchy voice at the back of my head sneered at me, *you're just Shay's little sister. His whiny, pathetic, broken little sister. Of course he'd rather party and fuck some sweet-butt than babysit you...*



My hands started shaking as I cleaned up the kitchen and packed the dinner I'd made into containers, desperately trying to distract my mind. When I finished, I limped on my crutches to the bathroom and paused, my irritation growing. Normally, I'd like to take a long, hot bubble bath to calm my nerves. But with my cast, there was now a whole process to bathing, and it was arduous. I could shower, as long as my leg was wrapped in a garbage bag with layers of tape at the top to keep the water out. But baths were completely out of the question. Grumbling to myself, I washed my face, brushed my teeth, and hobbled to my bedroom where I got into my loose fitted sweats that I could shimmy over my leg, a baggy t-shirt, and laid down.

Now, here I was, nine o'clock on a Saturday night, all my classmates were at Junior Prom, and I was alone in this house, paralyzed with fear. I thought I heard footsteps on the front porch at one point, and froze in my bed, as if the idea of me being absolutely still would keep an intruder from spotting me. *C'mon, Mina... don't be dumb.* I listened hard, wondering what the thumping had been, but when a gust of wind shook the house, causing it to creak and groan, my heart settled, however I was far from calm. James and Shay were gone... Mum was gone... I had no one.

And then... *Lightbulb!*

Moving faster than I had the past few days, I twisted as I leaned over the edge of the bed, and reached for the floorboard directly beneath me. My fingers sought the small hollow knot on one end, applied some pressure, and managed to slide it forward and up a bit so my fingers could seize the edges and lift it completely. I felt around the cool, empty space beneath the floor for just a few seconds before my fingers brushed over the small, metal device that I'd been searching for. I pulled out the burner cell and relaxed back in bed, turned it on, and quickly brought up my messages.

**Mina: You awake?**

I waited with baited breath. If anyone besides Shay could make me feel safe, *he* did. Not even a full minute passed before I got his reply.

**Captain Stud Muffin: Hey there. What are you up to? Studying for finals?**

**Mina: School ended last week. I finished my exams online since I was in the hospital.**

**Captain Stud Muffin: Congrats! So what... are you going into the eighth grade or something?**

I smirked. I knew he was teasing me, but I was willing to play along so I could have the excuse to be a snarky brat back to him, which was pretty typical between us. He feigned stupidity, and I called him out on it.

**Mina: I'll have you know, I'll be seventeen in a week, which would make me a senior in the fall. Dumbass...**

**Captain Stud Muffin: Thank fuck... or else I'd be in jail right now...**

I can't help but blush at that comment, knowing exactly what he was thinking about. That day he took me to the beach...

I feel my body warm at the memory, and an odd tingling sensation fills the pit of my lower belly. It happened a lot now; pretty much anytime I thought of him. But it's only gotten more intense after that day at the beach. It's like this weird craving that I can't seem to ignore.

**Captain Stud Muffin: So what are you doing then? Everything okay?**

I pressed my lips together as I read his words, squirming a little where I lay as I tried to ignore that deep yearning in my belly, and thought about what he said.

No, I wasn't okay. I was broken, lonely, and my control over my emotions was hanging on by a thread. Most days felt like I was just a few breaths away from snapping completely and coming undone as my memories and inner turmoil threatened to consume me.

**Mina: I'm alright. Just a little lonely. *A lie. Why did I lie?***

**Captain Stud Muffin: You're telling me, you messaged me on a Saturday night because you're lonely? Is no one with you right now?**

Shit. He knew I was lying. Why didn't I just tell him the truth?

*Because you're a burden, Mina, that nasty voice in my head sneered at me. Because every person that has loved you has either failed you, died, or left you. Why would he be any different? You're just going to embarrass yourself by confiding in him...*

**Mina: Yeah, I'm alone...**

**Captain Stud Muffin: What?? WHY? Where the fuck is your stepfather and stepbrother?**

**Mina: The club.**

**Captain Stud Muffin: And they left you home alone?**

**Mina: Yes. But they said they would be home before dark...**

I nervously waited for him to respond. I knew he was angry. When it came to James and Shay, the *Captain* had a quick fuse. In our old exchanges through the notes, if I told him something that they had done, like leaving me at home with Mum while she was in a drunken state so they could be at the club, or the time that Shay had nearly killed a boy who had held my hand, just to name two examples. His next note would be pages long of him ranting and raving, wishing me a better life. He'd always tell me not to let them destroy my light, whatever the heck that meant.

**Captain Stud Muffin: I don't like the idea of you being there alone, Mina. I'm fucking ready to go down to their clubhouse and start some shit...**

Horrified, I start to type a frantic message to him, begging him not to get involved. The last thing I want is for him to march into the clubhouse of the Celtic Beasts to try to confront James and Shay. He'd only get himself hurt, or worse, killed. He sent another message before I could respond.

**Captain Stud Muffin: But as much as I want to, I know it wouldn't resolve anything. I'm a realist. As confident as I am of my fighting skills, I realize I'd get my ass handed to me if I challenged an entire clubhouse on my own. And I'm heavily relying on my good looks to get far in life.**

I snigger at that and roll my eyes as another text comes in.

**Captain Stud Muffin: Want a bodyguard tonight?**

My breath catches in my throat. Is he seriously offering to come here? At once, my heart rate picks up, and my palms actually feel a little sweaty. I'm jittery, but in an excited sort of way. I absolutely do want him here. The thought of him being here, alone in my house with me, sends a thrill through my body that leaves goosebumps up and down my arms. Maybe we would have another moment like the one at the beach. I instantly feel warm and fuzzy inside at the memory.

*But...*

The new security system. I'd have to disarm it to let him in, and it would alert the app on Shay and James' phones. I won't even chance them getting the notification that I've disarmed the house, only to come home to find *him* here with me. I refuse to put him in a potentially dangerous situation just for my sake.

Regretfully, I write back.

**Mina: I want you to, I do. But there's no way I would risk you coming here, even if it would make me feel safer. I think Shay would kill you.**

I wince a little as I type those words in. *Shay*. There is absolutely no doubt in my mind he would kill him. Shay knows Captain, and he *hates* him. Absolute, irrefutable, pure, loathing. If he came home and found me in his enemy's company, he would pull out his knives and wouldn't hold back. I know it. I wouldn't be able to live with myself if they ended up killing one another because of my stupid ass.

**Captain Stud Muffin: I won't come in. I'll keep watch around the house so you can get some sleep. When those dickweeds get home, I'll make myself scarce. I don't want you there alone, Mina.**

I'm *so* tempted. Knowing that he would be prowling around the property, keeping an eye out for potential threats, actually *would* make me feel safer. I'm about to type back when the rumble of an approaching engine tells me that I'm no longer alone. For a moment, I feel an overwhelming sense of panic and fear, and I clutch the burner cell, staring at my bedroom door and ready to call Keenan if someone tries to break in. The engine cuts off and all goes silent for a minute. I listen, my heart pounding against my chest and feeling like I'm on the verge of actually fainting I'm so fucking scared, until I hear the security system disarm and the front door opens, followed by, "Mina, I'm back!"

Shay.

I breathe a loud, heavy sigh, feeling a strange mix of relief and disappointment.

**Mina: Shay just got in.**

**Captain Stud Muffin: Fuck, I still wanna kill them... but fine. I'm glad you aren't alone anymore, but if they pull this shit again, I want you to message me as soon as it gets dark. I don't want you there alone, not while the prick that arranged the attack is still out there.**

I shiver at his words and wholeheartedly agree. But I have to quickly say goodbye, knowing I need to get off the phone ASAP. If Shay stumbles in here and finds me with it, it's all over.

**Mina: I will. Promise. I gotta go. Thank you for talking to me.**

**Captain Stud Muffin: Anytime, love.**

My heart flutters at his goodbye, but I can't sit and savour the moment. I quickly shut the phone off and practically throw it under the floor beneath my bed and listen. I'm trying to control my breathing and that longing that's churning away inside me as I hear Shay move around the kitchen. He's probably getting something to eat, like the dish I'd made for tonight.

My heart flutters in my chest, my mind relaying the words from the final text over and over... *Anytime, love... Anytime, love... Anytime, love...*

I smile to myself, my belly jumping around, and I feel my cheeks flush. What if he *had* come over here? What if there was no alarm system and he came into my room as Shay usually did? I could picture him with his beautiful, glacier blue eyes, and his golden hair falling over his face, sitting at my bedside.

Knowing that Shay was busy out there and I was now safe in this house, but alone in my room, I gave in to the fantasy that I often replayed again and again in my mind.

*I'm in my room, as I am now, only I'm not wearing a stupid cast, nor was I in oversized sweats. I had on a cute tank top and sleep shorts, and my hair was washed and combed out in its usual long, blonde, rippled waves. He was here, and his glacier blue eyes would roam over my body before he'd reach out to cup my cheek. He would stare at me in that way he does that makes me feel like he can see my soul. My body shivered excitedly.*

My eyes close as I slide my fingers beneath my shirt and skim across my belly. I can see his slow sexy smirk in my

mind, and how the corner of his mouth curls up in his trademark crooked grin. My hand glides up my stomach until a fingertip grazes my left nipple, which instantly perks. I try to remember his beautiful scent... amber, musk, and the leather of his dark grey, Black Spades jacket. I palm my breast, giving it a squeeze, and my nipples both harden as that tingling feeling spreads between my legs. I'm vaguely aware of the clanging of dishes and the microwave running as Shay heats up his dinner, reassuring me that I'm safe to keep going with my reverie...

*I picture him tilting his head before slowly moving in, until his lips barely brush against mine. As if someone else is in control of my body, my hand moves away from my breast and slowly slides down my flat belly and over the small rise of my mound, until my fingers tentatively reach my clit.*

I can count on one hand how many times I've touched myself; I don't really know what I'm doing. But I'm a teenager, and curiosity has gotten the better of me before. I've looked up porn online, and now I do my best to remember what I'd watched those few times, and slowly start to swirl my fingers around. I lick my lips as I remember the feeling of his hands on me, how he embraced me so close, the feel of him...

*His mouth would brush against my own for just a moment before pressing to mine. His lips are soft. I'd feel the dark scruff on his face as it brushed against my skin. My fingers move a little faster now as my fantasy begins to take over. He grabs me roughly by my shoulders, teasing my tongue with his as he crushes me against himself. I sigh a little at the thought, and I can feel that rushing, tingling pulse a little more as I continue to play with my pussy. I feel a dampness between my thighs, and I use it to help lubricate my fingers as I swirl them around, experimenting as I explore myself. I picture his hand is the one touching me... his fingers slide down the inside of my sweatpants so he could feel me skin to skin. I bite my lower lip as I feel a blush creep onto my cheeks. My body feels warm, and I can feel myself getting closer to...*

Heavy footfalls thump down the hall and I immediately snap out of my daydream. My hand flies out from beneath my



sweats, and I quickly arrange myself so it looks like I'm just lounging in bed.

"Mina?" Shay's voice calls from the other side of my door, followed by the rap of his knuckles. Before I can say anything, he just walks in as though he has every right to, and spots me on the bed. "God, I'm so sorry, Sweetness!" He stomps into the room, clutching his hair as he relents. "Fucking Church went late. Bull wouldn't shut the fuck up! By the time you called, I was already on my way. Are you alright?"

I nod quickly, sitting like a deer in headlights, squirming in my spot on the bed. *Oh holy crap... Can he tell what I was just doing?* I can feel how flushed my cheeks are, and my lips are pressed tight together as I shift uncomfortably, feeling like I was *so close* to the cusp of something amazing... only to be denied. As I sit there, Shay continues to apologize, ranting and raving as he paces back and forth beside my bed, complaining about Shawn and his apparently "pointless" meeting, and how he had wanted to be home hours ago, but wasn't permitted to have his phone with him in Church.

And the whole time he's spouting off, I'm sitting on my bed, trying hard not to look as sheepish as I feel.

"Mina, do you forgive me?" Shay finally stops and kneels on the edge of the bed, reaching for me. I discreetly wipe my hand on the sheet beneath me and nod, only to be suddenly pulled into a rib-crushing hug.

As embarrassed as I am about almost getting caught masturbating by him, hearing that Shay *hadn't* forgotten about me, that he wasn't just partying it up in preference to hanging out at home, silenced all the doubts in my mind. Even more so when I feel his lips press against my hair again and again.

"Text me next time, ass!" I swat at his shoulder, relieved to put this moment behind us.

He chuckles and pulls back a bit to look down at me. "I will, I'm sorry. As soon as the meeting was over, I was just thinking about getting home to you right away."

“What about James?” I ask, remembering hearing only one motorbike pull in.

“Bull is sending him into Ashland with a few others for something. Just work. Don’t worry about them, though. Let’s hang out, hm? C’mon!” He lifts me out of bed, carrying me bridal style from my room, and back into the kitchen again. When I see the table, I feel a pang in my chest. He’d found the food I’d made, heated it up, and set the table for the two of us. I guess this is what he’d been doing while I was-

*Nooooope! Don’t think about it while he’s carrying you! Awkwaaaard!* I scold myself as Shay sets me down in a chair. When he takes the seat across from me, I notice the daisy he’d left by my plate. My heart immediately melts at the sight of it and I carefully stroke the white petals.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t get you a proper corsage,” he mutters as he starts shoveling food onto his plate, as though he hasn’t had anything to eat all day.

“I don’t give a crap about the corsage,” I tell him, surprised that he remembered my Junior Prom is tonight. “I just appreciate you being here.”

His eyes flash to me and I can see the apology in them.

I quickly cut him off before he starts grovelling again. “Don’t. It’s okay... *I’m* okay.” I shiver a little at the darkness beyond the windows. Anyone could be out there right now, watching us, unseen in the shadows. The fork I’m holding starts to rattle against my plate as my hand begins to shake.

“Hey, Mina... hey. Hey!” Shay reaches across the tabletop and gently grips my wrist, stopping my anxious worries before they can properly manifest. “It’s okay. The house is locked up and armed. I’m here. *No one* is going to fuck with you. Got it? I’ll kill anyone who’s stupid enough to try.”

I take a long, deep breath and hold it before I slowly exhale, and nod. He’s right. If anyone tried to get in here, it would be the last thing they ever did.

“Good. Now eat up. This is fucking *awesome*, by the way. How the hell did you manage?” He releases my wrist as he

digs into his meal again.

“Very carefully, and *very* slowly,” I say, still concentrating on my breathing.

Shay bursts out laughing. “Oh man, I’m kinda pissed I missed that. How many times did you biff it?”

I know he’s just teasing. He would never actually find the thought of me falling while I’m hurt like this funny. But I smile and play along anyways. “Maybe once or twice. You should have seen me when I spilled the salsa everywhere. Luckily, I was wearing one of *your* shirts, so I just used it to clean up.”

“Better not have been my Rolling Stones shirt.” He narrows his eyes at me, but I can see how the corner of his mouth is twitching slightly as he fights back a smile.

“Oops!” I grin and laugh.

He simply rolls his eyes and shakes his head. “What else have you been up to today?” he asks as he bends over his plate.

I bite the inside of my cheek, trying not to think about the new burner cell I’ve got hidden beneath my floorboards. “Been texting back and forth with Becca and Ashley. They’re at the dance.”

Shay glances at me, his eyes searching, while his jaw clenches a bit. I know if I wasn’t injured, I would be at prom alongside my friends, but Shay would likely have tagged along, lurking outside the gym until his patience wore thin. I can picture him storming into the school and hauling me out mid-dance. At least with missing tonight, I’m spared that humiliation.

“What else did you do?” he asks, changing the subject.

I shrug. “The usual. Watched YouTube, read a little, watched TV...” *ugh, my life was so boring right now.*

“Do you regret not being able to go to your little dance?”

I scoff. “It’s not a *little* dance. It’s Junior Prom. It’s like a right of passage!”

He rolls his eyes. “Oh please, no one gives a shit about Junior Prom.”

“I do! I mean, it would have been nice to get all dressed up... go dancing... just normal teen stuff, you know?” I don’t add the other thought in my head, that instead, I’m stuck at home, terrified of the dark like I’m just a little kid again.

But Shay knows. He always does. He stops eating and watches me as I pick at my own food, feeling my mood plummet significantly.

“You know,” he says slowly. “We could have our *own* prom, if you like?”

I raise my brows at him. “What? What are you talking about?”

The corners of his mouth lift just the tiniest fraction as he pulls out his phone and scrolls through it. He taps the screen, puts it on the table, then rises to his feet and moves around to me just as Ghost on the Shore by Lord Huron starts to play. Holding a hand out to me, the smallest of smiles on his lips, he murmurs, “May I have this dance?”

“Oh my God, you are *so* lame.” I laugh and shake my head. “And I can’t. My stupid leg-”

But before I can finish my thought, Shay swoops down, grips the small of my waist in his hands, and lifts me out of my chair like I weigh nothing.

“Shay!” I wrap my arms around his neck, terrified about being dropped on my stupid broken limb. Undeterred by my reaction, he wraps his arms around my waist, holding me against himself so that my feet are literally dangling in the air, and starts to sway us back and forth to the music, slowly turning on the spot. I’m nearly face-to-face with him, my nose at level with his collarbone. We’re so close, I can feel his breath on my forehead. Tentatively, I peek up at him, only to see him staring down at me with such unsettling intensity that it makes me blush.

“Shay...” I whisper, “... put me down.”

“Just enjoy this, Sweetness,” he tells me as he gradually revolves us on the spot.

*I'm just a man but I know that I'm damned*

*All the dead seem to know where I am*

*'Til it began on the night of my birth*

*We'll be done in a turn of the earth...*

Over the years, Shay and I have always been physically affectionate with each other, but this... this feels different. It leaves me feeling a little unsure, to the point where I can't even meet his eyes. So, I keep my focus on his throat, noticing how the pulse in his neck appears to be racing. Though I know he can hold me up with ease, I keep my arms around his neck, like I would if I was dancing with any boy. I concentrate on the song, telling myself not to be nervous, that there's nothing to read into. Shay is just being Shay, my protector.

*Die if I must let my bones turn to dust*

*I'm the Lord of the lake and I don't want to leave*

*All who sail off the coast ever more*

*Will remember the tale of the ghost on the shore...*

I could sense Shay moving his face closer to mine. I shift my focus over his shoulder, watching as the room gradually spins around us. His jaw touches my temple, pressing ever so slightly against it, and his muscled arms give my waist a little squeeze. I can't help it, dancing here with him, being held in his arms, the daisy by my plate... my arms around his neck squeeze a little in return as I hug him closer. Big, scary Shay *does* have a gentle side, one that no one gets to see. And that's because he saves it only for me, which makes me feel pretty damn special.

*I'm goin' away for a long time...*

*I'm goin' away for a long time...*

The song begins to slow and so does Shay's movements. I felt his chin move until his lips touch my temple with the softest brush of his lips. I immediately react as I always did with Shay. I tease him.

“Geez, you need a breath mint!”

His head snaps back, his brows raised. “Are you kidding me?”

“Nope. You just ate some garlic bread and that casserole. Trust me, it's bad.”

His mouth drops slightly. “Are you seriously saying this? When I'm doing probably the most romantic thing I've ever done in my life?”

His words clench at my heart. He was trying to be *romantic*? I thought he was just being... *Shay*. Overly-affectionate, super brother Shay. I have no idea what to think of that, so I laugh, but it comes out high and wavering, baring my discomfort to him. “And you could use a shave, too. Pretty sure you scratched up my face.”

His gaze narrows at that. “That's it! You're getting a spanking!” And I roll my eyes, not falling for it.

“Oh please, you would never hit an injured-”

But before I can finish, Shay moves us over to the couch and sits amongst the cushions.

“Shay!” I shout in surprise. “What are you-” I try to free myself from his arms, but he just flips me over so that I'm sprawled across his lap, my ass in the air. He's careful of my cast, making sure to set it on a pillow. Before I can move, his hand comes flying down and he *actually* spansks me! “*Shay!*” My voice cracks as I practically shriek at him. Instead of answering, he strikes me again, his hand smacking against the

soft material of my threadbare sweats, leaving a sting behind. Before I can start to struggle, his hand massages the area for a moment and catches me off guard. *Is he stopping?*

*Smack!*

*Nope.* Another sharp sting, but on my left butt-cheek this time. Wincing a little, I come back to my senses and reach back, managing to hit his shoulder. “Shay!” I hiss at him.

*Smack!* And his hand massages the area again. *Smack!* This time, after delivering the blow, his hand comes up the back of my thigh until his palm is pressing against my pussy.

*Holy shit!* I go completely still as the heel of his hand presses against me for a moment, shifting up and down ever so subtly before... *Smack!*

I cry out a little but, almost immediately, his fingers run over the area in lazy, idle circles before his palm slides back, pressing against my clit, applying a brief moment of pressure before sliding it away. My entire body shivers from the feeling and for some reason, I feel myself respond as I did in my bedroom not twenty minutes ago, when I was touching myself. *Oh my God...*

*Smack!* I gasp this time and close my eyes when his hand massages the area.

“Why am I punishing you, Mina?” he asks me in a deep rumble.

*Huh? What?* For a moment, I don’t even remember what the heck we’d been doing before this.

*Smack!*

*Uuuugh!* I grit my teeth at the same time I clench my thighs together. I can feel how damp my panties have become. *What in the ever loving...?*

Shay’s hand suddenly pulls at the waistline of my sweats and yanks them down, leaving me lying across his lap in my panties. My face goes beat-red at the thought of him seeing me like this, but before I can fully wrap my brain around the situation, I feel the tips of his fingers run up my sore backside,

making me quiver from the featherlight touch. “Tell me, Mina. Why am I punishing you?”

“Because-because...” I desperately try to remember. We were dancing, yes, and Shay was holding me, his lips grazing at my temple, and I...

*Smack!* I jolt forward from that one, and I wince. But at the same time, though I feel a sting of pain as his hand manages to smack some bare skin, I feel that familiar tingling ache start to spark to life again. He presses his other hand down between my shoulder blades, keeping me still.

“You were being a brat, isn’t that right?” he tells me.

“I-I...” For a moment, I brace myself, wondering if he’s going to slap me again, but instead, his fingers slide from the curve of my ass up along the cotton material of my panties, and I let out a little squeak of protest. No doubt that he can feel how damp they are. But as his fingers stroke over the material, I suck in a sharp breath as they skim over my clit again.

“Right, Mina?”

“R-right.”

“So I had to punish you, right?” he says as two of his fingers stroke a little harder against my pussy. I bite my lip, lost in a haze as I squirm on his lap, forgetting everything about... well, *everything*. All I know is that I want to experience that same feeling I got on the beach when...

*Smack!*

I gasp as his hand moves from slapping my backside, to the center, almost like he’s swiping it over my pussy. We’re both panting, me from my struggle, and him... well, I have *no* idea why he’s breathing so heavily. I shift a little in his lap, trying to move again, when something hard suddenly juts up into my stomach. I freeze, feeling the hard mass pushing up from Shay’s lap beneath his jeans and realize... *Oh my God!*

I’m so in shock from everything that I lay there like a damned statue. Something about him spanking me this way, and now rubbing the area, shifts the atmosphere to one that I don’t understand. This feels like *more* than him deciding to



punish me for being a smartass. As his hand starts to stroke along my damp panties, pressing against me a little harder than before, I find myself not giving a fuck in this moment. I press back into his hand as I reach forward and cling to one of the spare throw pillows. I grip the soft, velvety material and forget about everything but the feeling that's building inside me.

To feel *anything* that isn't pain, fear, or all-consuming anxiety, is a fucking blessing. And right now, Shay is giving me something that is numbing all that other shit. It feels good, and I trust that he won't actually hurt me, despite the sting I'm feeling on my ass.

"Right, Mina?" Shay goes on, but before I can answer, he presses his fingers against my clit and roughly rubs the area back and forth, back and forth, making me cry out from the unexpected assault. But really, it's the intense way my body responds to it. I'm soaked now, and his harder, quick caresses only seemed to have amped up that rising, tensing spring in my belly.

"R-right," I agree and bite into the pillow as he continues to move his hand, faster and harder against me.

"So you understand? If you misbehave in a way I don't like, you'll be punished. Say you understand."

"I-I understand!" I gasped into the material, my voice muffled.

"You want to be good. You don't want to cause any problems, do you?"

"N-nooo," I moan when he presses his fingers harder against that delicious spot. *Fuck! I'm so close!* I can feel myself rising on the edge of a precipice. I just need him to keep going. I can feel his hard-on digging into my stomach, but I'm so beyond caring about anything right now, besides focusing on what his hand is doing to me.

"Does that feel good, Mina?"

I can't speak. Instead, all I do is let out a soft, sort of agonized wail as my body starts to shake. Shay chuckles and his hand disappears, before he brings it down, striking

upwards on my ass, clipping my pussy in the process. *That* does it. I feel that amazing explosion deep inside my belly, followed by that rushing feeling, like hot electricity running through my veins as it runs up and down the length of my body. My elbows give out and I collapse against the pillow, crying out as the waves crash again and again while Shay continues rubbing that spot hard and fast, prolonging the sensation.

By the time I come down, Shay's movements slow until finally, he pulls his fingers away and carefully pulls my sweats back up.

For a few minutes, as I silently lay there, I'm overcome by mixed emotions. I'm so confused, I have no idea what to say. What just happened? But before I can really dwell on it, Shay shifts me up, turning me in his lap so that I'm facing him, and gets to his feet. Much like when we were dancing, he holds me against his chest, my eyes at level with his chin as he walks, my feet hanging in the air. He doesn't say a word as he carries me down the hall to my room, and I don't either. My heart is still racing in my chest, and because I'm crushed against him, I can feel that his is, too. He's still hard, and presses into my hip.

My arms are around his neck as I steady myself, but they really don't need to be. I know he'd never let me fall.

I avoid his gaze, suddenly overwhelmingly shy, but I can feel him watching me closely.

In my room, he sets me down on my bed and rolls me onto my stomach and yanks my sweats down again.

"Shay, what are you-"

"Just need to tend to the area, Sweetness," he says in a low rumble as he opens my bedside table drawer and pulls out my bottle of coconut body lotion. "This will help." I reach for it, but Shay ignores me. Instead, he squirts a healthy amount into his hands, and starts gently rubbing it onto my backside. I hiss a little from the small stinging, but he's right, the cool lotion is soothing as hell. I clutch my pillow and turn my face away, embarrassed to be so intimately touched by him.

As good as it feels, I'm still dazed and flustered by what just happened. *Why did he do that? Why did he like doing that? Why did I?* As my sanity comes back to me, I feel an overwhelming urge to cry, and soon several tears leak from the corners of my eyes.

Shay's hands leave me and I can hear him moving around my room and close the bedroom door. Seconds later, the bed shifts beside me and his arms wrap around me, rolling me towards him. He's in his boxer-briefs, ready for bed, and once he settles me against his side, Shay leans over, turns on my nightlight, and turns off the bedroom light.

He rests on his side, facing me, and cuddles me close, one hand running through my hair, the other rubbing my back, comforting me. I feel him press kisses to my temple before he murmurs, "I love you, Mina. You know that, right? I'm here for you. I'll always be here. I won't abandon you. I won't leave. I'll take care of you. I promise."

My lungs give out from his whispered vow, my breath shaky and uneven. I huddle against him, so grateful for it. I've lost almost everyone and everything I've ever cared about or wanted... it's all gone. But Shay, he's here. He's all I have. I don't know exactly what that was tonight, but he's here with me, and right now, that's all I need.



*The Past...*

*Mina: Twelve Years Old*

*June*

"I want my party at the club," I tell Mum over breakfast.

It's been an ongoing argument this last week... where are we going to celebrate my thirteenth birthday? James, Shay, and I all want it at the Beasts clubhouse, a place where I've spent more than half my childhood hanging out. Mum, however, has decided to be a major buzzkill and wants us to go to some fancy Italian restaurant in the city of Ashland,

which is half an hour away from our little town. I mean, the food there is good. But they don't take reservations, and any time we've gone in the past, we've had to wait over an hour to get a table.

"It's not appropriate, Mina," my mum has her back to me, but I can see how tense she is as she leans against the counter, drinking a huge cup of coffee. She had a late night last night and stumbled home in the early hours of the morning. When she finally emerged for breakfast, she looked like a train-wreck with her makeup smudged over her face and dark bags under her eyes. Her dark brown hair was a knotted mess and she stank of booze and cigarettes. Guess she hadn't looked in a mirror yet. I wanted to shove her into the shower and scrub the makeup, grime, and stink off of her so I could see the mother I'd grown up with, rather than this sad, pitiful, and tragic woman in front of me.

"I always have so much fun there," I say resentfully, hating how she was such a downer all the time. "Uncle Shawn and Uncle Marty said they'd get me a--"

"Those men are not your uncles!" Mum snapped and turned, her eyes practically blazing at me.

I sat back in my chair, troubled by her reaction. Since when did Mum hate Shawn and Marty? I mean, she was right, they weren't my uncles, but they were as good as. Every time I stopped by the clubhouse to drop off brownies or some other dessert I'd baked up for James and Shay, I always made sure I had enough for them, too. They showed me how to play foosball with the machine in their game room. Until I was ten, Uncle Marty, or Blade as some of the guys at the clubhouse called him, carried me around and showed up alongside my stepdad at all my ballet recitals. Shawn and his old lady, as he sometimes called her, Raya, showed up at my elementary school Christmas performances and my latest school play, which was a weird collaboration of Dr. Seuss stories. I played Thing 2. They were always around, and they always treated me like I was a member of the family. All the guys at the clubhouse, and their wives, treated me that way. Of *course* I wanted to spend my birthday with them. And because there

were so many of them, having it at the clubhouse just made sense.

“Em, it’s her birthday,” James finally spoke up on my behalf and I sighed with relief. I loved my mum, but in the past few years, she’s seriously become a mopey drag. She was so tense all the time, and I rarely saw her smile. She makes it to less than half of my dance recitals, and I can’t remember the last time she showed up at a parent/teacher conference. It was always James and Shay. “And as it’s her thirteenth birthday, I think it should be her choice where we spend it. She wants to do something at the clubhouse? I say she couldn’t have picked a better spot.”

“Do you really think any of her friends’ parents would allow their children to attend a birthday there?” Mum’s voice was like ice. The weird tone she used made it seem like she was sending James some sort of underlying message in her words. I looked back and forth between them, confused. My two closest friends, Becca and Ashley, had never been allowed to visit the clubhouse. James’ rules. For a brief moment, I wondered if he would let them just for my birthday. But if I had to choose, I’d rather spend the birthday with Shay, Mum, James, and the Beasts than with my only two friends. Becca and Ashley were great, but I often felt like a third wheel in our little group. I knew they were closer to each other than with me, and I tried not to feel resentful when I found out they’d hung out and not asked me to join them. So I didn’t feel too badly about the idea of not being allowed to invite them.

“She’ll have all of us,” Shay spoke up then and came around from the opposite side of the table. He grinned at me and ruffled my hair. “And the kids of the other members. They’re all around her age. She doesn’t need any of those losers from her school coming.”

“Shay!” I scrunched up my nose and smacked his hand away as he dug it deeper into my skull. He could be so annoying sometimes. “Don’t call them that!”

“I calls ‘em as I sees ‘em.” He shrugs, laughing at the look on my face and heads outside for a smoke.

“Maybe next time, look in the mirror before you call someone a loser!” I holler after him.

“Don’t need a mirror,” he calls over his shoulder, not even bothering to turn all the way. “I’ll just look at you.” The screen door slams shut behind him as he settles on one of the wicker chairs on the front porch. I silently seethe as I come up empty with a witty reply and end up just rolling my eyes behind his back. I’m terrible when it comes to winning arguments. I get too tongue-tied and my mind blanks out. Shay is a master when it comes to pushing my buttons and takes great pleasure in it.

But I still love my brother. Over the years, he’s stepped in where Mum has been failing. He dropped me off and picked me up from ballet class. He made sure supper was there for me, even if he had to go out for “club business”, or whatever it was, he always had something waiting in the fridge for me. He’s nineteen now, and though he spends a lot of time with James doing work for the clubhouse, he still makes sure we have our weekly movie and game nights every Friday. And sometimes, on the weekends, we’ll even make a trip out to the lake with his buddies, or go for a ride on his bike. How can I stay mad at him for anything when a nineteen year old man goes out of his way so much for his little stepsister?

“So, a BBQ at the clubhouse then?” James grinned wide and smacked his hands together, looking between Mum and me. I guess he convinced her while Shay and I had been bickering.

“Uncle Shawn said it was okay?” Ignoring my mother’s wince when I addressed him as my uncle again, despite her objection. He held the title of President of the Celtic Beasts, which meant he was in charge. He always had final say, especially on any events taking place in their large warehouse where they spent so much of their time. I liked it there. It was big, with a cozy lounge downstairs that had a great sound system, pool tables, a seating area and bar. But the second floor is my favourite. Their game room has a few pinball machines, dart boards, and some arcade shooter games (my favourite is Buck Hunter, and I like to challenge James the

most because I can usually kick his butt at it). The third floor and basement are off limits, though. Something my stepdad always reminds me of each time he brings me there. I've asked him why, but he just tells me it's for boring work stuff.

"He and Raya are so excited, they volunteered to take care of the cake." James winked at me and gave the crown of my head a kiss. "It will be great, Baby Girl. You're going to have an awesome birthday."

"Thank you, James!" I spun in my seat and wrapped my arms around his waist. He was such an amazing stepfather. Always so supportive and always had my back when I needed something.

He gave my head a pat. "Well, Emily? Want to give Raya a call and start planning the party for Saturday?"

When I looked her way, I wanted to roll my eyes at the look on her face... like she'd bitten into a sour lemon. Seriously, she needed to relax.

But I didn't want Mum to be so upset about this. This was supposed to be fun. "C'mon, Mum." I grin at her, hoping to bring her out of her bad mood. "Help me think of some party games, like seven minutes in heaven, and spin the bottle. Something along those lines," I said playfully and glanced up at James, knowing this would be like poking the bear, which always amused Mum and I. Sure enough, his cheeks reddened and his eyes narrowed at me.

"I don't fucking think so!" he growled.

"Language, please!" Mum snapped, but I could see the corners of her mouth twitching like she was fighting back a smile. I could usually get her to loosen up if I got James going, and teasing him had become a favourite pastime of mine. Seeing him get all protective papa bear was hilarious.

When I asked him when I could start dating, he nearly went cross-eyed with rage and shouted, "When you're walking with a cane and you have fifty cats hoarded inside your house!" Mum had laughed hard at that one. She knows I'm probably the least boy-crazy girl at my school. I never express

any interest in dating normally. Not when I daydream about a certain pen-pal most nights...

“I plan on kissing Billy’s son, Noah,” I go on. “He’s super cute and he’s been *really* friendly lately.”

“If I see Noah go anywhere near you on Saturday, Billy’s going to have to start planning his funeral...” James stomps over and reaches around my mum, resting his hand on her hip and begins stroking it affectionately, as he refills his coffee.

“Why are you going to kill Noah?” Shay walks in after tossing his cigarette stub into the can of water they leave outside. He stops beside me at the table and raises his dark brows at his dad.

“Apparently, Mina thinks he’s cute and he’s been sniffing around her...” James mutters darkly, and my mum watches Shay closely for his reaction.

At once, he tenses up just a bit beside me, and I freeze. Shay has become a little overbearing lately when it comes to boys, much to my frustration. James let me invite some friends over a few weeks ago so we could go fishing in the creek nearby, but when two of my guy friends, Matt and Liam, showed up, Shay decided to accompany us and literally stood five feet behind them at all times, arms crossed, his silver eyes narrowed on them. Safe to say that they’ll never come over again. They even keep their distance at school, now.

“Really?” Shay’s eyes flicker down to me and I bite the inside of my cheek nervously.

*Well, this backfired,* I think and lower my gaze, avoiding his stare. “It’s no big deal, Shay.”

For a long, nerve-wracking moment, no one says anything. I hold my breath until Shay wraps an arm around my head, yanks me against his side, and mutters, “Any guy touches you, I’ll be the one to kill them, not Dad.” Releasing me, he saunters off to his room.

I glare at his back and look to Mum, who shakes her head, looking heated.



“You know he’s just protective, Mina,” James says to me, his expression concerned. “Ever since that summer BBQ with the Spades-”

“I know, I know.” I hold up my hand, silencing him. I don’t need reminding. I think years had been taken off everyone’s life when I’d been found in the woods with Keenan Mathers... I hide the blush on my cheeks and turn away from my parents to hide my smile. “But he seriously needs to let me breathe a bit.”

“Don’t worry about it, Baby Girl. You’re going to have an awesome birthday. I promise.” James downs his coffee, gives my mum a long, lingering kiss under her jaw, grabs his leather jacket with the cool Celtic dragon on the back, and the keys to his bike. “Gotta meet Shawn for church. I’ll be back later.” He pats my head as he passes and heads outside. Moments later, I hear the rumble of his motorcycle as he starts it up and heads away to the clubhouse.



The field behind the clubhouse was decked out for my birthday. Mum and Raya had set up picnic tables, a dance floor, and a sound system to blast music into the area. All the kids of members who were my age hung out with me in the field, while the adults lingered on the back patio that ran along the length of the building. James was barbequing while Mum organized the long potluck tables that were piled with plates of food. Shay and his friends lingered near the tree-line on their own, though Shawn said some of them had to work. He made them organize the parking lot to manage all the cars and bikes, and some are stationed by the chain-link fence at the entrance. I asked him why, but he just said something about security. Why we need security, I have no idea, but it made me feel pretty darn special with all the fuss they were making over my birthday party.

Mum has decided to let loose today. She’s smiling and laughing and talking to some of the other women, the wives of the other members of the club. I feel hopeful as I watch her.

The usual scowl she had started to don was gone today, and her pretty smile was bright as she laughed with the others. With any luck, maybe whatever has been bothering her has resolved itself.

“Mina!” Kate, one of Shawn’s daughter’s, comes barreling up to me and hugs me tight. She’s a year older than I am, and she’s stunning. Her hair is a soft brown, with wide-set dark eyes that have the longest lashes I’ve ever seen. She’s also got a pair of boobs that I secretly covet. At thirteen, I’ve basically got a shelving unit. Mum says that she was a late bloomer, too, and that my dance also keeps my physique more toned. Which means I’ll probably have to wait a few years until I start looking like these beautiful women that I see at the club.

Kate grabs my hand and tugs me towards the table of other girls around our age, where a tray of food is waiting. I sit with them and we eye the boys that sit at another nearby, one of them being Noah. I glance his way, but it’s his older brother, Jordan, who is watching me with a confident smirk on his face, so I quickly look away as the other girls burst into a fit of giggles. Jordan has always been a bit of a creep, while Noah was always friendly and nice to me and the other girls. I meant what I said to James about finding Noah cute. He has copper hair and these dark eyes that reminded me of melted chocolate. He is two years older than me, and starting to show signs of muscle in his arms. He has always been quiet and more respectful than the other guys, and I guess I like the change. Most sons of members who are around my age, tend to be cocky douchebags, and usually poke fun at my flatter chest and more modest style of dress. But Noah doesn’t.

“... I don’t know. I always thought Cody was pretty hot,” Kate was saying.

I snap to attention, pulling my mind out of its weird trance. “What about Cody?”

The girls all burst into a fit of giggles again and glance over to where Shay and his friends were hanging out, all lounging at a table close to the trees, swigging back some beers and looking too cool for the rest of us with their tattoos and dark clothes. I’ve known Cody for as long as I’ve known

Shay. He's been like a brother figure to me, too, always messing up my hair and teasing me as of late. I made a face. "He's alright..." I mutter and take a large swallow of my lemonade.

"Are you kidding?" another girl, Morgan, says, flipping her auburn hair over her shoulder. "His dimples? His black hair? Swooon!" She pretends to fan herself and casts another flirtatious look over to the older boys, who aren't paying us even the smallest bit of attention.

"But he's dating some girl named Olivia," one of Kate's friends pointed out, pouting her lip a bit at that.

*Olivia?* I felt my heart pick up a little in my chest at the unpleasant memory. She, at least, had been somewhat nice, if not a little cowardly. If Cody was dating any of those girls, I was glad that it was her. From what I heard after, that girl, Dana, had to drop out of school and her family disappeared from town. I have no idea what Shay did to her, and he refused to tell me.

"Damn!" Kate looked to the guys again. "Well, I call dibs on Shay, then."

"Ew!" I laughed and scrunched up my nose at her. "My brother? Seriously?"

"What? He's sooo hot!" she said, defensively, grinning wide. "If he wasn't kinda scary, I would have said him first!"

"Shay's scary?" I ask, surprised. The other girls all looked at me like I had sprouted another head. "What?"

"You aren't scared of Shay?" Morgan asked, her brows high on her head.

"No, why would I be?"

"I would have thought, just with you living with him, that you would have seen what he gets up to... you know, for the club?"

I make a face. "What do you mean?"

Kate distracted herself with the straw in her fruit punch but murmured, "I was visiting my dad at the club a few weeks ago

and Shay was losing it.”

I frowned at that. “He was probably having a bad day, or something...” I say defensively, thinking about his tantrums. He’s always been one to lash out physically, and our furniture was usually the casualty of his angry fits.

“He was in dad’s office, but I could hear him all the way out in the lounge, and the stuff he was saying...” she trailed off.

“Don’t stop now. What? What did he say?” Morgan asked. The girls were all leaning in, whispering and eager for gossip.

“He was talking about some sort of fight with a member of the Faceless Ones...” Kate’s face was burning. She squirmed in her seat like she was sitting on a pinecone or something.

“The Faceless Ones? That gang in the city?” Morgan gasped.

She nodded. “Yeah, he said something about having to knife someone... that he... gave them a smile...”

I felt sick by her words. I’d heard rumours over the years about Shay’s violent outbursts. I mean, he sometimes told me about them, but now that I think about it, he really didn’t provide too many details. He never mentioned using his knives, though I know he carried at least one around with him everywhere. Maybe his weapons were used more for intimidation than actual use. Besides, he’d always gotten into fights. Hell, the first time I’d ever met him, he had just finished beating the crap out of four other guys. I know Keenan had mentioned to me that Shay had really hurt some people, but since then, he’s been good, I think? I told myself that this was all gossip and word of mouth was unreliable when it came to accounting actual facts.

“And there are countless stories about what he’s done to members of the Spades-” Kate went on.

“That isn’t relevant,” I cut in suddenly. “He was a teenager then, and there have been no problems for years.”

“How do you know?” Kate asked, sounding doubtful.

I look down at my plate and shrug. “I just do...” I mutter. God, they need to just drop this subject. I don’t want to talk about how my stepbrother might have gotten involved in a potentially fatal fight with one of the city’s major crime groups. I’m so freaking glad we live in a border town half an hour away. It feels like we’re in our own, peaceful bubble out here. But I *really* don’t want to discuss the Black Spades. To keep myself from thinking about a certain golden haired, blue eyed biker, I look up, searching for a distraction when I notice Noah and his friends casually rise to their feet and start heading our way. I nod in their direction and immediately, the girls in our group start flipping their hair and straightening their summer dresses. I cringe internally at the sight of them preening themselves. They look silly. I flat-out refuse to do the same and instead take a giant bite of my burger.

“Happy birthday, Mina.” Jordan grins at me and I fight the urge to shudder. He’s a few years older, eighteen or nineteen, I think. But he’s always been kinda pervy. I’ve caught him on several occasions trying to peek down girls’ shirts, mine included. Thankfully, in my case, there’s not much to see.

I’m caught with a mouthful of food and chew quickly, feeling my cheeks flush as everyone waits for me to respond. “Thanks, Jordan.” I smile politely at him and turn back to my plate. The boys all join us, squeezing in on the benches, or leaning against the edge of the table. Jordan makes himself comfortable beside me and I instantly move over a bit so we’re not touching. Noah parks himself across from me and helps himself to some of our food. He doesn’t even bother looking my way... not when Kate’s magnificent boobs are almost spilling out of her skimpy tank top.

“So what did you wish for, for your birthday?” Jordan gives my shoulder a nudge with his.

“I haven’t blown out the candles yet,” I tell him, not looking his way. My skin crawls when he presses his thigh against mine under the table. I’m in a jean skirt and a black Harley Davidson tank top that Shay had given me this morning, and when his hand brushes against the bare skin on

my thigh, I jump in my seat and get to my feet. “I’m going to grab a drink. Anyone want anything?”

Everyone shakes their heads. Noah ignores me completely, his dark eyes fixated on Kate. I guess I can’t be too upset. Again, cute, but it’s not like he had me swooning.

Climbing over the bench, I head towards the patio where the adults are laughing and joking around. The Guess Who is playing over the speakers and with the sun beaming down... a perfect summer day. I smile when I see my mother still hanging out with the other old ladies, and decide to leave her alone. I don’t want to accidentally ruin her good mood.

I bounce up the steps to where the coolers are sitting against the wall when a pair of thick arms like tree trunks pull me in and squeeze the hell out of me. I look up and see Uncle Marty grinning down at me, flashing one of his gold incisor teeth. I smile back at him as he sets me back on my feet. “Happy birthday, darlin’!” He pats my back and I swear, the air is knocked out of my lungs.

“Th-thanks!” I gasp, ignoring the adults as they laugh at my reaction. Before I can say anything else, he hands me a birthday card. When I open it, I squeal at the sight of two fifties and throw myself at him and hug him tight. “Thank you, Uncle Marty!”

He chuckles and gives me a gentler squeeze. “You’re welcome. Get yourself something nice, alright?”

“Here, Mina, I’ll put your money in my office until you leave.” James comes forward and I hand over the card with the bills inside. I can’t wait to go on a shopping trip.

A few of the other guys hand over their cards, too, and I can’t help but feel a little giddy as I think about what I can do with that money. Clothes? Books? A bit of both? While I search for a can of soda in the cooler, I start making a mental list of stores I want to check out. Maybe I’ll ask Shay to take me into the city... but then I remember the story about his altercation with the Faceless Ones and I shudder. Nope. Never mind. I’ll stick to town, thank you very much.

As the evening progresses, more of the adults seem to indulge in drinks, but they stay on the patio or by the woods, leaving the center space to us minors. As the sun sets, Aron, Shay's friend, changes the music from the oldies songs the club members like, to stuff my generation actually knows. The girls and I dance, and by dance, I mean I throw my arms in the air and jump around like crazy. I have zero finesse when it comes to Ariana Grande, Nicki Minaj, or Kendrick Lamar, and I like to leave ballet at the door when it comes to hip-hop and just let loose. So while the other girls all do their sexy little dances, I'm pretty sure I look like I belong in a mosh pit, but I don't care. Today is my birthday. I'm going to do what I want.

I look up and see Shay watching me from his hangout spot with his friends, a small smile on his face. I grin wide and wave to him. He laughs and waves back before taking a swig of his beer and turning to his friends. The song changes to something a little slower but I'm panting like crazy and I know my hair is probably a mess. I tuck it behind my ears and stumble from the rest of the girls and mosey over to the patio to grab a water or something to cool down. I slip by the adults who are laughing raucously, red-faced, and joking around. When I spot Mum, I frown when I see she's nursing a bottle of some sort of rich, amber looking liquid. Drinking. Great. The last thing I want on my birthday is my mother disappearing into the club washroom for the remainder of the night. Disappointment fills my gut like a sickness as I tear my eyes away, grab a bottle of water, and jump off the patio and make my way to the side of the warehouse. I just need to be alone for a minute. *Goddamn her.*

I lounge against the cool wall of the warehouse, sipping my water, watching everyone having a good time. I wanted this for my birthday... just a nice day, everyone smiling and laughing, no fighting or screaming. Mum and James seemed to fight a lot more frequently as of late. Being at home with them when they get into it creates a huge ball of anxiety in my chest. I don't know exactly what they fight about, but from what snippets I'd caught, it sounded like a lot of it was to do with the Celtic Beasts.

I don't get it.

I'll be honest. I don't know exactly what James or his club does. He told me once they delve into a few ventures in the border towns around Ashland. Something to do with sales. But when I tried to get more information out of him, he just said it was club business and not to worry about it.

Well, for today at least, I was hoping my mother and stepfather would just be normal and everyone could be happy. But seeing my mum clutch that bottle so tightly back there told me she was hanging on by a thread. My good mood started to dissipate and I sighed heavily, letting my head fall back against the concrete wall. Closing my eyes, I try to distract myself from my brooding thoughts and soon, my mind is filled with a vision that always brings me comfort... piercing blue eyes... that tousled, golden blond hair... that smile that gives me butterflies in my stomach...

“Hey, kiddo.”

My eyes snap open and for a moment, and I'm so grateful I'm standing in the shadows because Shay can't see me blushing here. He saunters over and leans back against the wall next to me, then wraps a thick arm around my shoulders, bringing me in for a hug. We relax into each other, watching the crowd in silence. I feel special that he's left his friends to check on me. He always does when he notices I'm drifting away, lost in my own thoughts.

“Anything you want to talk about?” he asks me after a few minutes of silence.

I shrug. “The usual stuff, you know?”

He nods, knowing exactly what I mean. My mum.

“I was hoping that, just for today, she would just let go and enjoy herself.” I bite my bottom lip, willing myself not to cry. “But she's drinking...”

“Hey,” Shay gives me a little shake. “Look at all these people here.” He gestures with his beer bottle to the crowd. “All of them are here for *you*.”

I smile weakly up at him and burrow into his side, so grateful for him.



“Well,” he goes on, “Except that Noah prick. He’s here for Kate’s rack.”

I smack Shay’s stomach as I giggle, but am surprised by how hard the muscle is, and I shake off my hand, wincing slightly. “Shut up!” I tell him.

“Wasn’t he the one you were planning on kissing tonight?” he teases and I instantly step away and cross my arms over my chest, glaring up at him.

“I had no plan on kissing anyone!” I say, trying to muster up as much dignity as I can. “He would only be so lucky.”

“That a girl!” he chuckles and gives the end of my braid an affectionate tug. “You don’t need to be worrying about kissing yet. You’re still young.” Even though it’s dark, I can feel his eyes on me, and for some reason, for the first time, I feel incredibly self-conscious of his gaze.

So I laugh lightly, cock a brow at him, and tease, “Oh yeah? When was your first kiss?”

He instantly turns away and shakes his head. “That’s not important...”

“*When*, Shay?”

He pauses for a second or two before he spills, “I was ten.”

“Ten!” I practically screech. “You big hypocrite!”

“And I was too young!” he goes on. “And it’s different for you. You’re a girl.”

Instantly, I give him a death glare. “And what the hell is *that* supposed to mean?”

He shrugs and leans back against the building. “You just need to be more careful, you know? I saw Jordan creeping on you. I was two seconds away from storming over and kicking his face in.” His tone instantly darkens and he spits on the ground. “Dirty motherfucker...”

“Shay!” I scold him. After hearing what the other girls said about him knifing someone, I’m suddenly nervous for Jordan. As much as he creeps me out, it’s not enough for me to want to

see him cut up by my big brother on my birthday. Good thing Jordan didn't push it too far or he'd be in pieces right now.

"It's true. You're thirteen! That fucker is almost nineteen. If I see him go near you again, Cody, Aron, Gavin, and I are taking him to the woods for a fucking talk."

I shiver at the threat in his words. It scares me. For a moment, I think I see what the other girls were talking about. Shay's hostile stare is fixed on Jordan, who is standing off to the side with some friends, eyeing the young girls dancing to the music. The thought, if looks could kill, runs through my head as I watch Shay study Jordan, looking like he was debating on dragging him out to the woods anyway.

I tug at the sleeve of his t-shirt and he slowly looks back to me. I know what he's thinking of. The BBQ all those years ago when that altercation happened in the woods with Keenan Mathers. It had scared the crap out of him. After that, Shay practically escorted me everywhere for almost a full year before he felt safe enough to back off a bit. Most likely, seeing Jordan getting too close to me had reminded him of that old confrontation.

I wrap my arms around his waist and rest my head against his chest, his dog tags pressing into my forehead. I hug him tightly and after a minute, I feel his own, muscled arms slowly rise up and embrace me back. We hug for a long time, slowly rocking side to side in the shadows, listening to the music in the distance. I feel his anger slip away as the tension leaves him and soon, he's the old Shay... the one I love so much. My best friend.

He releases a long sigh and lets me go before rubbing his face hard. "Sorry about that, Sweetness." When he looks down at me again, his rare smirk is back. "Well, I think it's just about that time..."

"What time?" I furrow my brows as he takes my hand and leads me from our hiding spot. We walk around the patio to where the crowd is gathered at one of the tables.

"There she is!" Uncle Shawn bellows out, pointing my way. I watch as the rest of them disperse a bit, and I see a two-

tiered ice blue cake, covered in candles and white sugar roses, waiting for me. I skip forward, still holding Shay's hand and everyone starts singing happy birthday. I smile as I look around at all the faces of those singing. All of those who were here to support me. I see James standing close by, beaming wide as the light from the candles casts a glow on his face in the semi-darkness. I try to spot Mum in the crowd, but she's nowhere to be seen.

Before I can feel my heart sink, Shay's hand gives mine a tight squeeze. I glance up at him and he nods to me. Mum might not be here right now, but all of these people are. I should consider myself lucky. I gaze down at the beautiful cake that Raya made for me. It's beautiful. She is one of those singing the loudest and she claps like crazy when I close my eyes and blow out the candles.

"What'd you wish for, darlin'?" Billy calls out from across the table.

"You idiot!" his wife, Margie, smacks the back of his head. "You don't ask what someone wishes for when they blow out candles! If she tells you, it won't come true."

I consider what she said. It's an old tradition, total BS, honestly. But just in case, I promise to keep my wish to myself. Maybe one day, I'll see *him* again...

## Chapter eight

*Present Day*

*Mina: Sixteen Years Old*

*June*

WHEN I WAKE up in the morning, I'm alone in my bed and from the kitchen, I can hear Shay and James talking to each other. Rubbing my eyes, I stretch out, grumbling to myself when my leg gives me a twinge of pain. Normally, I'd just hop out of bed, do some morning stretches (the ballerina in me would have insisted), brushed up, taken a shower, and would have then skipped out to the kitchen and joined my family for breakfast.

Now, however, I unsteadily shift myself, reach for my crutches, and slowly rise to my feet, careful as I focus to keep my balance. No morning stretches or workout. No shower. All I *can* do is dress myself, but I can't even wear real clothes with this damned cast. So I changed into a bra and light blue t-shirt, kept on my sweats, then hobbled out of my room and into the washroom, almost slamming the door behind myself. My mood was already sour and I've only been up for ten minutes. My ability to control my emotions was wearing thin. I try my best to swallow back my disappointment, my anger,

sadness, and grief... but I felt like I was getting close to cracking any day now. I don't want to lose it. If I do, I'll have to face the shit-show that my life has become, and I'm not ready for that. So I keep it bottled up, brush my teeth, spray and comb my hair with dry shampoo, and meander out to the kitchen area.

James is standing in the kitchenette, leaning against the counter with a cup of coffee in one hand and a cigarette in the other. His eyes are red and he hadn't shaved, so his greying whiskers were overgrown and messy. He looked like he hadn't slept at all last night.

"Morning, Baby Girl," he said, noticing me as I slowly made my way in.

"Mmmm," I mumble, trudging over to the fridge. Most days when I wake up, it takes me some time to shed the damaged feelings that cover me like a film. Every morning, it's the same thing. I open my eyes, and I'm immediately assaulted with all the dark, depressing thoughts that I fight back each day.

I open the fridge and grab the orange juice when Shay's voice practically purrs right into my ear, "Hey there, Sweetness."

Suddenly, my memories from last night come rushing back...

Me touching myself... Shay coming home for dinner... dancing with him... the *spanking!* As if I needed another reminder, my backside gives a little twinge of pain at the memory.

I close the fridge and peer over my shoulder to see Shay leaning against the support beam at my left side. His silver eyes are locked onto me, and I instantly feel my face heat. I feel like a jumpy little rabbit right now, facing off against a wolf. Overcome with shyness, I duck my head and grab a glass to pour my juice into, and move away, not ready to face all of this just yet.

“Mina,” James speaks up, sounding as tired as he looks. “I’m sorry about last night.”

“It’s okay,” I tell him as I sip my juice. “Shay said Uncle Shawn called for a last minute Church meeting, right?”

He nods, wearily sagging against the counter again. “Look, Baby Girl,” James’s voice is raspy as he speaks, as though he’s been shouting all night. “I want to throw you a birthday party next Saturday. We can have it at the club-”

“I really don’t know about having a party,” I say hesitantly. What I don’t tell him is that the *last* place I want to celebrate my birthday is at the Celtic Beasts Clubhouse. The last time I was there, well, let’s just say it was *not* something I could ever forget. I wish I could have burned my eyes out after that. But also, being in a crowd of people again, as lonely as I am, it makes me feel a little nervous. It’d be so easy for someone to slip through the mass, dressed as a biker, in order to get close to me so they can... *No, Mina! You’re being paranoid!*

James winces ever so slightly. “Everyone wants to see you.”

I tilt my head back as I stare up at the ceiling, my emotions becoming messy and entangled. He knows how put off I am about going there. I’ve been avoiding it for nearly four years now. But at the same time, I don’t want to make him feel bad about it. James is my only parental figure that I have left. “I know, I know! But... my stupid leg, I’m tired all the time, I...” my voice trails off as I try to think of more feasible excuses. I don’t mention that I’m semi-terrified of the idea of being in a huge group of people, where anyone can easily get to me...

I hear Shay tentatively step close and his arms encircle around my shoulders. He presses his face into the side of my neck and gives me a gentle squeeze. “It will be great, Sweetness. The place has been fully renovated. We’ll set up a seat of honor for you, so you don’t have to worry about walking around on your crutches. We’ll have a potluck. All you have to do is show up, sit, and eat.”

I peer over to the kitchenette and feel instant remorse at the sight of James, his expression heavy and hurting. Timidly, I

peer back at Shay, and instantly melt. They both had the puppy-dog look *down*. I tell myself that if it weren't for the Beasts, I might not be alive right now. They arrived before those men could take me to... whoever it was that sent them.

*If it weren't for them, you probably wouldn't have been attacked in the first place,* nasty bitch is back. But this time, I agree with her. *And your mum wouldn't be...* Fuck, no! No! Don't think about Mum! Don't think about what they did to her! What you saw...

Shay snaps me out of my tortured thoughts by giving my cheek a kiss before nuzzling my neck again. "Please, Mina? Let's have your birthday at the club. Let us spoil the shit out of you for your seventeenth. I'll stay with you all night. The guys and I. We'll play some pool, eat some food, and have a great time. What do you say?" Despite how confused I am about last night, I feel my worries subside. Any time Shay was like this with me, what with his hugs, his tenderness, and honest affection, it always turned me to mush. No one else has the ability to make me feel so wanted or cherished. Like last night, he always knows how to make me feel special and wanted. And here he was, doing it again for my birthday, promising to be there with me. I knew I couldn't refuse them.

"Okay then," I mumble and reach up, gripping one of his forearms that was draped across my chest. His face lights up and he gives my cheek another kiss. A smile tugs at my lips, glad that I made him happy. James perks up, too, looking genuinely pleased, and I immediately feel guilty for even pushing back at the idea of celebrating at their clubhouse.

"Great! Helen and Raya have been asking me for weeks to convince you to have the party there. Just with everything that happened..." James' voice trails off, his excited expression falls for just a second before he quickly composes himself, "... anyways, they're going to decorate the place and get the food together, so all you gotta do is show up, Baby Girl."

"Well, with this cement block on my leg, I can hardly help put up streamers and balloons and shit," I muttered, glaring down at my leg.

James chuckled. "It'll be great. You'll see."



The door to my room opens, the creak waking me.

It had been a nice day at home. James had fired up the barbeque, cooking us some burgers and hot dogs, while Shay and I played one of our old board games. All day I'd been watching him, trying to figure out where his thoughts were. He didn't mention or even hint or tease about last night. Whatever that had been, he seems to have moved on from it. And if he wasn't going to mention it, then I certainly wasn't.

I guess I was more of a hindrance than help after we had dinner, as I hobbled around the kitchen area, trying to help clean up one handed while attempting to balance on one foot. I shouldn't have had any problems with it, what with my ballet training, but the weight of it threw me off. So when I dropped a plate, the salt shaker, which exploded open, and accidentally crushed James' toe with the tip of my crutch, Shay picked me up and unceremoniously dumped me on the couch. I noticed that he made sure I landed on my side, and not on my tender ass, but that was the only sign that he even remembered the spanking and touching he'd done to me.

When they'd finished wiping everything down, we all relaxed in the sitting room, and even though it was a warm night, James lit the fire in the stone fireplace, and we ended up watching one of our old favourite movies, True Lies.

Last night, Shay had been so intimate, but today, he's back to how he was before. All day today, his touches were the same as they had been before. His hugs, kisses on my cheeks, or the way he'd carry me around, he was like the old Shay. So I allowed myself to easily fall back into our comfortable camaraderie as we joked with each other. If he wasn't going to talk about what had happened, then I wasn't going to. I was going to take any version of Shay I could right now, except "Manic" Shay, that is.



Now, I was lying in bed, the lights out, waiting for him to finish talking to James about club stuff before coming to join me. It was a given that he slept in here now, what with my constant nightmares and terrified, paranoid thoughts of shadowed figures coming to get me. I feigned sleep, watching him through my lashes as the soft, warm glow of my nightlight scarcely illuminated his features. Shay removed his shirt, revealing his cut stomach and tattooed arms. I heard the clank of his belt buckle as his pants hit the floor before he climbed into bed with me.

He rolled towards me and rested his head on his hand, leaning forward on his elbow. He watched me, his eyes shadowed, and his lips tight as he tilted his head to the side, as though studying me with a new sort of interest. I couldn't tell for sure in the low light, but his look seemed almost greedy and fervent. Slowly, he reached out until his fingers lightly touched my chin, and his thumb came up to brush over my bottom lip.

*Whoooooa...* any sign of drowsiness I'd been feeling before was now gone. My heart started to pound as his hand drifted down the side of my throat, his touch featherlight. He shifted a bit so that he could lean forward, partially over my figure, as I lay frozen in the bed. Gradually, he moved closer, until his nose was skimming along my jaw. My stomach skipped about and my palms were starting to sweat. *Holy crap, what was happening?* "Shay?" I whispered.

He didn't jolt away. Instead, he continued to run his fingers up and down the side of my throat, and lightly slid the tip of his nose to the spot just below my ear. My body shivered involuntarily, and I felt his lips curve up in a smile against my neck at my response.

"Shhh... it's okay, Sweetness..." he murmured, his breath warm against my skin.

"What are you doing?" my voice broke slightly, and I realized that I was trembling under his touch, whether from fear, from the memories of last night, or from uncertainty, I wasn't sure.

“I love you,” he breathed.

“I love you, too,” I said, laughing nervously, my voice so soft that I wasn’t quite sure he could hear me. Shay had told me he loved me hundreds of times over the years. I always responded with the same sentiment. But for some reason, as he whispered those words to me now, I could feel my blood racing in my veins, and felt suddenly light-headed. I didn’t realize how much I needed to hear someone say those words to me.

“No one loves you more than I do.” He turned his head so that he could look into my eyes, his nose barely touching mine. “You know that, right?”

I didn’t understand where this was going, but I nodded anyways, worried by the piercing look on his face. My anxiety was starting to spike, especially when he reached up and cupped my face with one of his rough hands. What did he want?

The corners of his mouth curled up in that rare, beautiful, familiar smile I liked so much, only this time, it felt a little ominous. “Last night... you understand why I did that to you?”

At the mention of the spanking, I blanched a little, shaking slightly as his hand shifted so that he was holding my chin in his fingers. “Yes,” I breathed, my voice lost.

“Because you were being smart with me.”

“Yes.”

“You want me around, don’t you?”

I nodded, though it was stilted by his hold.

“Then be a good girl, and I will. I’ll be right here, and I’ll keep you safe.” When he leaned forward, I knew he was going to kiss me, like he usually did on my cheek or forehead. But this time, his lips touched mine, lightly brushing over them, like a whisper. My eyes went wide and I froze, completely caught off-guard. The barely-there-kiss didn’t last for more than a few seconds before he pulled back, and wrapped his arms around me, hugging me against his chest.

I believed him. He *would* keep me safe. He would make sure no one ever hurt me again. That promise made my heart constrict and I clung to him as we settled in to sleep. As usual, when he is at my side, the nightmares stay away...



*The Past...*

*Mina: Thirteen Years Old*

*July*

It had only been a few days after my thirteenth birthday and here I was in an old, rundown theatre, which sat outside the east end of town. It had been abandoned years ago when the owner went bankrupt and no one had stepped forward to claim the property. Like the old railroad that ran along behind it, nature began to reclaim it, and soon, you could barely see the small, two story structure from the road. But I'd found it on one of those days that I had snuck out of my house to get away from all the bullshit. I ventured into town and let my feet guide me. I wandered down the old rail line, trying to balance on the metal bars without falling, when I noticed a large obstruction through the trees; a vine covered, shadowed heap that did not belong there. It was the theatre. The paint outside was peeling, the tiles on the roof cracked and broken, and all the windows were smashed out. The inside is no better. Every wall is covered with graffiti, and the old theatre style red leather seats split open, the stuffing falling to the floor and the air was musty and smelled like old wood, which I actually loved. The stage I practiced on was still good, though. The floor was solid, clear, and after I carefully inspected it, testing the boards with my weight, I found it to be sound. The windows on the upper floor of the theatre have all been smashed out, and golden rays of sunshine streamed in, illuminating the place with its ethereal light.

I threw myself into dance over the past few years, making it my number one passion. I practiced after school most days

at the little studio in town, but when I didn't have class, I started coming here, to this neglected building.

But, of course, I wasn't the only one who knew about this place.

I'm pretty sure every teenager from the high school came here on weekends to drink and hangout without the prying eyes of neighbors, parents, or cops. There were smashed bottles scattered on the floor around the seats, which were arranged in a semi-circle, ascending the steps so that the audience back in the day were looking down upon the stage. Whenever I arrived, if there was a mess left behind on the platform, I used the old janitorial broom I'd found in the back, and swept it clean before I started.

I'd only been using it for two weeks, but I liked it here.

I liked the seclusion and the fact that no one knew I was here. That was a bonus. Shay could drive the streets on his bike and he couldn't see me in here. Mum wouldn't show up drunk like she occasionally did at the studio that my teacher, Miss Riley, owned. James and the other club members wouldn't appear and scare off the other students and parents. No, this place was mine for a few hours each week, from when I finished school at three-thirty, to five-thirty, when I had to get home before my stupid six o'clock curfew.

I moved across the stage, going through my steps for what felt like the millionth time. I tried to make my movements as graceful as possible... *empty your mind... be formless, shapeless, like water... Thank you, Bruce Lee.*

I finished practicing my spins and stopped for a moment, breathing hard as I stood with my hands on my knees, catching my breath. My recitals were done for the year, but I had my summer all planned out. I was going to practice and practice until my toes bled, until my muscles felt like they were going to give out on me from fatigue. I wanted to be the best. I wanted to keep in top form. I believed, prayed, that one day I would become a ballerina... *the ballerina.* The star of the show.

I thought about those words I'd read so many years ago, and felt my heart constrict as warmth flooded me, a reaction I got every time I remembered what Keenan Mathers had written to me...

*I can see you living in the big city, dancing for a company as their prima ballerina. I know, I know... I haven't even seen you dance... but you have passion, Sunshine. I want to see you do great things.*

Well, I clung to those words. Ever since I'd read them, I'd decided that dance was going to be my ticket. My ride or die. If I practiced enough, if I pushed myself, then one day his words would come true. While every other kid my age is out enjoying their summer swimming, hanging out with each other at the mall, or getting as much time outside as possible... here I was, in this run-down, ancient theatre, practicing in the golden glow of the afternoon sun, working my butt off.

The song on my phone, Elastic Heart by Sia, was playing on repeat, and as it started over, I took my place at the far end of the stage, and started my steps again. I slid forward, holding myself up on my toes as I held myself up in an arabesque position. I fought the shaking in my leg, willing myself to be strong and to hold it for as long as possible, before I swirled across the stage in a series of small Jeté's. I braced myself, then attempted a grand Jeté, but I knew I didn't get enough air to perform the flexible stretch that was required to nail it. I stumbled forward, staggering a foot or two before I stopped, breathing hard as I bent over my knees again. Ugh! I was so frustrated with myself. I just couldn't get the height I needed.

"Holy crap, Sunshine."

I straightened up at the voice, like someone had shocked me with an electric current, and stared wide-eyed up the steps to see someone hidden in the shadows, high up in the rising seats. For a moment, I felt a trickle of fear wash over me when I spotted the glowing cheery light of the cigarette. But as the dark figure brought it to his mouth, I caught a glimpse of his full lips and square jawline and my face broke into a giant grin when I realized who it was.

“When you told me about your dancing, I was picturing you in a tutu, skipping around the stage with too much makeup on, and maybe spinning in circles ‘til you fell on your ass,” he chuckled, “But this?” He took several, slow steps down towards the stage, stopping when a ray of sunlight finally fell over him. Keenan Mathers stared down at me as the sun illuminated his golden hair, his icy blue eyes sparkling with mischief, and the corner of his mouth lifted that beautiful smirk I remembered so well. “This is some hard-core dance shit.”

I couldn’t help the bubble of excitement that exploded inside of me. Seeing him standing there, I thought I was going to pass out for a second, until I realized I was holding my breath, and I gasped. “Key!”

I jumped off the stage and ran up the steps to him. Though it had been some time since I last saw him, having the close correspondence since then, made it feel as though it was just yesterday. I threw my arms around his stomach and hugged him tight. He let out a little, “Oof!” and stumbled back slightly, before he chuckled and gave me a small hug in return. “Hey there, Cutie.”

“What are you doing here?” I asked him, excitedly as I pulled back to look up into his face. Wow, he was *so hot*. What girl could look into those blue eyes and not swoon? For the first time ever, I felt overcome with shyness when I met his intense gaze straight on.

“I just so happened to spot you walking along the old rail line out of town. I was intrigued, so I decided to follow you and make sure you didn’t get carried off by a bear or something.” He winked at me and brought his cigarette back to his mouth again. I watched as he sucked on the end and then slowly exhaled, letting the smoke creep out from between his lips. My heart fluttered as I watched, especially when he didn’t take his eyes off me.

I released him and giggled nervously. “So you were watching me?” I asked, tucking a strand of hair that had fallen loose from my bun behind my ear.

He nodded. "I've heard you talk about dancing for years, Sunshine. I wanted to check it out for myself, once I realized what you were up to."

I shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot, embarrassed that he'd witnessed my fumble. "I have a long way to go, still. I can't seem to jump high enough... I suck," I laugh, but even I can hear how fake it sounds.

Keenan's brow furrowed and his smile disappeared. "Good things take time and practice. The fact that you're here, in this shitty, stinking-

"It doesn't smell!" I protest.

"Stinking, condemned barn-"

"It's actually a theatre, dummy." I cock a brow at him and grin.

"Says so much about you. You're going to get there one day, Mina." He reaches up and squeezes my shoulders, his gentle smile much less mischievous now. Instead, it holds warmth, sincerity, and credence. He fully believes in me. I can see it in that smile and it makes my heart soar.

"Now, get your butt back on that stage and try again."

"What are you going to do?"

He shrugs off his cut and leads the way down the steps to the front row. He curls his upper lip in distaste as he eyes the old, crinkled and torn leather seats, before cautiously placing his jacket over the back. "I'm going to yell insults and words of encouragement, just to keep you on your toes at all times, pardon the pun." He makes a face as he sits in the seat and the thing lets out a long, groaning creak that has both of us tensing up, waiting to see if the thing will crumble apart. It doesn't. "And, I'm going to pray to God that I don't catch some sort of rabid disease just breathing the air in this shithole."

"You're-you're going to stay?"

"Sure, why not?" He kicks his legs forward, crossing them at the ankles and places his hands behind his head, looking remarkably like a beautiful, lazy prince.

“It’s probably going to be boring. I’m just practicing.”

“I don’t mind.”

“But you don’t like ballet.”

“I like *you*, sunshine. And I’m assigning myself as your personal cheerleader.” He smirks at me. “Unless you don’t want to see me?”

“No!” I say much too fast and turn red. I quickly move away so he can’t see my face. “It’s nice seeing you again. I just don’t want you to go out of your way to-”

“Mina. No offense, but shut up. Don’t even finish that sentence.” I glance back at him to see he’s lost his playful grin, his face absolutely serious. “I’m not leaving you to dance here for a crackhead or some teenage wannabe gangster to find while looking for someplace to shoot up. You’re a vulnerable, thirteen year old girl, *alone*, easy prey.” His expression becomes incredibly stony and he narrows his eyes at me, “I won’t let you be alone here.”

“Really, Key... I-”

“And my hand has been cramping up writing those notes to you. I’d much rather talk in person. This makes things easier, yeah?” He lounges back even more in the seat, as though to cement the fact that he’s not going anywhere.

“Well, if you’re sure?” I won’t lie... having him here with me fills my stomach with butterflies. I’ve been lonely lately, and having Keenan in my life feels like I have a secret, special guardian, or bodyguard who is always silently standing in the wings, watching over me, a safety line extended should I ever feel that I need it. To go from passing notes to actually spending time in person with him is a step up that I wanted so badly. But, he’s nineteen. Surely, he’d rather be elsewhere?

“I’m one hundred percent positive, Cutie. Now, get your butt on that stage and start rehearsing. If you stumble like that again, I’ll make you run laps up and down these stairs ten times.”

“I’m training for ballet, you nutjob,” I scorn at him as I bite the inside of my cheek, hiding my smile. “Not football.” I



think about the senior boys at the high school who run into the stands to improve their cardio.

“Either way, chop chop, Sunshine!” he tells me, loudly clapping his hands together, the sound echoing in the space.

Rolling my eyes, I turn away and take my first position. If he thinks he can make me do *anything*, he’s crazy.



From downstairs, there was an enormous crash, followed by the sound of something that sounded like glass shattering. I pulled free from my mum’s arms and ran out into the hall that overlooked the floor below. Shay had flipped the kitchen table over, the veins in his neck popping and his face red, and turned to scream back in his father’s face. The vase of flowers that had been the centerpiece was in pieces, the daisies littering the floor, and the chairs were thrown back. He and James had been at it for nearly twenty minutes now while Mum and I had been holed up in her room on the second floor. As the men continue to shout at each other, I retreat back to the bedroom and sit on the edge of the mattress where my mother was laying down, my heart thundering and my hands shaking. It’d been an awful morning.

Mum had walked into my room, exactly a week after my birthday, wanting to wake me up so we could go on a quick trip into Ashland to visit my only living grandparent, my dad’s mother. We’d talked about it last night, and I was excited to have an excuse to see Gran. I was also hoping to maybe take a quick trip to the mall downtown and spend some of my birthday money. But I’d forgotten to set my alarm, so she had come in to check on me, froze, and started screaming. I snapped out of my deep sleep, and had almost fallen out of bed, but Shay’s large body at my side blocked me.

“What are you doing in here?!” my mother had screeched at the top of her lungs. “Why are you in her bed?”

“Emily, I-”

“What the hell is going on?” James’ heavy footfalls rumbled down the hallway until he appeared over my mother’s shoulder. At the sight of Shay sitting up in my bed, wearing his cotton sleep pants and an oversized Van Halen t-shirt, James’ face went rigid and his dark eyes flashed. “What’s going on, son?”

I thought he would scream like my mother, but instead, he had sounded eerily calm.

I immediately started panicking.

Shay had always told me not to say that we shared a bed every night, explaining that our parents would be angry, and he wasn’t kidding. Mum was angrier than I have ever seen her, and James looked like he was about to strangle us.

“Nothing is going on,” Shay said, getting to his feet, “Once in a while, Mina and I have a little sleepover. It’s no big deal-”

“It *is* a big deal, Shay. Especially now that Mina is a teenager.” James says, stone-faced.

My mum, meanwhile, had run over to me the moment Shay got up, and yanked my arm none too gently. I fell to the floor as she tried to drag me from the room. When I’d cried out in pain, Shay had reached for me to help me up, but she practically snarled like a pissed off housecat. “Back off!” she snapped at him. “I know your game! I’m on to you!”

“Emily, it’s not like that, I swear-” Shay held his hands up defensively and stepped back, but his silver eyes were on me as I struggled to stand. I stumbled again when my mother gave my arm another pull. I wanted to tell her to stop manhandling me like this all the time, but my hands were shaking and I felt like I couldn’t get enough air. My voice caught in my throat. I’ve never been a kid who got into trouble before. To have both James and my mother stare at Shay and I this way made me feel sick to my stomach and that bubble of anxiety in my chest was growing and growing, cutting off oxygen.

From there, Mum hauled me upstairs to her room while James and Shay talked it out. Or rather, shouted it out. I caught

bits and pieces every once in a while when their volume reached a thundering peak.

“I would never cross that line!” Shay screamed.

“I don’t give a shit! It stops now!”

“It’s the only way I can sleep at night, Dad!”

“Again, I don’t care, Shay! Man the fuck up!”

“Does the shit we do not fuck with your head? Do you seriously sleep like a baby at night after a cleanup?” Shay’s voice breaks and I immediately want to run downstairs and hug him, but my mum has me practically held hostage in her room, trying to interrogate me about what she thinks has been going on. Honestly, I gag as I hold back bile at her insinuation.

“We all have shit to deal with, son. That’s part of our lifestyle-”

“Well, the shit I deal with and what you do are different, Dad. We have different roles in the club! You were never an enforcer.”

“I’ve done shit, Shay. We all have-”

“Not what *I* do!”

“You do it willingly enough.”

“That’s true, because I’m fucking loyal! Loyal to you and to the club! I’ll get my fucking hands dirty because you need me to, and most of the time, I can stomach it. But that doesn’t mean that at the end of the day I can always shrug it off! Not after some of the shit I’ve done! Not after what I’ve seen...” he’s quiet for a minute before he says, “... I’m-I’m starting to scare myself, Dad...”

“With what? No one asks you to take it as far as you do... just, reign it back a bit. You don’t need all the bloody flair along with-”

“No... *no!* You don’t understand!”

“*What* don’t I understand, Shay?” James was seething, and the desperation in his voice was evident, even from upstairs.

Shay's voice dropped and I strained to hear, even going as far as to shush my mum so I could make out his tortured words. "... *like it*," was all I caught.

Their voices drop even lower after that and now I can't hear anything at all. Meanwhile, Mum is *still* fuming about the whole situation.

"Are you mad at me?" I whisper to her.

"No!" She looks appalled that I even thought such a thing. "Why would I be?"

"Because of-"

"It was not your fault. Shay should not have taken advantage."

"We were just sleeping, Mum. He never touched me or-"

"Mina, stop. I don't want to hear it anymore." She closes her eyes and takes a few deep breaths. I bite the inside of my cheek and watch her nervously. She looks like she's about to lose it. If she does, that means she'll be taking her car and peeling down the drive to the nearest pub, which happens to be the clubhouse. So much for our trip to see Gran.

"I'm sorry, Mum." I wrap my arms around her and snuggle in, hoping that I can help keep her demons at bay. *Please... please, don't give in...* I think in my head. *Don't give in, Mum. Please.*

She shudders a little bit, her exhale long and shaky, but wraps her arms around me and kisses the top of my head. I can tell she's crying by her breathing, fast and uneven.

In an attempt to distract her, I sit up and flash a huge grin. "Hey, let's pretty up, go to the city, and see Gran. Maybe we can do a little shopping after."

Mum, however, stares off at the wall opposite the bed, her look vacant and faraway.

I reach out and give her shoulder a shake. "Hey... hey, Mum? Mum? C'mon! Let's get ready and go and have an awesome day together!"

She says nothing for a minute, but from the look in her eyes, I know I've lost her today. We aren't going anywhere.

Sighing heavily, I lower my head into my hands, gripping my hair tightly. The wave of disappointment that seeps through me feels like my blood is on fire. *Here we go again.* Mum has fallen into another pit of despair, only this time, it's my fault. The guilt is suffocating me.

A light knock on the door snaps me out of my wallowing and I look up to see James peering into the room. He sees the look on my mum's face and tilts his head, silently gesturing me over to him. I give Mum one last regretful glance before I follow James out and downstairs. Shay is gone.

We both right the table again, and I grab the broom to sweep up the broken pieces of the vase and daisies that scatter the floor.

"He won't be sleeping in your bed anymore, Mina," James says after a few minutes of awkward silence.

I freeze for a moment before I continue sweeping. I have no idea what to say. Is he about to yell at me, too? I brace myself, avoiding his gaze.

"I didn't realize this was going on..."

"We didn't do anything!" I say suddenly, wanting to make it perfectly clear and protect my stepbrother from our parent's judgement and wrath. "It was just..." my voice trails off as I struggle to find the words to explain exactly *why* we've been doing this for so long.

He holds up a hand, and I stop. "I know, Mina. I believe you. But I don't think it should continue. You're only thirteen years old. No matter how innocent it seemed..." He stops and shakes his head.

If I'm being honest, I'm not too upset about having my bed back to myself again. I never needed a bedmate. The only reason I was okay with it was because Shay said it helped him sleep. Shay is probably the most important person in my life... of course I wanted to help him. He always does so much for me. But after Mum's questioning and the look in James' eyes,

I feel my face redden with embarrassment and shame. I feel icky.

“Where’s Shay?” I ask quietly as I toss the broken pieces of the vase into the trash. It’s beyond repair. I could try to glue it back together, but the shards are so delicate and splintered, it would most likely just crumble apart again.

“He went for a walk.” James glances up to the second floor balcony above. “Your mother?”

I sigh and shake my head. “Trip is cancelled today. I messed up.”

“You didn’t mess up, Mina. You didn’t know any better. It’s not your fault.”

“It’s not Shay’s, either,” I say firmly.

James bites the inside of his cheek like he wants to disagree with me, but instead, he chooses not to say anything. “I’m going to go check on your mum. Get yourself some breakfast, alright?” He heads up the stairs, looking like he’s carrying a heavy weight on his shoulders. I imagine dealing with my mum’s mood swings are becoming a chore for him, but none of us seem to know how to fix it.

As soon as he disappears, I rush to the bathroom, wash my face, brush my teeth and hair, and then get dressed in a pair of jean shorts and a band t-shirt. Shoving my feet into a pair of sneakers, I silently step outside, then run into the trees, knowing exactly where Shay wandered off to. We have a place in the woods that surrounds our cabin-style home, right by the creek, enclosed by thick underbrush and draping branches. It’s where we go when we want to get away from the fighting in the house, or as a way to silently let the other know that we need each other. If he’s not there, then he’ll be off dealing with his anger alone.

But as I step onto the uneven ground by the creek and peer over to the hidden spot, I see his dark, messy hair amongst the leaves. I head over, pushing the branches out of my way until I see the small clearing where he’s sitting, his arms resting on his bent knees, his silver eyes watching the water lazily drift

by. For some reason, he seems younger, like when I first met him, and not the nineteen year old man that he is now. He looks lost and vulnerable and afraid. I take a seat next to him, crossing my legs, leaning back against the thick oak behind us, and watch the creek, too.

After a few minutes of silence, I whisper, “Are you okay?”

Shay is contemplative for a minute, as if he’s seriously wondering the same thing. Finally, he lets out a long, heavy breath and peers down at me, his eyes sad. “Honestly? Not really.”

My heart breaks at the dejected tone of his voice. “What can I do?” I ask.

He hesitates for a moment, and the next thing I know, he’s lying on the mossy ground next to me, his head in my lap and his arms wrapped tightly around my waist, holding me close. “You’re the only good thing in my life, you know that?” His voice is so quiet, I almost don’t hear him over the sound of the rushing water.

I’ve done this with Shay plenty of times, and I know to stay quiet while he talks himself out. So I play with the long strands of his dark hair and keep my eyes focused on the creek ahead.

“You’re the only thing that makes me truly happy...” He murmurs into my lap. “... the only thing that gives me a sense of calm. The only light in my dark mind,” he lets out a shuddering breath. “I don’t know what I’d do without you, Sweetness.”

I feel something in the pit of my stomach, like a sense of overwhelming responsibility that I am not ready for. Shay has always made it clear how much he loves me, that he’d do anything for me. But when he speaks like this, it scares me a little. I guess I was wrong when I told the girls at my birthday that I wasn’t scared of Shay. I am, a little. But in the end, he is the best stepbrother a girl could ask for. I don’t want to let him down. He’s asked for nothing from me. Just my presence. It’s such an easy, simple request. How could I deny him that? If I

did, would he really lose it? Now *that* scared me. A Shay that was completely out of control was dangerous to everyone.

I wrapped my arms over his shoulders and bowed my head over his, giving him some semblance of a hug. “I’m not going anywhere, Shay,” I whisper to him. “You always have me, okay?”

His response is to press a kiss to my stomach and continue hugging me. For a long time, we sit there, holding each other in silence, and a confusing surge of emotions fill me to the point where it feels like I’m drowning.

An hour passes by the time Shay pulls away. My butt is numb from sitting for so long in one spot, but I accept his hand when he helps me to my feet. We head back in silence to the house, where he veers away to the back garage without a word or backward glance to me, and I know he’s going to head to the clubhouse. Hopefully, his friends are there and they can cheer him up. I watch as he roars by on his Harley, disappearing around the bend of the driveway, leaving me alone.

I don’t know what to do about Shay.

“There is no fucking way I am signing that form!” Mum’s scream pierces through the air, making me jump about a foot off the ground. “If something should ever happen to me, she is going to Patrick’s mother!”

I look toward the house when I hear a loud smack. *What the hell was going on now?* I quietly head over and climb up the porch steps, but instead of going inside, I sit on the boards beneath the kitchen window, hiding from sight, and listen.

“Mina is like a daughter to me,” James growled, “and she means the world to Shay. Would you really send her off to that old woman who knows nothing about her? We know her better than anyone!”

“She doesn’t belong here! She doesn’t belong to you! Nor your son!”

“She’s our family!” he argued. “We’ve always taken care of her. If something were to happen to you, it would make



sense that she would stay with us. Em, would you really tear her away from that comfort?”

“I don’t give a shit, James! I won’t sign-”

“You will!” His voice rose and I instantly tensed. James rarely got angry, but when he did, he was a scary bastard. Only my mum, and once in a while Shay, seemed to be able to push him to a boiling point.

“No!”

“Emily! The way you’ve been acting out, and with your drinking escalating, you’re signing your own death warrant. Do you really want to leave your little girl to an eighty year old woman who could croak it at any time? What will happen to her? Foster care?”

“Any of that would be better than spending her life under your control!”

Another hard smack. I felt tears spring to my eyes when I realized James had hit my mother, but I was too afraid to go in and intervene. Not when he was clearly so pissed off.

“Sign it, Emily!”

“Fuck you...” she slurred.

There was a loud thump, followed by more cursing and I could hear my mother’s footsteps as she ran up the stairs and slammed the bedroom door. I waited, listening for a sign of movement from James. When he thumped towards the door, I quickly scrambled around the side of the house to hide, not wanting to get caught in the crossfire of his anger. I pressed my back against the log walls of the house and a minute later, the roar of his bike broke through the trees, and disappeared into the distance.

He had been trying to get my mother sign some sort of guardianship form.

A hundred questions raced through my brain as it hit me.

Why wouldn’t Mum want me to stay with James in case something happened to her? Why wasn’t there something already in place? Why would she want me to go to Gran? Why

was James so angry about all of this? Was he that fed up with my mum? If that was the case, is their relationship heading towards divorce?

I couldn't breathe. I could feel the panic rising in my chest. I needed to get the hell out of here. I broke away from the wall and ran through the trees, not towards the creek, but north, into the thicker part of the forest. I ran until I was gasping for air and my legs were hurting before I sank to the leafy carpet under my feet and rested my back against a maple. Overhead, the wind rustled the leaves and I could hear a soft call of a mourning dove. Closing my eyes, I pressed the back of my head against the bark of the tree and tried to calm myself. Every year that passed, it felt like my life was becoming more chaotic, more confusing, and more complicated. The worst part was, it felt like I had no control.

So, I did the only thing I could think of that calmed me. I thought about what I would say in my next letter to Keenan...

## Chapter nine



*Present Day*

*Mina: Seventeen Years Old*

*July*

*“No one else gives a fuck about you...”*

*“I’m all you’ve got.”*

*“Dad has his own life. Once you’re eighteen, he won’t be bothered with you...”*

*“Every person you’ve loved is gone, except for me. You will always have me. Only me.”*

*“I’m the only one who has been there for you...”*

*“Your own mother wasn’t even there, remember? She chose the bottle over you every time. Only I was there. I was the only one who wanted to be with you.”*

EVERY NIGHT THIS WEEK, when Shay crawls into bed with me, he whispers these reminders into my ear before he gives me a kiss and falls asleep. When I wake up in the mornings, I’m alone, and when I go to the main room, Shay treats me as he has always done, acting the part of big brother in front of James.

Shay stays close, his touches becoming more frequent, and intimate, like when he places a hand on my hip and squeezes, or when we were watching a movie and he pulled me into his lap then rested his hand on my stomach beneath my shirt, so that it was against my skin. Sometimes, it catches me off-guard, while other times, I melt against his touch, craving the beautiful distraction. He's all I have right now. James is always at the club, and I'm cut off from everyone else with my injury. So, I cling to Shay, desperate for his promises of protection and constant attention.

I'm already feeling shattered and broken over all the memories and emotions that I've been bottling up this past month. I've fought to suppress it all, but I've started cracking this past week. My inability to block out thoughts of Mum and the attack, and the fact that I still can't fall asleep when I'm on my own, or without my old childhood nightlight... I'm a mess. My cast has been a heavy reminder of the fact that a dream I'd once been working towards is over, and each day that I limp along, the thumping of it against the floorboards only seems to resonate in my skull again and again, like the echo of a harsh bell... *It's over... it's over... it's over...*

But...

I've also noticed how Shay's silver eyes carry shadows around them, the dark rings beneath them more prominent, as though he's been having trouble sleeping. But he's been with me every night, and he always drifts off before I do, so I know that's not it. He looks haunted, and combined with his new disposition and dark words that he murmurs into my head each night, I find myself more uncertain and confused, but at the same time, I'm determined to please him. I need him here with me, not spiraling.

I'm also plagued by other thoughts and memories.

*Keenan...*

He's a secret I've kept safe for several years now. When we started our correspondence, I was just a kid. I couldn't help but think that maybe his attention towards me was a part of some other plan... after all, he and Shay are basically enemies.

But, that day on the beach. *That* felt real... so real, it scared me. And when I relive our moments together, I'm surprised by how much they affect me, even more than my moments with Shay when he's giving me comforting kisses and caresses.

But as much as I wanted to hear from Keenan, I haven't been able to contact him, not with Shay staying close to my side all day and sleeping in my bed every night. There has not been a spare moment where I felt safe enough to shift the floorboard aside and check the phone for messages. When I think about when I do get the chance to contact him, if I open my phone and there are zero texts or calls from him, the thought is incredibly painful and I feel an actual ache in my chest. I want so desperately to check, but I won't risk Keenan's safety.

Shay hasn't even left me alone to go to the club. I shiver at the thought of Shay suspecting my contact with Keenan. I have no idea if that is even a possibility, if something has happened to give him the idea that I am talking to his adversary. But I decide to be careful nonetheless, just in case. So, I avoid the hidden spot beneath my bed, not giving it even a second glance, in case Shay is watching me for any clues.

So for now, I bask in his comfort and attention, craving it like a drug. Shay's love reassures me that I'm truly not alone.



The night before my seventeenth birthday, Shay stayed with me as usual, only this time, while he had been murmuring those hushed reminders into my ear, his lips brushing against its curve, one of his hands had drifted under my shirt and I lay frozen as his fingers moved a little lower. They slipped beneath the elastic waistband of my sweats, skimming ever so slightly over my clit, teasing it.

“Mina?”

“Huh?” I breathed, realizing I hadn't been listening to a word he'd been saying. My mind was too distracted by his wandering hand.

“Do you understand?” His voice deepens dangerously, becoming more of a growl than anything.

*Shit...* I have no idea what he just asked me. His other hand moves to my chin and grips it tightly before turning my face to his. His nose brushes against the tip of mine and his piercing eyes hold my gaze. I shiver involuntarily at the intimidating look he gives me. “Sh-Shay, I-I-” I stammer as his fingers continue to tease my flesh.

“Do you *understand*, Sweetness?” he hisses between his clenched teeth.

“Y-yes, I understand,” I whisper, hoping that I wasn’t damning myself with my answer.

His full lips lift up into a cruel smile and his grip on my chin relaxes a bit, but he doesn’t let go. Slowly, Shay leans in and gives me another one of those simple, yet firm, kisses on my mouth, letting his lips linger a little longer this time.

“Good,” he murmurs, before settling in beside me. His hand slides out from beneath my pants, leaving me feeling slightly restless and unfulfilled, and slightly irritated. *Why did he stop?* He rests his head on my chest, his ear on my heart, and wraps his arms around me before closing his eyes. “Don’t make me kill anyone tomorrow.”

My heart hammers in my chest at his words. *What in the fuck does he mean by that? Oh my God, what did I just agree to?* Tomorrow is my birthday and the party is being held at the Celtic Beasts Clubhouse. What could I possibly do there that would make Shay want to kill someone? I take his words literally because, well, it’s Shay.

“Relax, Mina,” his voice is quiet as his warm breath floats over my skin like a heavy fog, “Just stay by my side at the party and do as I say and I won’t lose it. Got it?”

“Y-yes,” I stammer, my eyes wide open as I stare up at the ceiling, feeling like a cross between a prisoner and a cherished possession.

“Good girl.”

Now it's morning, and I lay awake in my bed, my room filled with pale morning light, alone. I don't know what to think of Shay's words and his behaviour. But I know that the last thing I want is to be the reason he goes off the rails. So, I'll just do as he said, stay by his side, and watch him for the signs I've come to recognize that means he's descending into his darkness.

I lie in bed, my hands gripping the blankets as I think over the words he's been murmuring in my ear every night. *"No one else gives a fuck about you... I'm all you've got. Every person you've loved is gone, except for me. You will always have me. Only me."* It scares me how right his words are. Everyone else is gone, and at that moment, I'm reminded that this is the first birthday where Mum...

I shake the thought away as quickly as I can and force myself to get up and get ready.

I end up showering (after wrapping my leg up in garbage bags held up around my thigh to keep my cast dry), and putting on a little bit of makeup (simple winged eyeliner, mascara, and pink lip-gloss) before I stand and stare dismally at my closet for something to wear today. The cast kind of limits me, and in the end, I decide on a lace, periwinkle blue dress with spaghetti straps. It hugs my upper body, but fans out at my hips and goes down to just above my knees. I slip on a beige ballerina flat to my uninjured leg, then blow-dry my hair so it sits around my shoulders in loose waves.

It's the first time I've dressed up in ages, and except for the cast, I feel good. More like myself again. It helps that I can move much easier on my crutches now, sometimes even with just one. But today, I intend to pick the comfiest couch at the club to relax on, and make everyone else cater to me. I've been through enough and I'm going to be a greedy bitch today, I've decided.

I make my way down the hall to the main room of the house where James and Shay are waiting. As soon as they see me, my stepfather bursts into a loud cheer and runs forward, hugging me tightly as he gently lifts me up off the ground. "Happy birthday, Baby Girl!" He practically shouts as he

twirls me around. I wrap my arms around his neck, dropping my crutches and can't help but laugh as we spin. When James sets me down on my feet, I sway slightly, dizzy and a little off-balance. A strong hand grips my elbow and I look up to see Shay standing at my side, my crutches in his other hand, and a scorching look in his silver eyes as his mouth curls into a small, almost tentative smile, as he stares down at me.

“Happy birthday, Sweetness,” he murmurs in a raspy tone.

“Thank you,” I take my crutches from him and look away, finding his heated gaze way too intense. My cheeks redden as I remember how he touched me bare for the first time last night. But then, he'd pulled away. I didn't understand his intentions. I knew what I needed from him, but what did *he* need from *me*?



*The Past...*

*Mina: Thirteen Years Old*

*October*

The summer had sucked. It sucked big, dirty, hairy old man balls. After Shay was banned from my room, he took a serious nosedive. He was out late, doing stuff for the club, but never wanted to talk about it. He said it was club business. But his mood was surly, he snapped at Mum and James often, and stomped around the house like an angry storm. Mum seemed to enjoy antagonizing him, and she and Shay got into arguments almost every time they were in the same room together. Then James would intervene, and soon, he'd be joining them and all three would be yelling at the top of their lungs, swearing and threatening each other. As usual, my anxiety grew, and I'd lock myself in my room and blast some music to try to distract myself. Once upon a time, we'd all gotten along. We all smiled and laughed and enjoyed each other's company. When had that changed? Or had I just been a naïve little kid that didn't see it before?



School had started up again, and now that it was the end of October, that meant I was busy keeping on top of my schoolwork and I was going to ballet classes several times a week on top of it, so I rarely saw anyone because by the time I got home, I was usually so tired and sore from dance that I'd scarf down whatever food was leftover in the fridge, then I'd pass out in bed.

So I spent most of my summer at the theatre with Keenan, where he became my unofficial cheerleader and coach, often lounging in the front row while shouting words of encouragement, which meant saying things like, "Mina, that was terrible. You looked like a duck that has a fucked up wing," or, "when you move like that, it reminds me of the time I got so drunk that I forgot how to walk". These comments usually ruined my concentration and I'd bend over laughing so hard, I'd cry. He helped keep me from becoming too anxious and serious with my dancing. As good as I wanted to be, when I started becoming so frustrated every time I messed up, I'd stop altogether. But Keenan's observations and the random crap he spewed, always got me laughing and he'd encourage me to try again, in which case, I'd do better as I was determined not to look like a gibbled duck or a drunk.

But now, it was Friday, nearly the end of the month, and the night Shay and I would usually have our dinner and game night. But when the bell rang, signaling the end of the day, I received a text from him saying he was going to be busy with some work for the Beasts tonight.

Bitterness washed over me like a bucket of water was dumped over my head as I read his text, apologizing for bailing last minute. I bit the inside of my cheek and decided not to even bother responding. All summer he'd done this to me, and I was losing my patience. Earlier, two of my girlfriends had asked me to join them at the movies, but because it was Friday, I had declined. I was tempted to go find them before they left for the day and say I changed my mind when I sensed someone standing by me. I glance over my shoulder and see Eli Jacobson standing there.

Eli was one of the jocks of our middle school. He played soccer and lacrosse and was admired by most of the female population in this place. He flashed me a bright smile and flipped his light brown hair out of his chocolate coloured eyes as he casually leaned against the locker next to me. “Did I interrupt something?” he asks me, his dark gaze flicking down to the phone clutched tightly in my hand.

Just as he says it, it goes off and I look down to see Shay is calling me, most likely upset that I’m ignoring his text. Well, screw him. I ignore his call and shove my phone into my bag, then turn to Eli, wondering why he’s talking to me. If my friends, Becca and Ashley, saw him standing next to me, guaranteed they’d both lose their minds and would squeal and burst into a giggle fit. Not me. I mean, don’t get me wrong, Eli is cute enough, but I haven’t ever really thought about him.

“Nope,” I tell him, “Nothing important.” When he doesn’t say anything else, I arch a brow at him. “What’s up? Did you forget to write down our English assignment or something?” I ask him, thinking about the one class we both share together.

He smirks and shakes his head, “Naw, I... well, I know we haven’t really talked much, Mina...” He suddenly lowers his gaze, as if he’s uncomfortable. I wait in silence, watching him. He rubs the back of his neck and peeks at me. “I was wondering if I could walk you home, maybe?”

Both my eyebrows shoot up at this. Seriously? I almost ask him why, but shut up before I make myself look like an idiot. I can’t tell if Eli is interested or if maybe he wants to talk about something else. Better be safe and stay quiet and see what it is he wants as we head home. For all I know, he’s interested in one of my friends and is going through me to find out more about them. I shrug easily and slide my arms through my jean jacket. “Yeah, sure. I’m heading down Maple Drive. You going that way?”

He nods and beams at me as I slam my locker shut and slip my bag over my shoulder. By this time, most of the hallways have cleared, but I can feel the eyes of the remaining students watching as Eli walks at my side. I glance around, hoping that no one will put too much thought into it. I don’t even know

exactly what he wants. The last thing I want is people making assumptions before I know what's happening.

We leave the school grounds and pass the east side of town, walking down the long road that leads to more private residences like mine and Eli's. Maple Drive is a road flanked by thick foliage and forest on either side, with trees shrouding over the street like a green canopy. People who live along here have larger plots of land for privacy, something James had wanted when he got his space. I didn't realize Eli lived down here, too.

At first, it's awkward as hell as we stroll along, and I wish I'd told him no. But after we leave our school and fellow students behind, he starts asking me about my ballet and he tells me about lacrosse. He wants to be good enough to play for high school and then hopefully earn a scholarship for college. The entire time we chat, I can hear my phone going off in my bag. After five minutes of its incessant ringing, I silence it, and continue our conversation, which has switched over to Game of Thrones. I start to relax around him and laugh at his impression of Joffrey, which is pretty spot on, if not a little exaggerated to get the brattiness down.

"Um, Mina? I wanted to ask you something?" Eli stops walking and I join him. I get the feeling that whatever it was he originally wanted to talk to me about, he was about to bring it up.

"Sure, what is it?"

"Um, I was wondering if you... might want to... I dunno, catch a movie sometime?"

At once, I feel my heart pound in my chest. He's asking me out? Oh my God, I feel so stupid. I didn't see this coming at all. This is the first time I've been asked out, and suddenly, I find my mind coming up blank. What do I say?

"Mina?" His dark eyes look anxious and he shuffles on his feet, looking majorly uncomfortable. I shake myself when I realize I'm pretty much silently staring at him like a freak.

“Sorry!” I tell him and smile, “Sorry I, um... yeah, that’d be alright.” I can feel the blush on my cheeks. Oh God, Becca and Ashley are really going to lose their minds now. Becca will be pissed, most likely, because I’ve never expressed an interest in Eli. But our conversation has been pretty easy so far, and he’s kinda cute. So why not give it a shot?

“Cool.” He looks immensely relieved and runs a hand through his dark mop of hair. “I was thinking maybe this weekend?”

“Yeah, sure,” I say, feeling suddenly insanely shy, “that sounds good.” We exchange numbers, then Eli reaches out and takes my hand and resumes walking. I stroll at his side, my burning face lowered so that it’s shielded by my hair, which falls over it like a curtain. I can’t believe I’m going to go on my first date! I’m excited and terrified at the same time! I’ll ask mum if I can go when I get home, if she’s there, that is...

“I can pick you up tomorrow night. Maybe we can catch a bite first-” he was saying, when the loud roar of an engine cuts him off. We both stop in our tracks and he looks over his shoulder curiously, to see what belongs to that obnoxious, ear-splitting noise.

But I know.

I know exactly what it belongs to, and I feel the blood in my veins turn to ice. Immediately, I drop Eli’s hand and spin to him. “Eli, go-”

“Why? What’s wrong?”

The engine is closer now, and I know he’ll be here any second. “Please, just... run. Go home. I’ll call you later, okay?”

“Mina-”

“MINA!”

The huge black and orange Harley Davidson pulls up behind us and I shove Eli away. I turn and see Shay, dressed in dark jeans, a black shirt, and his Celtic Beasts cut and aviators, looking like a scary-ass motherfucker. He turns off the engine, throws his sunglasses aside, and his piercing silver eyes are

fixed on Eli. The last time Shay looked this angry was when I was eight and he had found me in the woods with Keenan Mathers. I know he's about to lose it.

"Eli, please! Run!" I practically shout at him, but behind me, Shay's footsteps stomp towards us, coming up fast.

Eli looks so confused and stunned, I don't think he really hears me. He watches Shay with a look of terror on his face, and pales. Before anyone says another word, Shay's hand flies past my shoulder and seizes a fistful of Eli's shirt and hauls him off the side of the road into the ditch.

"Shay!" I scream after him and stumble down the incline after him. Shay easily walks up the other side, dragging a terrified Eli with him, and they enter the tree-line. I feel my heart racing and my face is numb as I race after them. I'm scared for Eli. Shay has been a loose gasket lately, and I am petrified at what he might do, "SHAY!" I scream again as I burst through the trees.

My mouth drops when I see Shay pummeling Eli into the ground. There's already blood sprouting from his nose and mouth, but Shay keeps going. I run forward and try to haul him off, but it's like his mind is somewhere else completely. I shake him, shove him, and continue to scream, but Shay delivers punch after punch until Eli is motionless on the ground. He's shouting at him, swearing and calling him names I'd never even heard of before. Blood is spattered on Shay's fists and covers the forest floor. I'm sobbing hard and I'm worried for a moment that I'm about to pass out. As sick as I feel at the sight before me, I grit my teeth and slap Shay's face as hard as I can.

Thank God he actually stops.

He blinks, as if coming out of a trance. His fist pauses mid-swing and falls limply to the ground beside Eli's head. He stares at the body beneath him and starts shuddering violently.

"Shay?" I whisper.

Slowly, he turns his head, and the look on his face has me stepping back fearfully. Shay has never looked at me with

such... *rage*... he's angry with me. Beyond angry. He's lost it. Snarling, he lunges at me and grabs my arm, pulling me into his chest with a heavy thud. Fisting a handful of my hair, he presses my face into his leather cut so that I almost can't breathe.

"What the fuck were you doing with him?! Why was he holding your hand?" he hisses.

"Shay." My voice cracks as tears flow down my cheeks and I desperately try to think of a way to calm him. "We were just talking-"

"Don't lie to me, Mina!" he practically growls.

I close my eyes and force my voice to stay steady. "Please, let me call someone to help him-"

"I'll have it taken care of. Let's go." Shay glares at Eli, his voice and ominous. "If you, or any other fucker so much as looks at Mina, I'll rip your teeth from your skull and cut out your eyes. Fucking got me?"

I stare in horror as Eli barely manages a nod before Shay turns, still gripping my arm, forcing me to stumble behind him as he stomps away through the thicket. I cast a worried glance back at Eli to see his hands twitch the tiniest bit. His face is completely covered with blood and he moans in agony. I start crying harder just as Shay pulls out his phone with his free hand and dials someone, before pressing it to his ear.

"I need a pick up on Maple Drive... two clicks... see you soon." He shuts it off as we emerge from the trees. When we approach the ditch, he scoops me up into his arms like I'm still seven years old, and carries me down the embankment and up the other side. When he sets me on my feet again, he leans his backside against his bike and continues to glare at me. "Dad and Billy are on their way to bring him to the hospital."

For a moment, I simply stare at him in shock. I feel cold all over, my hands are shaking, and there's a buzzing in my ears. "What did you do?" I whisper before my legs give out beneath me. I fall hard on my ass on the side of the road and accidentally bite my tongue, but I barely feel it. Shay is at my

side at once, trying to hold me, but I shove him away. “Don’t touch me!” I shout at him. “I don’t want you anywhere near me!” I’ve seen Shay fight plenty of times, but *nothing* like this. I’ve never seen him attack someone, especially someone completely innocent. He had pummeled Eli’s face to nothing. I’ll be surprised if he has any teeth left.

“Mina,” his voice lowers dangerously in warning and tries to grab me again.

I scuttle back on my hands and feet before I shove off the ground and retreat several steps, putting a fair bit of space between us. “You beat him within an inch of his life.” My voice is flat, and despite how calm I sound, my heart is racing so fast, I think I’m on the verge of having a heart attack.

“He touched you.”

“He touched my hand, you psycho!” I shout suddenly, and it echoes down the road as the rumble of approaching motorbikes alerts us to James and Billy’s arrival.

“You didn’t answer my text or my calls.”

“Yeah! Because I was upset with you. And now, I’m more than just upset! I’m so fucking angry and disappointed, I don’t even want to look at you!”

Shay’s dark brows pull together as I scream and swear at him. I’ve never had much of a big potty mouth, but right now, my mind is such a mess of emotions, I can’t keep myself in control. Shay stands, towering over me with his large, muscled frame, but despite how intimidating he looks, I am far from afraid, especially when I see the hurt in his eyes. “Mina, I’m sorry about tonight-”

“I don’t care!” I scream at him as James and Billy pull up. “I don’t want anything to do with you, Shay. Just leave me alone!” I turn to James, tears streaming hot down my face. He looks from me to Shay and back again, his dark eyes trying to piece together what the hell happened. “Will you please take me home?” I ask him. Billy can help Eli. If anything, Shay should. But I know he won’t.

“Sweetness, please...” he starts to beg and I hear him step up behind me as my stepfather passes me a spare helmet from a saddle bag.

“Don’t!” I whip around and glare up at him, having to tilt my head back to see his face as he’s so tall. “Do not come near me. Weren’t you supposed to be busy with the club?” I snap at him, ignoring how the corners of his eyes tighten at my dismissing words. “Looking at you makes me feel sick to my stomach.” He flinches hard. I’m hurting him right now. Good. He needs a reality check. He can’t just attack people like that. There is no way Eli is okay. I’d run back to help, but I know Shay won’t let me. He’ll simply drag me back.

After I get the helmet on, I quickly climb up behind my stepfather and wrap my arms around his waist. I don’t even bother looking at my stepbrother as we pull away, leaving him behind to deal with the mess he created.



When Shay made it home late Friday night, he tried to see me, but I’d locked my bedroom door. He knocked and called my name, and I just ignored him. “Mina, please... let me in?”

Instead of answering, I put on a pair of headphones and played some music from the laptop I had set on my bed. I hummed along to Title and Registration, a song by Death Cab for Cutie, allowing the beautiful tune to ease my nerves. It was almost one in the morning, and after James had dropped me off at home, I went straight inside and sent a flurry of texts to Eli, apologizing and asking if he was okay and if there was anything I could do. I wasn’t expecting a reply. Not now, anyway. I hoped Billy got him to the hospital alright. Maybe tomorrow I’d call.

Mum wasn’t home. I had no idea where she was, and I honestly didn’t care at this point. My shock from what had happened was wearing off and now, I was just pissed. I ended up going into Shay’s room, tore his bedding off the mattress, and threw it around the space. I grabbed the clothes from his



closet and threw those on the floor, too. It wasn't my proudest moment. I know it was childish, but I'd never felt such overwhelming resentment and fury in my life. I had no idea how to deal with it. It clawed its way up my throat, causing me to explode and desperately seek an outlet. So, I attacked Shay's things. He was lucky I didn't go for his computer or his expensive guitars that he had hanging on display on the wall over his desk, though it was damned tempting.

When I was done, I stood in the middle of the destruction, panting and shaking. I didn't feel better. Not even close. Stumbling out of his room, I left the chaos behind for him to find. I took a long, hot shower, ate a frozen dinner, and then hid away in my room and stayed there, hiding from the world.

And now Shay's fists were pounding on the door so hard, I could hear it over my music. After a full minute, I ripped off my headphones and stomped to the door, but didn't unlock it. "Fuck off, Shay!" I shouted.

"Please, Sweetness, let me in. I need to see you. I need to talk to you-"

"Well, I don't want to talk to you." I snapped, cutting him off. "I need to be alone. Respect that."

"Mina..." his voice cracked a bit and heard a small thump on the other side. I could picture him pressing his forehead to the wood. Most likely he was leaning against it to hold up his weight. I knew this was hurting him, but I was still too angry to care. I needed space. He continued to plead. "Mina, I need you. I need your help... I-I..." He sounded like he was choking. "I can feel-feel the dark cloud in my mind. It's-it's growing. It's drowning me! I need you!"

I clenched my fists and fought my natural instinct to go to him. No. I wouldn't let him make me feel guilty about this. "You could have killed him," I said, proud that I didn't waver.

"Mina..." again, his voice broke.

"No! Just go. *Go*. I don't want to see you, I don't want you near me! You disgust me!" I turned and went back to my bed without another word. I shut my laptop off, turned off my light

and huddled under my blankets, turning my back to the door. For a long time, he stood there, his fingers drumming a frantic sort of rhythm against the doorframe to my room. From that sound alone, I could tell he was strung out, impatient, and agitated. Finally, after a minute or two, his footsteps thudded heavily down the hall, followed by the click and slam of the front door opening and closing. He'd left.

I felt both elated and guilty for standing up to Shay. I didn't let him sneak his way back in after he'd done something so horrific. I thought I would have slept easy that night, comfortable with my decision, but instead, I lay in the dark for hours, listening for any signs that I was no longer alone in this house.



My eyes slowly opened to the golden light shining through the trees outside my window, and yawned wide. Rolling over, I checked my phone and saw it was nearly 11:00am. There were no missed calls. No text messages. I really hadn't expected Eli to be able to respond today, but there was nothing from my mother or James. The fact that Shay hadn't sent anything kind of shocked me. He never went too long without sending me a message when we bickered... then again, I guess this was our first major fight. Most likely he was off either beating the crap out of another helpless person, doing stupid security stuff for the club, or he had pulled an all-nighter with his friends.

So, I got out of bed, cleaned up, and dressed in a pair of tight light jeans and a tight grey long-sleeve crop top, then searched the house to see who else was home. I went upstairs and knocked on Mum and James' door, but there was no answer. I opened it tentatively, unsure of what I would find (in the past I'd accidentally walked in on them in the middle of sex and had been traumatized from the sight), so I closed my eyes now and called out, "Mum? James?" When they didn't answer, I pushed the door open more and flicked on the light to illuminate the dark space. Sure enough, Mum was there,

passed out and snoring loudly from beneath the sheets. Well, that's one mystery solved.

I thumped back down the stairs and, after a brief moment of hesitation, I knocked on Shay's door. "Shay?" I called and opened it. The room was exactly how I'd left it yesterday, a complete mess from my temper tantrum. I guess he never came home. I closed the door and headed out to the kitchen.

As it was noon by this time, I made myself a grilled cheese sandwich and cut up an apple to eat with it and sent Eli yet another text, apologizing and telling him that I hoped he was okay. It felt weak to just text him, but I doubted his family would want me to visit the hospital. I was debating about sending some flowers to him when I heard the approaching rumble of a motorbike. Jumping up from the table, I went to the window just in time to see James on his bike, peeling around the bend of our driveway. Alone.

I sighed heavily and took my empty dishes to the sink to wash. If I was being honest, I did feel a *tad* guilty about shutting Shay out last night. But my anger had overruled my empathy towards him then. Just as I was drying the plate, the front door burst open and James stormed in, his eyes wild and his salt and pepper hair a mess as he thumped across the room towards the hallway leading back to Shay's and my bedrooms.

"James?" I whispered, eyes wide with shock. Why did he look so scared?

At the sound of my voice, he halted in his steps and spun about to face me, like he just realized I was there. He paused for just a second before suddenly lunging at me, wrapping his arms around my legs, and lifted me into the air so that I fell over his shoulder.

"What the heck!?" I shouted, my hands clutching the back of his worn leather jacket to keep my balance. He turned and rushed out of the house, grabbing my own leather bike jacket with his free hand on the way, and let the door slam shut behind us. "James! What is going on? Is everyone alright?" I cried, getting more freaked out by the second as he stomped back towards his bike.

“I’m taking you to the club,” he said and plunked me down on my feet.

“Why? What’s going on?” I asked, bewildered.

He tossed my jacket over my shoulders, slid my arms through the sleeves, and zipped it up for me, like he used to when I was little. “You need to get through to Shay...”

I rolled my eyes, shaking my head in frustration. *Seriously?* That’s why he came and grabbed me like a sack of potatoes and scared me half to death? Because Shay was feeling *bitter*? I almost spun on my heel to head back inside. “I don’t want to see-”

“Mina!” James’ sharp voice cut me before I could move, making me jump, my eyes widening from his bark. “Shay spent the night drinking and doing God only knows what. He stumbled into the club an hour ago and started trashing the place. We tried to get him under control, but he attacked a bunch of the members when we fought to restrain him. He’s completely fucked up.”

I shivered at his words. This was the Shay I wanted to avoid. “Well, *I* sure as hell don’t want to see him like that.”

James grabbed his helmet and carefully slid it on my head, clicking the strap into place. “He needs you, Mina.”

I shook my head, about to try to take it off when James gripped my shoulders hard and gave me a small shake, his expression desperate. “He’s been rambling about you since he arrived. You’re the only one that can reach him. Please... *please*, Mina.” His voice was tight. “I don’t want anybody else to get hurt, and if there’s one person who can reach him, one person he would *never* hurt, it’s you. I don’t want the guys to take more drastic measures to try to get him to calm down. It will only make it worse for him. *Please.*”

Shay was out of control... he was incoherent... he has been attacking people who were trying to help him. I felt a tightness in my chest as remorse flooded through me as James’ words repeated themselves again and again in my mind. Shay had been drinking all night and was now hopelessly lost and

angry... this having occurred *after* I sent him away. Which meant this was my fault.

“I’ll come,” I finally whisper.

“Thank you, Mina.” James gives me a tight, quick hug. “He won’t hurt you. I promise. You’ll be safe.” He steps back, flips my visor down and gets on his bike, which has been idling this whole time. I carefully climb up behind him, wrap my arms around his waist as I’d done many times before, and we were off.

How the hell was I going to get through to Shay? I was freaking out inside, despite how confident James seemed to be about the idea of me being the only one who could reach him. I mean, I was the reason he was like this in the first place. If he saw me, wouldn’t he only become more violent? Would he scream at me and throw stuff around the room like he did when he fought with James or my mother?

We pulled up to the clubhouse and I stared in surprise at the sight of about ten members all gathered outside, like they were nervous about going in. Uncle Shawn was standing with a small group to one side, while a few others were oriented around the doors leading in, as if guarding it. It was led by Shay’s friends Gavin, Aron, Cody, and Leif, who were all clearly stressed to hell, judging by the way they clenched their jaws and fists, all while watching the front door with caution. When the members noticed James and I pulling up, most looked relieved, while a few others glared at my stepfather like he was to blame for everything.

But I had no plans to get into it. My own guilt was eating away at me and I *needed* to get in there and fix this. As soon as we stopped, I climbed off the bike and tossed James the helmet before striding purposefully toward the entrance. My heart was hammering against my chest to the point where I was sure the bone would crack. My palms were sweating, and my lip was quivering as I tried to slow my breathing.

“Sheik,” one of the older members, a terrifying looking guy named Cooler who had a long grey beard and weathered skin, practically shouted at my stepdad in disbelief. “Are you

fucking crazy? You can't send a thirteen year old kid in there," he rumbled, clearly pissed off at the situation. I couldn't blame him. I couldn't even imagine what it looked like inside.

"He won't hurt her," James said, his voice confident.

"But-"

"Manic will not hurt a hair on her head. I promise you all that!" he snapped, addressing Shay by his road name. "Do you really think I'd send my stepdaughter in there if I believed otherwise?" When no one else refuted his statement, James murmured into my ear, "We'll all be right behind you. You just concentrate on Shay and getting him to calm down. Once he's settled, I'll come over and help get him on his feet, alright?"

"Okay," but my voice came out more like a frightened squeak.

The bikers moved away from the doors as I approached, my stepdad moving a few feet behind me. I hesitated as my hand closed around the cool metal of the handle, and listened. I don't know what I thought I would hear... screaming, maybe. Swearing. The crash of furniture or dishes and bottles. But it was eerily silent. Cautiously, I opened the door, and behind me, I could feel the presence of the Beasts move in, like a personal guard.

"Shay?" I called into the dark hall that led to the lounge. The lights were off, but at the end, through the narrow archway that led to the bar and seating area, I could make out the faint glow from the stained glass lamps that hung over the pool tables. As I took a step inside, the sound of glass crackled beneath my shoe, nearly making me jump out of my skin. I peered at the floor, trying to see through the darkness, but there were no windows in this hall, and the door had shut behind me and my stepfather, cutting off the outside. The only light came from beyond the arch leading into the lounge. Where the hell was the light switch? I took another step and there was more crackling glass beneath my feet. It hit me then, why it was so freaking dark in here... I was stepping on broken light bulbs. Someone had smashed them all. I shivered and slowly moved forward. As I drew closer, I could make out

the faint sound of music coming from the stereo system,  
playing a song by Lord Huron over and over again...

*I am not the only traveler,  
Who has not repaid his debt...  
I've been searching for a trail to follow again,  
Take me back to the night we met...*

I kept walking, and over the music and the crunching broken glass under my feet, I could make out the thud from the front doors as they opened and closed again, momentarily casting a small ray of light in the hall as more members followed us in.

*And then I can tell myself,  
What the hell I'm supposed to do...  
And then I can tell myself,  
Not to ride along with you...*

Ahead, a chair suddenly flew across the room, soaring past my view of the entryway to the lounge, before I heard it crash into a table or something out of my field of vision. I stilled for a moment, but James clapped a heavy hand on my shoulder, reassuring me I wasn't alone to face this horror. But when I took another tentative step forward, a sound pierced through the air... a cry that was strangled, so filled with pain, it brought tears to my eyes, blurring my vision.

*I had all and then most of you,  
Some and now none of you...  
Take me back to the night we met...  
I don't know what I'm supposed to do,*

*Haunted by the ghost of you...*

*Oh, take me back to the night we met...*

“Shay?” I whispered when I made it to the entry. Cautiously, I peeked in and my mouth dropped in shock as I absorbed chaos that was the clubhouse lounge. Tables were tossed over, the wooden chairs were in pieces. There were broken glasses and dishes scattered in piles along the dark, panelled wood walls where they’d been thrown, and empty bottles of alcohol which had been flung carelessly aside. The air felt thick in the room, and smelled of liquor and cigarette smoke, which burned my nose. There was another smell, too, a sort of coppery scent. What the hell was *that*? James released me as I stepped in, my sneakers crunching over more broken glass, and my heart continued to race. I searched for a safe path to walk in amongst the debris, before scanning the room, searching... until I finally spotted him.

*When the night was full of terrors,*

*And your eyes were filled with tears...*

*When you had not touched me yet,*

*Oh, take me back to the night we met...*

“Shay...” I breathed as I took in the sad sight of him.

His back was to me. His black t-shirt ripped and tatted. I could see where he was bleeding in several spots on his arms and hands from the glass, and whatever else he had broken. He staggered sideways a little, falling against the bar with his hip, and his shoulders were heaving. He hadn’t noticed us yet. Another loud, broken wail filled through the room and I covered my mouth with my hands, tears sliding down my cheeks, as I felt the sound of Shay’s tortured cry rip through me.

“Shay!” I cried out to him.



He stilled at my voice and, moving so slowly it was like I was watching a movie in slow motion, he turned to face me. His eyes were red and puffy, but they were narrowed, filled with rage and pain, and tears streamed down his face. He had an angry, dark bruise on the left side of his jaw, and he was bleeding from a cut in his hairline. He was covered in sweat, and from the rips in the front of his shirt, I could make out more bloody wounds on him... most likely from fighting the other Beasts.

As he stared at me, I watched the hostility that had been rolling off of him begin to leak away, like the air out of a tired balloon. His lower lip trembled, his bleeding hands shaking, and more tears leaked out of the corners of his eyes. "Mina..." he choked out my name.

*I don't know what I'm supposed to do,*

*Haunted by the ghost of you...*

*Take me back to the night we met...*

I held my arms out to him, silently giving him an open invitation to come to me. I had no idea what to say to him. What *could* I say? This was beyond anything I felt capable of dealing with... and yet, it fell on my shoulders. It was *my* fault he was like this. I had to fix it. And the only way I could think of, was to let him know I would let him back in.

When my arms opened to him, he let out a strangled sort of moan, and stumbled towards me. I walked closer, aware of James and the others moving cautiously in the background as they entered the space, too, giving us a wide berth. Shay collapsed into my arms, and I mean literally. He sagged against me with all of his weight. I let out a soft, "Oof!" from the impact, and fell backwards to the floor, thankfully avoiding any of the glass and rubble, with Shay wrapped around me. He burrowed his face into my hair and dragged me into his lap, both my legs dangling off his thigh on one side. The blood from his hands seeped into my shirt as he held me,

as if terrified I'd be ripped away. I brought my arms up around his back and held him, not caring about the blood that was now seeping into my clothes. I just needed him to be better.

"Shhh," I whispered, just like my mum used to for me when I had nightmares, way back before we knew James and Shay. "Shhh, it's okay... it's okay, Shay."

His whole body shuddered violently as he silently sobbed into my hair. I could barely see a thing past my own tears, which welled in my eyes until they finally slowly slid down my cheeks, soaking into his shirt along with his blood.

"Mina," he gasped, "don't ever shut me out again..."

Yeah, like I was going to let *that* happen anytime soon. Not after seeing this.

"Don't," he went on. "I need you. You're the only good thing in my life. Please, don't shut me out. Don't deny me..." He clutched me harder, to the point where I almost couldn't breathe. "Don't leave me."

"Where would I go?" I laugh nervously, trying to lighten the mood. When he doesn't respond, I stroke his back, hoping to continue soothing him. "It's alright, Shay. I'm here."

"Forever?" he asked, one of his hands grasping the back of my neck in a weird, almost possessive sort of way, that only fed the fear building in me. I peered over Shay's shoulder to see James watching us, his eyes hard and his mouth pressed into a tight line as though he saw something he didn't like. But he didn't say anything. Instead, he nodded to me, as though he had heard everything Shay had said, and wanted me to just agree so we could move on. So I did.

"Forever," I promised.

# Chapter ten



*Present Day*

*Mina: Seventeen Years Old*

*July*

SHAY DRIVES me over to the clubhouse in James' pickup, who, in turn, follows us on his bike. It's close to noon now, and my hands are clasped in my lap tight as I concentrate on my breathing. It's been so long since I've been back, so long since I've seen these people, and every shadow makes me jump. I feel like I'm being watched, that someone is hunting me, but I remind myself that it's just the paranoia talking. Shay won't let anyone touch me. I need to suck it up. Besides, I know it's important to the guys that I go along with this.

Despite the fact James had made me waffles with extra whipped cream and berries for my birthday breakfast, there was tension in the air. Not anything to do with me, but between father and son. Shay lingered near me at all times, and I often caught him scowling at his dad, who glared right back. I can only assume they had some sort of disagreement this morning before I got up, probably something to do with the club. I was grateful they weren't shouting each other down on my birthday, but it was awkward as hell. Maybe going to a

familiar, public place and being around everyone else will help ease the tension.

So, I sit quietly in the passenger seat, blasting some old rock on the radio while Shay drives, looking completely at ease. I glance over at him, noticing how relaxed he seems. He even has a small smile on his lips... he's *happy*. It's almost weird seeing him like this. In recent years, I've become used to his scowl and mood-swings. But this past week, I've been trying to please him because I need him here with me while I battle my own demons.

"You excited?" he asks as we turn up the gravel road that leads to the security gates. Today, they'll be locked up against the public, as my birthday will be a private event. During the week, or on days that they don't have business, the Celtic Beasts open their lounge for civilians who want to come by for a drink or pub food. They aren't allowed in any other part of the clubhouse, and they have to show respect to any member in a cut. If they don't, they are banned for life, and that's if they're lucky.

"Yeah..." I mumble, playing with the lacy hem of my blue sundress. I can put a smile on my face for the guys' benefit, but it's hard to fake that enthusiasm in my voice. I'm not in drama class for a reason. I'm a terrible actress, and an even more terrible liar. I used to be good in the past when I tried manipulating Shay to get out of a sticky situation where he might have gotten mad at me, but lately, he's become too perceptive and reads me like a book.

As if sensing the apprehension in my voice, he reaches over and gives my thigh a gentle squeeze. "It will be great. Like I said, I'll be close by, and so will all the guys. You're safe with me Mina." I glance over at him, the sincerity in his voice reassuring.

I let out a low, shaky sigh and nod. "Okay..."

Shay punches the code into the panel at the gate and it swings open, allowing us to drive through, with James on our tail. We round the bend of the road, which is flanked by thick foliage, until it opens up to a large, unpaved parking lot, set

before a large, windowless concrete warehouse that is the Celtic Beasts club. The outside looks the same as it always has, except the front door has been replaced with a heavier, metal looking monstrosity that gives the place an even colder, more unfriendly look than it had before. Honestly, it looks like a goddamned prison.

“The renovations are great. It looks like an entirely new place. It was in need of an upgrade,” he tells me as he parks the truck. The parking lot is full of bikes, trucks, and SUVs. Looks like everyone else is here already.

“Is that because you trashed the place so many times they had no choice?” I blurt out before I can stop myself. I slap a hand over my mouth and tense up, eyeing Shay out of my peripheral. But to my surprise, instead of snapping at me or chastising me for being a smartass, he just chuckles and shrugs, as though he agrees with my statement, and gets out of the pickup.

Sighing with relief, I follow suit, though a lot less gracefully as I carefully climb down on my good foot. Shay comes around and gets my crutches out for me just as James wanders over, a huge grin on his face.

“Come on, Baby Girl. Everyone is waiting!” The boys flank me, both ready to catch me as I move across the uneven parking lot to the front doors. As soon as I step inside, I’m assaulted with the scent of smoke and alcohol, but there’s an underlying finish that smells like new paint and cleaning products. The hallway leading into the lounge is the same as before, dark, with small overhead lighting, but the floors are now concrete with a shiny, resin layer overtop.

Ahead, I see the entry into the lounge, and the sounds of people talking and laughing echo down the hall. I’m so anxious at the prospect of seeing these men again, my hands slip a little on my crutches and I nearly fall forward. But Shay’s reflexes are so quick, he grabs me before I can really process that I was about to fall. Instead of straightening me up, he moves behind me, wraps his arms around my middle, and lifts me into the air so my legs are dangling, and starts walking us forward.

“Shay, I can walk.” I give one of his hands a smack.

He just smirks as we enter the lounge and announces with a loud, “Here’s the birthday girl!”

Everyone in the room breaks out into loud whoops and cheers and as I look around at all their faces, I’m hit with the memories of the last time I saw them all, and cringe a little with embarrassment. Not only are Uncle Shawn and Uncle Marty here (with their *wives* and *kids*), but so are all the old-timers I’d once been so close to and admired. Last I saw these men, they were... well... engaged in less than honorable circumstances. When I see the few sweet-butts that were roped into working, I recognize none of them, and breathe a sigh of relief. I didn’t think I could handle seeing those women again after what happened.

At once, several teenage girls rush me, Kate leading the fold. All of them start talking at once, so I can’t discern a single thing they are saying.

“Ladies, ladies!” Shay hollers, laughing as he sidesteps them. “Let me get her settled on the couch first, alright?” He weaves us through the crowd, and as we pass everyone, they cheerfully greet us and wish me a happy birthday. When I’m settled on a silvery grey, leather couch at the back of the room, I can finally get a good look of the place. All I can think while staring around the space is that it is a far cry from the homey, warmer feel that it was before.

The bar was lined with silvery, reflective pieces of sheet metal, and the countertop was a black marble, all the taps and appliances a copper-tone. The floors were a polished, concrete stone, and the walls were black, except for one at the far end where a huge mural of the Celtic Beasts, a dark blue dragon on a silver shield, was painted. They had strips of dark blue fluorescent lighting running up along the black walls, and it gave the place a sort of sinister feel. They had several round tables with the same dark marble tabletops, two blue felt pool tables by the mural wall, and booths lining the far wall, the leather a silvery grey like the couch I was on. The walls were decorated with framed portraits of Harley Davidson motorcycles and Celtic Dragons graffiti’d around them.

On top of all the fancy refinishing, Raya and Helen had hung up pink and yellow streamers and white balloons all over the place. The couch I was sitting on had a ‘Happy Birthday’ banner on the wall overhead, and a low table piled high with gifts. A long, narrow folding table was set up at the opposite wall from me, and was covered with a bunch of potluck dishes people had brought. Despite my reservations about having the party here, and how I felt about the men that were involved with the club, I could not help but admire and appreciate what their wives had done for me.

The other girls gathered around the moment Shay had dropped me off on the couch, and started yammering away, but I couldn’t hear a word as someone started blasting some Pearl Jam over the sound system. I peer through the crowd until I see Helen and Raya and waved them over. Both women were at least ten years older than my mother, and when they come rushing over, I can see the tears in their eyes. Despite the age gap between them, they’d been close.

“Oh, honey!” Raya steps forward first and wraps her arms around me. “You’ve grown into a beautiful young woman! Happy birthday, hon.”

“Happy birthday!” Helen said from my other side as she joined in the hug. “I hope you like red velvet cake.”

“Is the sky blue?” I raise my brows at them.

They both chuckle and kiss my head and I can’t help the lump that rises in my throat. For just a moment, I feel like I’m being hugged by my own mother...

“Mina!”

Several figures break through the throng of people and I freeze at the sight of Cody, Gavin, Aron, and Leif. *Don’t think about it... don’t think about it... don’t think about it...* I chant over and over in my head as they surround me. Oh God, the last time I saw them... **DON’T THINK ABOUT IT!**

The girls scatter as the four men move in and take their places on the chairs and sofa. The guy to my left wraps an arm around my shoulders and pulls me in for a tight, sideways hug.

I tilt my head back and fight the sick feeling in my stomach when I recognize Cody. He looks the same, with his dark wavy hair, blue eyes, and dimpled smile. Except now, I can see a bit of a tattoo peeking up under the neckline of his shirt, and he has filled out with a little more muscle. Oh God, he had been in the security booth with that girl before I had walked in here...

“Hey there, Precious.” He grins at me, showing off that dimpled smile that all the girls, including the ones my own age, have always swooned at. “Happy seventeenth!” His dark eyes look me up and down, and I can’t help but feel a little icky at the leering sort of look I can see behind his smile. “Holy shit, you’ve grown up! Haven’t seen you in forever. Why haven’t you been by?”

“Well,” I mutter, trying to wiggle out from beneath his heavy arm, “Seeing as the last time I saw you, you were cheating on your girlfriend, I kind of woke up to reality. And it wasn’t one I wanted to be a part of.”

The douche just chuckles. “Sorry, baby. But that’s life. And it’s *our* life. You’re stuck with us.” He puckers his lips and blows a kiss at me.

“She’s still in high school, fuck-face.” The guy on my right reaches behind my head and smacks Cody in the shoulder. Begrudgingly, he releases me. I turn and recognize Aron at once, despite the fact that he’s changed a lot over the years. He used to be a skinny guy, but has obviously been bulking up, judging by the size of his muscles under his shirt and cut. His usual curly, pale brown hair is smoothed back and hidden beneath a blue bandana, and he now has a scar running down his left brow and partially down his cheek, like he’d been slashed by a knife. But his eye appears normal, the same hazel colour he’s always had, so he had gotten lucky in a fight, I guess. He grins at me, his gaze not as leery as Cody’s dark one, and he gives my hair a little tousle. “Happy birthday, kiddo!”

“Thanks.” I roll my eyes, unable to hide a grin as I shove his hand off. I fight back a repulsive shudder, remembering how Aron and Leif had been together with a girl on one of the



old pool tables... I resist the urge to gag as I quickly shake that thought away. Speaking of Leif, he leans back in a lounge chair and kicks his booted feet up on the coffee table, nudging one of the larger gifts aside with his toe. Gavin sighs and leans forward, moving the gift out of the way from his friend's dirty footwear. Leif is pretty much the same, with honey brown hair, pale blue eyes, and arms that are decorated in tattoos, which are on full display with his sleeveless tank top and vest cut. However, he has nothing on Gavin. Gavin looks like he comes straight out of someone's nightmares. His hair is dyed black and styled into a messy faux hawk, both sides of his lips are pierced, as well as both eyebrows, and, out of all the guys, he is covered with the most tattoos. But of all of Shay's friends, Gavin has always been the nicest and most brotherly to me, always the sensible one. Seeing him be mindful of my presents doesn't shock me in the slightest. Now that I think about it, I don't remember seeing him that day when I'd stumbled into the party at the club.

Gavin grins at me, "Happy birthday, Precious."

I can't help the genuine smile that curves up on my lips. I wish he and Cody had switched seats. "Thanks, Gavin."

"Storm." He corrects me, his voice sounding incredibly hoarse, as though he'd been shouting for hours on end.

I've always addressed the men in this club by their real names. It's something that has been difficult for me to adjust to as I've gotten older, especially when these four guys, who I've known since I was a little kid, have only recently been approved as full members of the Celtic Beasts and given new road names. Shay earned his road name years ago when he was a prospect. The name 'Manic' just suited him. But I refused to address him as anything other than his birth name. I liked it more. As a kid, just hearing him addressed as Manic sent shivers down my spine. It alluded to so much that I didn't want to know about him, and the work he did for the club.

Hearing Gavin's new road name, I decide it *does* suit his visual appearance and his quiet, dark, broody nature. But underneath it all, he is more like a gentle spring rain, rather

than the forbidding, threatening torrent that he is now addressed by, “Do I have to call you that?” I ask him.

Cody chuckles beside me and lays an arm along the back of the couch behind me. I ignore him.

“Only *you* don’t have to. Everyone else can fuck off.” He glares at Cody for some reason, who smirks back.

“James drove you here, sweetheart?” Aron asks from my other side.

“No, Shay did.” And I immediately peer around the room, searching for him. He said he would stay with me while we were here. When I don’t see him, my palms become clammy and I feel like someone is running an ice cube up my spine. The room is packed full of people, all milling around each other, the music blasting. It’d be so easy for someone to sneak through, unnoticed...

The guys all laugh quietly as though sharing some secret joke.

“Figures.” Leif slides his hands behind his head, looking completely at ease in his chair.

“What does that mean?” I ask, staring around at all of them suspiciously.

“Nothing, sweetheart.” Cody shakes his head as he takes a sip of the beer in his other hand. “Manic has always had a soft spot for ya, is all.”

“I still don’t see a property cut,” Aron said, cheekily.

I spin to narrow my eyes at him. “Not interested in wearing *anyone’s* property cut.”

They all laugh harder at this, as though this makes the joke they’re sharing even funnier.

I’d known Cody, Gavin, Leif, and Aron for as long as I’d known James and Shay. They’d always treated me like a little sister. Seeing how happy they actually seem to be by having me here fills me with warmth. I guess I had been pretty lonely the past few years, and I’d alienated myself from the only people I had left. I just wasn’t sure if I was the kind of person

who could turn my cheek to the shit they did. But right now, I feel myself letting go of all that negativity and just *be*.

As they start talking about something to do with Billy's son, Jordan, I scan the room, searching for familiar faces, and most importantly, Shay. I recognize most of the men here, but none of them come over. If they catch my gaze, they just smile and give me a nod before going back to whatever they were doing before. Some even turn a little red. My guess is they are as embarrassed as I am from the last time we saw each other. It's uncomfortable as hell. Especially since their old lady's are all here, and most of their kids. I finally spot Kate sitting in one of the booths with the other girls, chatting animatedly and drinking what looks like cocktails. Doesn't surprise me. These guys have always been lenient with teens and booze. I think they prefer that they drink here where they can keep an eye on them, rather than have them sneaking off to do it elsewhere.

I finally catch sight of Shay and James, who are off to the side, talking to Uncle Shawn. Both father and son look absolutely pissed. James shakes his head vehemently at something Shawn tells him, only to have his President nod towards the back. Looking reluctant and livid, James follows his leader across the room and down the hall leading to his office. Shay hesitates, his fists clenched hard. For a moment, I'm worried he's gonna punch a hole in the nearest wall, but he seems to get a grip before he turns and follows his dad to the back. On the way, he glances towards me and holds up his hand signalling, *five minutes*.

*What the heck is that all about?* Whatever it was, it was obviously important for Shawn to drag them into his office in the middle of my party.

"Well," Cody stretches and gets to his feet, "Seeing as Manic is busy being reprimanded by Bull, we'll keep you company 'till he gets back." He holds a hand out for me to take.

"Or," I say, crossing my arms, "I can go hang out with my friends." I nod towards the girls.

Cody turns and follows my gaze. Kate glances up and sees him looking over. Immediately, she blushes hard and tosses her hair over her shoulder, rolling her shoulders back, which makes her full chest look even perkier than it already is. I bite my lip to keep from laughing. Kate has always been a bombshell. I admire her confidence. Her body is to die-for, and it helps that she's always bubbly and very accepting of the club and their ways. I can definitely see her being snatched up by one of these guys in a few years, if Uncle Shawn approves, of course.

Cody turns back to me and shakes his head, "Naw, you don't want to hang out with them. Trust me. We're much more fun." He reaches down, pulls one of my arms free, and hauls me up to my feet. I'm about to stumble, what with my cast and all, but he wraps his arms around my stomach from behind and lifts me into the air, just like Shay did, and carries me over to one of the pool tables.

"Cody!" I snap at him as we weave through the crowds.

"Mina!" he chuckles and sets me down. I grip the edge of the table to keep from falling, "C'mon. It's been ages since you've hung out with your brothers. It's your birthday. Let loose!"

The other three follow and hover closeby. Aron and Leif sit on two barstools at our side and order some beers as they prepare to watch Cody destroy me at this game. Gavin, however, seems distracted. I watch as his dark eyes seem fixated on the pretty bartender. She looks a bit older than the other girls that work here, maybe in her late twenties or early thirties. Her black hair is tied up and she looks like a real biker girl, with a Harley Davidson tank top, short jean shorts, and tattoos down both arms. Her whole vibe is seriously cool. I hear one of the sweetbutt's, who is acting as a server today, call her Lindsey. Gavin appears to be a little smitten as he watches her work, with a softness in his eyes that I realize I've never really seen before. I'm about to move in and meddle, because I'm a sucker for a potential love story, but Cody hands me a cue instead, and then moves to break.

To say I was bad was being generous. I've watched the guys play for years, but have never actually done it myself. I either hit way too hard, not hard enough, or would scratch, giving Cody free reign of the table.

When I handed him an easy victory, he grinned smugly at me, and I rolled my eyes. "Congratulations. You kicked my ass. Do you feel good about yourself? You beat a complete newbie who has never touched a pool cue before, and is partially handicapped. I can order you a trophy, if you like?"

The other guy's chuckle as one of the sweetbutts, Ava, brings over a tray with several plates of food from the buffet. I sit at the bar and she hands me one that's piled high with a variety of things, like lasagna, a hamburger, cheesy garlic toast, beans and sausage, and Greek salad. Aron gave her butt an appreciative smack as she walked away, smiling flirtatiously over her shoulder at him, Leif, and Gavin, who still had his eyes on Lindsey behind the bar.

The only one who hadn't received a plate was Cody, who held out his arms, his mouth gaping open, and then called after her, "What the hell, Ava?"

She glares at him over her shoulder, "Your arms aren't broken; get your own damn food!" she snaps and saunters away with a little extra attitude and sway to her hips. I smirk over my plate of food and take a huge bite of my burger to smother my laughter.

"That's what you get, idiot," Gavin says in his deep, raspy voice. "You're the biggest whore in this place."

"Every guy here has slept with these girls," Cody protests indignantly, as he puts the cues away.

"Yeah, but they didn't fuck their sisters or cousins right after. Girls don't like that shit."

I fidget a little in my seat, greatly uncomfortable with this conversation. Cody mutters something and heads over to the buffet to get himself a plate, when a glass of water slides across the bar towards me. I look up to see Lindsey standing there.

“I’m glad I finally get to meet the infamous Mina,” she says with a grin.

I snort and shake my head as she wipes down the bar around me. “Yeah right, do I meet your expectations?” I joke as I watch her grab a beer to give to one of the other men.

“Sort of.” Lindsey flashes a pretty smile and comes back over. “I mean, you used to be a ballerina, and you haven’t been by, so I figured you’d be a little vanilla.” she says, looking me up and down. I realize I don’t look like the typical daughter of a biker guy like James, so I’m not offended.

Instead, I let out a sharp, breathy laugh and take a sip of the water. “Let’s just say, I never really embraced this lifestyle.”

Lindsey nods like she understands. “It’s not for everyone, that’s for sure.”

“I mean, I have no problem with people who do,” I say quickly, hoping I didn’t insult her. “I just... I had other plans...” I finish, quietly.

“I get it,” she says and leans on the counter towards me. “Nothing wrong with that. This place, these guys, it can be rough. You know that first-hand.” I tense immediately and shake the dark memories away before they can properly manifest in my mind. She goes on, “But these guys have looked out for me. Gave me a job. Helped me when I ran away from an abusive relationship. I get protection and I can earn a living.” She shrugs. “It works for me and I like it.”

I think about how protective Shay and James had always been. Despite their controlling ways, I’ve always felt safe with them and the guys at the club. I just didn’t like the fact that my stepdad cheated on my mum all the time, and I suspect they are possibly involved in some illegal bullshit. I think that’s another reason why Mum always fought with the guys, but I don’t know all the details. They never talk to me about club matters. I just have my suspicions based on what I’ve stumbled in on from time to time... bloody shirts, sketchy looking tools in the garage, late hour visits into Ashland where the Faceless headquarters are based. No one would enter

someone else's turf as often as the Beasts do the Faceless unless they had some mutual understanding or agreement.

Lindsey moves on to where Gavin is sitting quietly near the end of the bar. As soon as she stops before him, he lowers his dark eyes, and talks quietly to her. She leans in to hear him, smiling and nodding before grabbing him a glass of some harder liquor. I'm almost done with my food when Cody comes up behind me again and pulls me out of my seat. I cough as I choke a little on my bite of lasagna and squirm as he carries me back to the pool table. "Watch my leg, ass-hat!" I snap.

"Rematch, Precious!" He sounds positively gleeful as he ignores my insult. "I'll even instruct you this time. No charge."

Before I knew it, Cody had me bent over the table in his arms, pressing into my backside as he maneuvered the cue in my hands to line up a ball. At once, Aron and Gavin frown at him and call him out. "Yo, dude," Aron calls, "back the fuck up."

"What? I'm just showing her how to play..." Cody says with a way-too innocent undertone.

I shake my head and elbow his side. "This is so beyond cheesy," I tell him. "I think I've seen this move pulled in at least five romantic comedies." Yes, Cody was cute, but the last thing I wanted was his hands on me this way. It felt all wrong. I shoved back against him, trying to get him to move away while keeping my balance, when Shay finally reappears in the lounge. At once, his silver eyes lock onto us and he glowers at the sight of Cody holding my hips while pinning me against the pool table. He crosses the room like a predator on the hunt and at once, Aron and Gavin jump to their feet while Leif swings his barstool around to face us, looking like he was about to watch a show. I quickly gave Cody another shove and said loudly, "Hey, Shay!"

Cody lets me go at once and turns, smiling playfully at his friend. "Hey, Manic. Finish things up with Sheik and Bull?"

Shay stops about a foot away from Cody, arms crossed over his chest, and glares down at him in a way that would have made most men shake with fear. Even Aron and Gavin seem nervous. Cody swallows hard, giving himself away, though he tries to appear confident and tough as he stands his ground. *When had he become so cocky? Especially against Shay?* I mean, the first time I ever saw Cody Miller, Shay had been kicking his ass at the summer barbeque all those years ago.

Shay says nothing and reaches around him, his arm brushing against his friends as he takes my hand and pulls me over to himself. I don't put up a fight. I know better than that. Not now when Shay looks absolutely murderous, and not in front of his brothers. James always told me to mind my manners at the club. Never argue, never disrespect him or other members, especially in public.

Shay pulls me against his chest so that my forehead is pressed into the dog tags I'd given him, which rest right over his heart. His thick arms wrap around me tightly, but his eyes never leave Cody's. I felt like I could choke on the tension and testosterone that fills the air, like a heavy perfume. I keep quiet and still as I wait nervously for something to happen, all while praying for James to come in and intervene.

"I'm giving you a pass this time, brother," Shay says finally, his voice deep and full of warning that makes me shiver "You *know* not to touch her."

"She has no cut or tattoo."

"Doesn't matter. She's family. You've always known..."

Silence follows this statement and in that moment, I wished I could teleport myself the hell out of there. This was beyond mortifying. I wanted to tell them that they were both being ridiculous, that too much was being read into the situation, but when I peek up at Shay, the darkness in his glare silences me.

Cody finally laughed, though the sound was uneasy. "Sorry, brother. Meant no disrespect."



“You knew the line. You crossed it. The only reason I’m not beating the shit out of you is because you have been loyal to me ‘til now... don’t fuck it up.”

“I’m still loyal. I get it. Hands off.”

I hear him step back then and Shay’s hold on me relaxes, but he doesn’t let go. Instead, he tucks his chin to look down at me. “You okay, Sweetness?”

“I’m *fine*. It’s all good, Shay. Cody was just teaching me how to play pool.” I know why I was defending Cody, because as much as I didn’t appreciate his hands on me like that, I didn’t want Shay to lose his shit because of it, either. It would just cause him problems with the club. And if he trashed the place and bloodied Cody up because of me, well, pretty sure members would have a problem with that. They didn’t like women intervening with their business, which was why James and my mum fought so much. She hated that he was always here.

I grin up at him, hoping to ease the tension. “I’m having a great birthday.”

At that, he visibly softens and flashes a rare, small smile at me. “Yeah? Did you get something to eat?”

“Ava brought some stuff over... I was actually going to hang out with Kate and-”

Before I can finish talking, Shay lifts me up, my chest crushed to his, and carries me back to the couch sitting beneath the birthday banner. He sits down, arranging me so that I’m in his lap. This wasn’t all that unusual, as I used to sit in his lap all the time as a kid, but now, it didn’t feel the same, especially when I think about the spanking and the frequent kisses and touches he gave me each night this week. The way he placed a hand over my stomach, gentle yet firm, makes me feel safe in this noisy, crowded room. No one can get to me while I’m with him. But... I can feel curious eyes on us as they take in our close proximity to each other and I feel a little chagrined. I shift a bit, deciding it would probably be best if I wasn’t sitting *on* my stepbrother, and beside him instead, but Shay firmly keeps me in place.

“Calm down, Mina,” he murmurs in my ear. “Relax. We’re just sitting here.”

“But... people are looking, Shay...” My breathing is coming in quick, uneven gasps and I was feeling a little dizzy. Great, now I’m having an anxiety attack on top of this.

“It’s fine, Mina!” He snaps and gives me a small shake. “Just chill. We’re hanging out, that’s all.” He nods to Ava who was coming back with a drink for Aron, who had followed us over. She smiles a little too warmly at Shay as he orders a beer for himself and a vodka cran.

“I’m not drinking,” I tell him, assuming that cocktail was for me.

“Loosen up, Mina,” Aron says as he settles in one of the lounge chairs. Leif sits in the second one, and Gavin has taken my place against Cody at the pool table and is in the middle of making a break. None of them seem at all bothered to see me sitting on Shay’s lap this way. I look around the room for James, knowing that he would most likely have a problem with it. After all, he has no idea that Shay and I have started sharing a bed again. But he was nowhere to be seen. In fact, none of the members, nor their family members look at all surprised or scandalized at the sight of me sitting on my stepbrother’s lap this way. Except for the girls at Kate’s table. They are all watching this interaction with great interest, and I can see them whispering to each other. They are way too focused on us, and it only makes my anxiety worse. I blush and curl up into Shay, who immediately hugs me close, his thumb slowly circling my shoulder.

When Ava comes back, she hands me my drink with a small smile and a wink. I hold the glass, but I don’t take a sip. I’ve never had any alcohol before. Never wanted to. Especially after witnessing what it did to my mother. Seeing how depressed she was and how it slowly destroyed her put me off booze. That, and the memory of that bitch Dana trying to force a bottle down my throat... I hold back tears and shake my head, angry that Shay is being so insensitive right now.

“Have a sip, Mina,” Shay tells me, his mouth touching the curve of my ear.

“Shay, I am *really* not comfortable with this.” I keep my eyes on the hall that leads to the back, knowing that James is somewhere close by, probably still talking with Shawn in his office. I need him to come out and back me up on this.

“Stop worrying, Mina. No one is going to turn you in here,” he laughs.

“I don’t give a shit about being underage,” I tell him.

“Mina, don’t challenge me in front of my brothers...” he hisses suddenly in my ear and I shudder when I hear the impatience in his tone. *Don’t upset him, Mina! Keep him happy. He’s all you’ve got!*

I take the tiniest of sips. It’s not bad, actually. It tastes mostly like a fruity sort of juice, but with a small bite to it that I know must be the vodka. I make a face and swallow and the boys laugh. I scrunch up my nose at them, flipping them off briefly, and keep looking around for James, hoping that any minute he’ll appear and save me from this awkward situation.

But time ticks by, and eventually the guys finish their pool game (Cody won *again*), several beers each, and start to disperse. Gavin headed back to the bar where he continues to sit quietly, his dark eyes on Lindsey the entire time. Aron and Leif disappear upstairs, and I wonder if they still have their game room, or if they got rid of it with the renovations. Cody has moved over to Kate’s table, where he flirts shamelessly with the girls. I can see Kate’s flushed face and how thrilled she is at his attention. As much as I want to slide off Shay’s lap and go talk to her, Cody’s presence there kind of deters that idea.

“Um, Shay? Can I get off now? My leg is bothering me.”

Instead, he shifts me so I’m sitting sideways on his thighs so that my legs stretch out along the length of the couch, and places two pillows beneath them. He says not a word, but takes another sip of his beer and relaxes back into the soft

leather. I feel safe here with him, and relax against his chest, my head drooping against his shoulder just beneath his chin.

“Drink up, Mina.”

I feel a bubble of resentment rise in my throat, “I’m not in the mood for alcohol, Shay.” I peek up at him and fix him with a hard look. *Why can’t he understand this?*

Slowly, Shay turns his head, his silver eyes fixated on mine, his expression tense and shadowed. “Mina.” The hand on my back slides up until it’s twisted in my blonde hair, and grips a handful. His eyes flash to me, the look on his face turning fierce. “You don’t want to upset me, right, Mina?” I stare back at him, my heart beating hard against my chest as his words sink in. “You don’t want to cause problems, right? You don’t want to be the reason I lose control or be the one to cause the monster in my mind to destroy all that’s left of my sanity?”

I stare at him in horror while a shiver of fear races up and down my spine at his words. My hands are clammy and I can actually *feel* the blood drain from my face. I shake my head vehemently, terrified of the picture he painted. He’s right, he *is* all I have left. He’s the only one that’s been at my side since that horrible night. He’s been here for me, making sure I feel good, that the dark thoughts and memories don’t haunt me. I’ve witnessed that darkness that consumes him... to hear him say I would be the reason behind him losing his mind makes me feel ill. The last thing I want to do is upset him.

“Now just do what I say, and everything will be fine. Okay?” The hand on my stomach tenses a bit, and it feels almost like a threat. It *is* a threat. I nod obediently and he leans in and gives my cheek a small kiss. “Good girl. Now, drink up and enjoy yourself.”



*The Past...*

*Mina: Thirteen Years Old*

## *October*

Halloween was coming up soon. For a whole month, I'd been trying my hardest to bring some sort of happiness and calm into our house. Shay's crazy freak-out at the club a few weeks ago, has been one of the lowest points in my life. Since then, I've pretty much been at his beck and call. If he was feeling at all anxious and I wasn't there, I was retrieved and brought to him so I could keep him relaxed and calm. If we were home, he'd pull me into his lap on the couch for a snuggle session. I became a sort of weird, human security blanket.

Mum and Shay were fighting more than ever now, and it was awkward as hell, as it was usually about me. She wanted him to back off, as we were practically joined at the hip, and would throw a fit, even threatening to send me away to school. He'd retaliate by intimidating her by promising to commit some physically violent act against her, and that would set James off, who would then intervene and try to explain to her that Shay had some issues that he was dealing with, and the quickest way to keep him stable was to simply let him be around me.

But at night, James made sure it was known my room was still off limits to him. However, I'd occasionally hear him pacing outside my door, or he'd knock softly on it. Yawning, I'd stumble outside wearing my warm, flannel cupcake pajamas and we'd sit on the couch together and wait for his episode to be over.

I bore my new responsibility as best as I could, but I was stressed to hell. If Shay wasn't upset, then Mum was. If Mum wasn't upset, she was drunk. If James wasn't at the club, he was at home, stomping around the house, fed up with Mum's drinking and how Shay liked to pick fights with him. Everyone was angry. Everyone was strained. I felt like it was my duty to keep everyone happy. I tried to smile and keep conversation light whenever we ate dinner together (though it was a rare occurrence). I cleaned up where I could. I did my homework and concentrated on getting good grades so my parents had one less thing to worry about.

And today, I decided I was going to make some Halloween treats for everyone at the club, just like I used to when I was younger and less distracted by school and ballet. I baked some Autumn cookies and decided on S'more style ones I'd found online, and spent the better part of Saturday morning baking and then carefully packing them all up. Mum was home, but she was sleeping off last night's booze-fest, so I worked as quietly as I could so I wouldn't wake her and piss her off.

I was feeling pretty good about how my experimental recipe turned out. I tried one, just to make sure I wasn't going to be feeding the guys something they'd gag on, and ended up stealing one more, silently patting myself on the back for a job well done. It melted in my mouth with the perfect mixture of chocolate and marshmallow. Oh yeah, the guys were going to love these!

So, I carefully piled them onto a plate, covered them in plastic wrap, and got ready to head out to the club. It was a chilly day, the cool air brisk and thick with the damp aroma of fallen leaves, cider, and a sort of spice in the wind that screamed Autumn. I dressed warm in a pair of skinny, dark jeans, a hoodie, and tied my hair up in my favourite style, a ballerina bun. I shoved my feet into a warm pair of boots, slipped into my black leather coat and a beanie, and then called James' cell to let him know I was on my way. It rang until voicemail picked up, but I decided not to leave a message. He always liked it when I asked to come by and rarely told me no. So, I decided to surprise everyone today.

I would have taken my bicycle to get there faster, but I knew that I wouldn't be able to balance the plate at the same time. It was a nice enough day, despite the cooler air, and the sun was out, so I decided to walk. The leaves on the trees that shrouded over the road were turning different shades of oranges, reds, and yellows. I shivered as a cool gust buffeted me while I strolled down Maple Drive, which led past the town and down a private, gravel road that was owned by the Celtic Beasts. Their plot of land was huge, surrounded by a chain-link fence that was locked and had a special passcode to get in. Beyond that, was their security office, set just outside their warehouse. They had cameras everywhere, too, so I

didn't think my stepping onto the property was going to go unnoticed. But it would be a surprise nonetheless.

James was head of security at the clubhouse. That's what he told me anyway, so he was responsible for changing the passcode every few days or so. Lucky me, I was sitting in the office at the club with him, doing my homework as I curiously peeked over while he changed it, the numbers being my mother's birthday. I grinned at the memory and punched in the key-code, the lock unsnapping with a clank. I swung open the high gate and locked it behind me before trudging up the road to the warehouse and security office. I thought I could make out Cody through the side window and was about to call out when his head tilted back and he let out a long, deep moan. I furrowed my brow... was he sick? I was about to step closer when the profile of one of the club girls rose up before him and she licked his neck.

*Ewww...* I thought and scrunched my nose. Kissing, okay, but seriously? *Licking*? And with Cody, no less. I blushed and averted my gaze, easily making it past him as he was kinda distracted by his new girl... which was definitely *not* Olivia.

I stepped inside the club, glad to be out of the cold air. I'm sure my cheeks and nose were probably bright red, right now, as they stung slightly. The hallway lights had been replaced after Shay had smashed them, and lit the way as I strolled in, my giddy anticipation at surprising the guys making me grin like an idiot. I felt like I was ten again.

I could hear the music blaring from the lounge... some darker, rock songs I didn't recognize, and as I stepped closer, a pungent smell hit my nose. There was the usual trace of cigarettes and booze, but there was something else, like sweat. A scent I recognized from the locker rooms at school. But there was another unfamiliar odor I didn't recognize at all, and it immediately put me on edge. *What the hell was that?* I stopped in my tracks, staring at the opening to the lounge. I could hear the sounds of people... like they were crying or something. *Holy shit... what was happening?*

I stepped forward, curious and baffled, and stepped inside, getting my first peek of the semi-repaired lounge and literally felt my eyes pop out of my head and my mouth drop as I took in the scene before me.

The room was filled with the Beasts... them and the girls that I often saw hanging around the club, sweetbutts, they were called. But instead of sitting around, eating and playing cards, or watching a sports game, they were... well...

I stared in shock as Uncle Marty held what looked like a straw to his nose and sniffed in some white powder that was arranged in long strips on one of the badly repaired coffee tables. One that I often sat at to colour when I was a kid. Those same pictures were still hanging up behind the bar and in James' office. My eyes drifted to the side where, at one of the circular dining tables, a naked woman was sitting with her legs spread wide and Uncle Shawn's head was pressed between them, right to her privates. She was moaning and thrashing her head back, her fingers clawing through his greying hair. I held back the bile in my throat as I slowly took in the scene before me.

All of these men, men I'd known since I was seven, were somewhat engaged with the women, or were snorting and sniffing something, or smoking on strange looking pipes. Billy and a guy named Mask were both with a girl who looked half their age. She was sitting in Billy's naked lap facing him, and Mask was behind her, his bare ass exposed as he and Billy both thrust their hips into her. Aron and Leif were doing something similar to another girl by one of the pool tables. *What the hell was going on?!*

And then, I saw James...

James was sitting near the back, leaning against the wall, his hand on the back of a girl's head as she bobbed her face forward and back into his crotch. His eyes were shut, his head tilted back, and lazily drank from a bottle of hard liquor as the girl... *oh God, I'm going to be sick...*

I could feel the blood draining from my face as I took this all in, everything moving so slowly, I felt like I was trapped



underwater. And yet, only a few seconds had passed since I walked in here.

Averting my gaze away from James, to the opposite side of the room, I saw Shay.

He had a girl up against the wall, was shirtless, his pants undone, and his hips battered into her again and again in a rough, frantic way. She was completely naked, and her large, fake-looking boobs were pressed against him. He was running his tongue over her neck and his hands gripped her bottom, holding her up, while her legs dangled limply in the air.

The plate slipped from my fingers as a numbing sensation trickled over me. When it crashed to the floor, pieces of cookie and ceramic china broke and scattered everywhere. Though the music was blaring, enough of the Beasts still heard it fall, including my stepfather. James' eyes flickered open, his gaze snapping in my direction. The lazy air about him instantly vanished, and his mouth dropped in shock as he straightened up. "Mina!" he shouted and shoved the young girl away. I burned red as he tucked his junk back into his jeans. I stood there frozen, staring like an idiot, unable to think of anything to say that could make the situation less awkward, embarrassing, and shocking.

"Mina," Shay's hoarse voice cried out from the other side of the room. I turned my attention to him and saw that he, too, had stopped what he was doing now that he finally noticed I was here. He dropped the girl to the floor in a heap, causing her to cry out in anger and surprise, and zipped up his pants as he turned to me.

"Mina, get the fuck out of here!" James roared as he scrambled to find his boots.

His sudden roar seemed to snap me out of it, and I didn't need him to tell me twice. I spun on my heel and threw myself down the hall, bursting outside and gasping as I breathed in the fresh air. I only paused for a moment before I took off down the road, desperately needing to put as much space between me and the club and those... disgusting... *asshole*... pigs... as possible. Tears streamed down my face, freezing my

skin from the cold, and I quickly punched in the code to leave. I slammed the gate shut and raced down the street towards town. It wasn't long until the sound of approaching engine's told me they were coming.

There was absolutely no way I could face any of them now. No fucking way! Diving into the ditch, I scrambled up the side, and raced into the trees. I ran maybe thirty feet, before I quickly flung myself behind a thick mass of dead-looking bushes and some maple trees. Sinking down amongst the dead leaves littering the ground, I crouched on my knees, my arms wrapped around my stomach as I gulped in breath after breath. My lungs burned. So did my throat. And I felt a wave of nausea hit me as my mind reeled from what I'd stumbled in on.

The engines were slowly passing and Shay's panicked voice screamed my name over and over, and James' more controlled, deep tone was also calling out for me.

I peered through the forest, making out the flashes of the bikes in the distance as they rumbled past. These men I had known almost my whole life. But for the first time, I wasn't seeing them as James, Shay, Uncle Shawn and Uncle Marty... They were Sheik, Manic, Bull, and Blade. They weren't the ones who carried me around piggyback, or tickled me in play. And Cody, Aron, Leif... I hadn't seen Gavin, but I'm sure he had been there, too. Seeing them all that way, I felt like I didn't know them at all. None of them. These men were strangers to me.

I dove sideways and threw up as images flashed through my mind... Shay and that girl... my stepdad and the woman on her knees before him... Uncle Marty sniffing that powder that I had no doubt was drugs of some kind... and Uncle Shawn with that girl on the table... all of them. All of it. I gagged and retched again, bringing up my entire breakfast. I couldn't stop thinking about what I'd walked in on. What about Billy and Mask? Even Cooler, who would seat me on his lap while he played cards, had his head between a girl's legs on another couch.

I spat on the ground and crawled back a bit from the mess I'd made.

I began to sob as I sat there on the cold ground, the wind buffeting me a bit as it rushed around the maple tree I leaned back against. I wiped my eyes and nose on my sleeve, knowing I was full-out ugly crying and probably had snot running down my face... but I feel like my entire life with these guys was a lie. How could they be the same men? What exactly is it that these guys do? *Oh my God! My poor mother!*

*Stupid, foolish Mina.* Was this what Keenan had warned me about? About not letting them steal my light? Was he worried I was going to get sucked into their dirty, dark world?

*No!* A voice screamed in my head.

Maybe these guys were happy in their world. It worked for them. That was fine. But it wasn't mine. I didn't want to end up like my mum.

I could hear the bikes coming back around and their voices all calling out to me, but how could I bring myself to look at them in the eye after that? I hid behind the tree instead, listening as they passed again. Hopefully, they would return to their clubhouse and forget about me.

So I kept to the woods, headed for town, but I wasn't going to go home yet. Not until I was ready to face them. Ugh! I didn't think I would ever be ready. By the time I broke through the tree-line, my hands were frozen and I was shivering uncontrollably. My face felt like it was carved out of ice, my tears now frozen to my cheeks from the cold wind. I ended up at the library, knowing Shay and the others would never step in there, and hid out in a cushy sofa near the back, pulling random books off the shelves to read to pass the time. But no matter how hard I tried to concentrate, I couldn't get the burning images of what I saw out of my head.



It was dusk by the time I made my way home. I felt numb all over, from both the cold and what I had witnessed today. I

didn't want to see anyone yet, and silently hoped the guys were still out, but as I rounded the corner, I deflated when I saw two Harleys parked off to the side, and all the lights inside the cabin were on. I inhaled a long, deep breath, hoping to keep myself calm. My nose was frozen, as were my toes, and my eyes were stinging from crying. They were probably all puffy and red. I told myself that I needed to be strong. I needed to sound sure of myself when I walked in there and confronted them, and not let them make me feel guilty or bad about my reaction.

Releasing one long, shaky breath, I continued forward. When I was about twenty feet from the porch, I saw Shay's figure move in the front window, and a moment later, the door flew open.

"Mina!" he cried, sounding like he was the one who got hurt today, and not the other way around. I ignored him as I stomped up the steps and elbowed past. I was about to head down the hall to my bedroom when James' voice cut through me.

"Mina, please, wait..."

I stilled, hanging my head as I braced myself for whatever bullshit he was about to spew. I couldn't bring myself to look at either of them in the eye. I was too embarrassed and disgusted. Shay slammed the front door shut and hurried in my direction, reaching out like he was about to grab me, but I threw myself back and hissed, "Don't touch me!"

He froze, his silver eyes pleading. "Sweetness, please, don't shut me out... not again-"

"I don't want to hear it! I-I had no idea... I wish I never..." I felt myself choke on my words as I tried to get them out, but I was choking. I had a whole damned speech prepared. I was going to cuss them out, tell them off for being such sick, slimy bastards... but now that I was facing them, I lost all my nerve. I took several, deep steadying breaths, and finally found the strength to raise my head and look at my stepdad in the eye, who flinched back, his cheeks reddening slightly, before I turned to Shay.

“I guess I’m an idiot, huh?” I whispered, “Just a naïve little girl... but my eyes are open now... I get it...” I bit my bottom lip as it wobbled and I knew my eyes were probably shining with the tears I was struggling to hold back. James actually had the decency to look chastised, but Shay’s gaze was unwavering as he listened to me speak. I met his determined gaze just as a tear slipped down my cheek. “I just wanted to bring you guys some cookies... to-to cheer you up... you all have been so stressed and unhappy lately...” my voice finally broke.

“Baby Girl-” James’ voice cracked, too, as he finally spoke up.

“No!” I cut him off, “I don’t want to see either of you right now. I can’t stomach it.” I was about to run to my room when Shay lunges forward and grabs me, restraining me in a bear hug tight to his chest. “Shay!” I shouted, my words muffled against his shirt. My skin crawled from touching him like this when a few hours ago he had that girl... *ugh!* I felt like all the women and the drugs were transferring to me by this contact. “Shay, put me down! *Now!* Please, please, don’t touch me!” I cried as I desperately tried to free myself, throwing my head back, tears streaming down my cheeks.

“You know I can’t, Mina.” He buried his face into my shoulder as he stood there, holding me easily as I struggled in his arms. “Please, forgive me! I never meant to hurt you. I never meant for you to see that... she was nothing to me...”

“I don’t *care!*” I sobbed, as he forced my forehead against his chest, my skin pressed into those damn dog-tags I’d given him for Christmas a few years ago. “I don’t care who you fuck, Shay!” I shouted. “But now I see it. You are all dirty, disgusting assholes! No wonder you go off the deep end! But don’t you do that crap and then come to me, saying that I need to make it better again, that you need me, and then put me through hell with your crazy tantrums! You don’t need me; you need a therapist!”

“No, you’re wrong! I do need you, Mina!” He gave me a shake.

“Shay,” James stepped forward. “Ease up, you’re going to hurt her...”

Shay moved away from his dad and carried me over to the couch where he sat down and continued to constrict me with his arms. “Mina, you are the only one for me... that girl meant nothing!”

“Again, Shay, I don’t care about that. I just didn’t want to see it! And I don’t want you using me as some stupid security blanket when you don’t actually need me! Go get what you need from the sweetbutts and stop tormenting me!”

“No, Mina!” He gives me a shake. “Don’t you get it? I do need you! I need you more than *anyone*! But I can’t have y-”

“Shay!” James thundered behind us, his voice warning. “Don’t!”

“Fuck off!” he shouted back. “I’m not crossing the line!”

“You are fucking close! Back off! Let her go!”

“Only if she agrees to listen to me!”

They both go silent, waiting for my response. I’d agree to almost anything right now if it meant I wasn’t being smothered against Shay’s pecs. I nod and he finally lets me go. I practically jumped out of his lap, staggering back several feet, and glared at him. “What, then? Tell me, Shay... What do you want to say? I’m cold. I’m hungry and tired, and I want to spend the rest of my night alone in my room. So tell me fast because I’m at my limit!”

“Mina, I still need you. I do. That... what you saw... it was a fucking outlet. But the demons in my head... it’s just another way to deal. It’s a part of our life-”

“Really? *Drugs?*” I narrowed my eyes at my stepfather. “*Infidelity?*” I shook my head in disgust. “What I saw in there was... it was...”

“You shouldn’t have seen that, Mina,” James said.

God, he *really* needed to stop talking. “Yeah, because you shouldn’t have been cheating on Mum in the first place! What the hell, James?” I spun back to Shay. “And *you*,” my voice

faltered. What was it exactly that he'd done that had hurt me so bad? Shay wasn't *mine*, not in the way James was to Mum. Not even close. He hadn't been doing any drugs, at least from what I saw. So why was I so hurt by him? I seized fistfuls of my hair and yanked on them, frustrated and confused.

"Mina," Shay said gently. "I'm sorry." But I couldn't speak. Why was his apology more important to me than James'? I squeezed my eyes shut and shook my head, but Shay kept going, "I'm sorry that you had to see that, and I'm sorry for all the stress I've put you under lately-"

"Stop! Stop it, Shay." Now that he was apologizing, it was like I couldn't handle it. It was easier to be angry with him when he was just being a douche. But now...

"Mina, you are all I have that is good. The darkness in my head, it's killing me. I'm falling into it and I don't know how to make it stop. All I know is that when you're with me, I feel better. That dark cloud in my mind goes away. I need to know I still have you. If I don't... if you don't... I..." his voice trailed off. Tentatively, I peek at him through my lashes and instantly regret it. His face breaks me. He looks so tortured, haunted... whatever those assholes at the club make him do, it was twisting him up. And goddamn it, I was the only one that kept him from diving completely in the deep end. Now guilt was rising from the pit of my stomach, just like I feared would end up happening.

I want to scream in frustration. I want to hit something. I wanted to run away and never look back. I look to James for help, but he seems to have given up. He was leaning back against the kitchen counter, his eyes on the floor, staring at nothing as he listened to everything his son said.

"Mina, please just... before you go for the night... just tell me that I have you still?" Shay begged me.

I felt sick again. I wanted to tell him to fuck right off. But the look he was giving me was so much like the ones I'd seen on his face when he had feared for me, when he had stepped in and sheltered me from the dangers of the world... the car

crash... Dana... Keenan in the woods... when he thought he had lost me a month ago...

I wiped the tears from my eyes and closed them, covering my face with my hands. I concentrated on my breathing... *in and out... in and out...* and finally, I reluctantly nodded. He exhaled harshly, his breath catching in a choked, strangled sob of relief, and without a word, I sidestepped him and ran down the hall to my room to lock myself in until they left.



## Chapter eleven



*Present Day*

*Mina: Seventeen Years Old*

*July*

AS LATE AFTERNOON descends into the evening on my birthday, people start to drink a little more, and the atmosphere begins to relax. I guess my being here was as nerve-wracking for these men as it was for me. But by now, I've finished my first cocktail, and am feeling pretty good about things. Shay and his friends have basically catered to me as the night wore on, and I got to say, it felt pretty good bossing these guys around. Cody brought me more of the potluck dishes to try, Aron changed up the playlist to better suit my taste (old rock, which was a favourite of mine), and Leif started filling me in on the more light-hearted stories that he and the guys have gotten into (like the time they'd all gotten so drunk, they thought the idea of streaking in the middle of winter through the main street of town was a fantastic idea, and Aron had gotten frostbite on his feet. He had ended up getting his pinky toe amputated). Shay, meanwhile, kept his promise and stayed close, even carrying me to the washroom twice before bringing me back to the birthday couch of honor.

I gradually finished my second drink as the guys started another pool game. Shay orders me *another* drink, which I end up consuming a little faster than the last one, and soon, I find myself lounging against him, feeling more laid back and laughing as the guys screw around with each other. I even forget about being nervous of the crowd, and am instead laughing at Aron as he heckles Cody who, as good as he is at pool, his friend is better, and he's apparently a sore loser about it.

As I giggle, Shay's hand is drawing little circles on my stomach with his thumb, but I barely notice. My head feels light, my stress is basically non-existent right now, and I just want to have fun. When Black Betty by Ram Jam starts blasting through the speakers, I whoop as Kate and the other girls get up and move to the open space behind the bar to dance. As much as I want to join them, I'm a little hindered by the block attached to me, so I stay where I am, swaying on Shay's lap and sing along instead. He smirks at me and shakes his head while pulling me in for a hug.

"It's nice to see you loosen up a bit, Sweetness." His mouth hovers close to my ear so I can hear him over the music.

I toss back the rest of my drink and slump against him, closing my eyes and smiling as I get comfortable.

Aron lets out a loud laugh. "Lightweight!"

"I've never had any alcohol before," I snap. "Fuck-face," I add with a sleepy sort of grin.

They all chuckle as footsteps stomp our way. A hand drops on top of my head and I jump in my seat. Tilting my head back, I find myself staring up at James. I smile wide at him and wave. "Hey, stepdaddy!" I say in a sing-song voice. "Where ya been?"

At once, James' dark brows furrow and he narrows his eyes. He scowls at the three guys hanging out across from us, and then to Shay, who has his arms wrapped around my middle and is resting his chin on my shoulder. "What in the FUCK, Shay?" he growls at him.

Shay grins mischievously and shrugs. “What?”

“Are you kidding? You let her drink? She’s a teenager!”

“Yeah, well, it’s no secret that we all drank when we were even younger than her,” he says, not sounding at all afraid of James. “And besides, it’s her birthday.”

I pout out my lip. “Uh oh, am I in trouble?” Then I burst into a fit of giggles.

James lets out a long, impatient sigh. “Fuck’s sake,” he mutters, “Raya wanted to bring out the cake. Can she even stand to blow out the candles or is she going to face-plant into it?”

“*Someone* is being a major fuddy-duddy.” I laugh and slap my knee. *Seriously, sometimes I’m so witty.* I feel Shay chuckle behind me, which only causes me to laugh even more.

“She’ll be fine,” he says, “I’ll hold her up.”

“You feeling okay, Mina?” James’ dark gaze looks worried. *Why? I feel great!* “You aren’t going to throw up on the cake Raya spent hours making for you, are ya?”

I shake my head and give him a thumbs up. “I’m A-Okay, daddy-o!”

“Oh, God help me...” James shakes his head and glares again at his son. “I’m going to pack up her gifts so she doesn’t fall and crush them. You make sure she doesn’t embarrass herself for the next half hour. Got it? Bull needs me to get a crew together to make a run into town for Elias tonight. *You’re* responsible for her, so *no more drinks!*”

Shay salutes him with a chuckle and we watch as he and Uncle Marty start gathering up my presents to load up in the truck.

I look over my shoulder at Shay and pout out my bottom lip again. “I wanted to open those.”

He leans forward and kisses the tip of my nose. “You can tomorrow, once you’re feeling a little mellower.”

I scoff at him and look over at Aron. “I demand sustenance!”

He laughs, tossing his head back. “And what does the birthday girl wish for?”

“Water,” Shay cuts in before I can say anything.

“I want another fruity drink.” Even to my own ears I sound whiny, and I cringe slightly. But it’s my birthday. Shouldn’t I be allowed to do what I want?

“They’re all out of those, Sweetness,” Shay whispers to me.

“Really?” I furrow my brow and glance over at Kate, who is drinking something that looks awfully similar to what I’ve been having. She’s leaning back against a table and Cody has an arm leaning on either side of her, caging her in. I’m momentarily distracted as I watch them, strangely fascinated by their open flirtation. When they kiss, I feel my cheeks flush a little. That would be nice right now. To be at home in my bed, wrapped up with a handsome guy, making out for hours...

When a set of ice blue eyes and beautiful blond hair flashes in my mind, I feel myself settle back against Shay, getting lost for a moment in my daydream. I can still smell the water, feel the sand beneath my feet, and his lips...

“Earth to Mina!” I snap to attention as Aron holds a glass of water in front of my face. He chuckles. “Where did you go just now?”

“Huh? What? I’m right here.” I say, swaying a little on Shay’s lap.

The guys all snigger, but my stepbrother makes me swallow back the entire glass of water, tilting the bottom up so that I can’t even put it down. I choke and cough and shoot him an angry look just as Raya appears with Helen at her side, and several of the other wives and kids, holding a beautiful two tiered pale pink cake, with white pearl buttons along the sides. Shay rises to his feet, holding me around the waist to help me balance, and I listen as everyone in the club breaks out into a

loud, boisterous rendition of ‘Happy Birthday’, ending with Leif attempting a long, off-key, rocker impression, complete with bad air-guitar. Aron whacks him on the back of the head and I stand there, swaying slightly, my cheeks turning red as I feel everyone’s gaze on me.

Raya holds the cake out. “Make a wish, sweetheart!”

I stare at the many, glowing candles that are lit upon the top tier, and find myself drifting off in thought. *What wish did I want to make? What did I want more than anything in the world?*

“C’mon, Mina! We’re dying of old age here!” Billy shouts from somewhere in the back.

I bit my lip, my good mood wavering slightly as I thought about the many things I wanted to wish for... but no amount of wishing would make them come true. Finally, an old wish came to mind... one I’d made four years ago at this very club.

*Keenan...*

I smile, take a big breath, and blow out the candles in one go.



“Shay, get her fuck out of here. And make sure she takes some aspirin and has some water before she goes to bed.” James glowers angrily at me. I’m sitting on the couch, joined by several of the other girls, Shay, Aron, and Leif. Cody and Kate disappeared some time ago, and Gavin is deeply engaged in a rather intimate looking conversation with Lindsey at the bar. I’m feeling wonderfully light, like I could do anything, carefree, without a single worry on my mind. I’ve been spending the last hour eating cake, talking with the girls while the guys lingered nearby, and laughing harder than I have in ages.

But then, my stepfather decides to be a major buzzkill and ruin the good time I’m having. It’s not even midnight. Why do

I have to leave? But before I can protest, Shay suddenly appears before me and easily pulls me up to my feet.

“Say goodbye to everyone, Mina,” he instructs me.

I waggle my fingers at the group and blow a kiss. “Toodlee-oo!” I sing to them as Shay chuckles and helps me along. His arm is wrapped around my waist, and he pulls one of my arms up and around the back of his neck, easily lifting my right side into the air. I squeal and laugh, feeling like I’m floating as we move through the throng of people. I hear multiple people wishing me a happy birthday, but I can’t focus on where they’re coming from, so I simply toss my head back and shout, “Thanks everyone! You all rock my socks off!”

“Jesus...” Shay mutters under his breath while the crowd breaks out into laughter, and we move down the long hall that leads outside. My head is swimming, but I’m enjoying myself too much to care. I stumble as we walk down the steps into the parking lot and I let out a loud whoop as my uninjured leg slips on the uneven gravel. Shay keeps me from falling, and practically drags me to the truck.

Propping me against the side while he unlocks it, he then lifts me up by my hips, and settles me into the passenger seat. “Think you can refrain from throwing up ‘til we get home?”

“Yes, Sir!” I give him a salute and giggle.

As soon as I hear the door slam shut, I rest my head back against the seat and let out a long sigh, my energy depleting with remarkable speed. My body goes limp like a ragdoll as the overwhelming urge to just fall asleep, right here in the truck, hits me. I don’t even care whether or not I make it to my bed. This feels comfortable enough.

The driver’s door opens, and I can feel the cab rock a bit as Shay climbs in, closing the door with a snap, and starts the engine. He fiddles with the controls for a minute, and the pleasant rumble of the engine only fuels my sudden fatigue.

“Mina? You holding it together?” his voice pulls me out of my lull.

“Like a mother-fucking *boss!*” I tell him, grinning wide. “Like stink on a monkey... like white on rice... like...” I stop talking when I open my eyes and the world starts to spin. *Oh. My. God.* It’s like I just stepped off a theme park ride. “Whoooooaaa,” I moan, covering my face with my hands as I try to orient myself.

“Shit, c’mon, suck it up for just ten minutes. Ten minutes and we’ll be home.” I feel the vibration from the engine and my body shifts slightly as we start to drive away. I don’t know if I can make it ten more minutes like this.

“You’re doing good, Sweetness.” I feel his hand in my hair and his fingers comb through the strands, like he’s trying to soothe me. “Just take deep breaths... in, and out...”

“I know how to breathe, Shay.” My voice is slurred, like I can’t even put enough energy into enunciating properly.

He chuckles, almost like he’s enjoying this, and I scowl, but keep my eyes closed. I can almost guarantee that if I watch all the turns we need to take to reach Maple Drive, it will only make the vertigo I’m experiencing even worse and I’ll end up spewing everywhere.

When I feel a pull back into my seat, I realize he’s picking up the speed. “Yo, Ricky Bobby, ease up on the gas. It’s a thirty-five zone,” I mutter when I peek through my lashes and see we’re passing by the edge of town.

“Calm yourself, you lush,” he sniggers again. “No one is going to pull *me* over.”

I scrunch up my nose at him. “Well, don’t *you* think high and mighty of yourself.”

He shrugs. “Hey, I speak truth. The cops in this area know not to fuck with me,” he says this with such affirmation, that even in my inebriated state, I have the sense not to question him. Instead, I tilt sideways until my forehead is pressed against the cool window and I peer out at the night, risking getting car sick. It’s dark out, but the light of the moon is enough that I can make out the stretch of road we’ve turned onto, flanked by beautiful forest. We’re nearly home now.

“Almost there, Mina. Just hold on, no puking, okay?” he says again.

“Holy crap, Shay, I knooooow! You’ve said it a bajillion times now. I got it!” Without looking, I blindly reach across the seat until I feel his thigh, and give it a pinch. When I go to pull away, he snatches my hand and holds on to it with surprising tenderness. It feels nice, like the way he used to hold my hand when I was a kid, so I relax and squeeze back.

It’s not long until we’re slowing down and turning up a dark, tree-lined driveway. As soon as he parks the truck and turns off the engine, I immediately turn to pudding and just want to curl up in bed and sleep. Before I know it, the passenger door is being yanked open and I nearly fall sideways out of the truck, the seatbelt the only reason I don’t face-plant onto the ground. I feel Shay reach around to unbuckle me, and I fall limply against him, finding it incredibly difficult to stand. I feel the rumble in his chest as he quietly laughs and then my body is swung up into the air as he carries me like a baby. I don’t have the energy to open my eyes, but I can still hear his boots crunching on the leafy ground outside the house, then the stomp of his steps on the porch before he unlocks the door and brings me in.

I curl up as best as I can in his arms, feeling semi-comatose as he carries me down the hall to our bedrooms. I hear a door open, and then the soft cushion of a mattress beneath my body. I sigh, having never felt so happy to be in bed. But as I shift, I feel the soft, jersey cotton comforter and sheets, rather than the silky feel of my blankets. When I inhale, the scents in the room smells of Shay’s cologne and leather hits me, and I realize that it’s *his* bed I’m lying in, and not my own.

“Shay?” I mumble in protest when I feel his hand on my foot, slipping my flat off. I hear it hit the floor with a loud smack. “Why am I here? Take me to *my* bed, please.” I try to sit up, but my head feels like it weighs fifty pounds, and I flop back onto the pillows and blankets, waiting for the world to stop spinning. This bed is way too comfy. Bigger than my double. Shay got a king sized one last year. I hear him moving



around the room for a minute, followed by silence. I don't realize how close I am to drifting off to sleep until his hand slides behind my head and he lifts me up a bit. "Wha-tha-fuh!" My words jumbled together but when he presses the rim of a gold glass to my lips, I stop. He makes me swallow two pills and I inhale the rest of the drink, then plonk back against the pillow.

I drift again and I try to get more comfortable, but the stupid cast keeps me from lying the way I like, curled up on my side like a baby in the womb. I feel Shay shift me over so I'm closer to the wall, and then feel the blankets slide out from under me. The mattress tilts a bit as he climbs in, and covers us both with his comforter. I smile, loving how soft everything is. Seriously, I have a great big brother.

But after a minute of silence in the dark room, Shay shifts a bit so that he's lying closer to my side. I feel the bare skin of his chest touch my side. Mmmm... he's warm. I shift a little closer, seeking his body heat. But I notice how he's mysteriously silent. Will he try to talk to me while I'm bombed out of my mind? I don't think I have the energy to pay attention to any of his weird, dark spiels right now. But when he remains silent, I allow myself to relax again. *Huh, I guess we're having an old-fashioned sleepover like we used to.* My drunk-ass seems to think this is great, like old times. It's not like we haven't done this before.

Out of nowhere, Shay's hands wrap around me and I'm pulled over a little more, until he tilts my face so that it's pressed against his neck. I mumble something about being smothered, but even to me, my sentence doesn't make sense. It comes out scrambled and fragmented. He just chuckles and buries his face into my hair.

"Go to sleep, Mina." he whispers to me.

"God, yes!" I mutter, trying to ignore how the room feels like it's spinning around us, even though I'm lying down and my eyes are closed. At least this bed is cozy.

I'm about to doze off again, when I feel something soft touch my forehead. At first, I furrow my brow in confusion

and am about to smack the spot, thinking it might be a spider, until it happens again, only at my temple, and I realize he's kissing me. The whisker on his chin is surprisingly soft on my skin as he moves his mouth down the side of my face. Hmm, Shay's kisses really *are* nice. Soft, with the rough brush of his whisker. I'm so freaking tired and in a drunken state of not-giving-a-crap, that nothing is really registering. That is, until he pulls back just a bit, and then I feel the press of his mouth on mine. I mutter, "F'king... wanna *sleep*... stop kissimppph..." How the heck can I pass out when he's doing this?

I blearily open my eyes as Shay forces his mouth against mine once more. When he feels me trying to shift away, he stops and gives my chin a little squeeze between his thumb and forefinger. "It's okay, Mina. Just relax, alright?"

"*Trying*... you're suffocating me... with your *mouth*... mmmm..." My words are heavily slurred now, and when I press my hands against his bare chest to push away, I realize I have zero energy and strength to follow through. I just want to *sleep*. I slump back into the bed, eyes closed, hoping he'll just shut up and leave me alone. I feel like a sleeping lioness right now. He's got to stop messing with me. I'm not in the mood. I'll use my claws, I swear!

He lets out a quiet, deep chuckle and strokes my hair. "Listen to me, Mina. Are you listening?"

I shake my head and try to turn away, grumbling under my breath. *Eff off, Shay!*

I feel his arm slide along the dip of my waist and up the back of my dress so that his hand is pressed against my bare skin, while the other gently seizes my chin to turn me back to face him.

"Look at me, sweetness. Open your eyes... good. Now, listen." Even in the darkness of the room, the light of the moon outside his window is enough that I can make out his features in the shadows. His dark brows are pulled low over his shining eyes, giving him a more frightening, intimidating disposition. Shay leans in close, so that his lips are nearly touching mine,

and I can feel the warmth of his breath on my face. “You want to be happy, right?”

I nod subtly, restricted by his grip.

“You don’t want to cause problems for dad and I, or the club?”

I shake my head this time.

“You don’t want to be the reason I have another breakdown again?”

I shake my head a little harder this time. *Abso-fucking-lutely NOT!*

A cruel smirk paints itself onto his otherwise handsome face, and he gives my chin a little shake. “So, here’s the answer to all of that, Sweetness.”

“What answer?” I slur.

Instead of telling me, Shay leans close and presses his lips to mine again. The best way I can describe his kiss is... demonically passionate. I’m caught up in a ball of trepidation and confusion, while Shay is ardent and fierce. The hands holding me are burning, clenching me so tight, there’s no way I won’t be bruised in the morning. His lips move against mine with a sort of desperate fervour, as if he is finally being given something he’s longed for, for ages. Shay *wants* me.

“Kiss me back,” he demands, his voice hoarse, before pressing his lips back to mine.

Thinking of what he just told me about keeping him stable, I obey and tentatively kiss him back. I’ve only kissed one guy before, so my lack of expertise is obvious. I have no idea what I’m doing, but Shay doesn’t seem to care. He groans from deep in his chest and the next thing I know, his tongue swipes along my lower lip. His teeth nip at it next, and I jump a little in surprise. My mind is so full right now, and his kisses are so intoxicating, I decide to just let go of any reservations I’d been holding onto and go with it. But then, his hand snakes down my stomach and slides the hem of my dress up, exposing my silk panties. Shay leans back a bit and I bite my lip,

remembering how he touched me after the spanking, and when he teased me the other night, and felt the anticipation building.

He shifts over my body, carefully moving my injured leg aside, before pushing away the other one, and settles between my hips. He leans down, his mouth at my ear, and whispers, “Do you want to feel good, Mina? Do you want me to help you forget your nightmares?” His words send a shiver up my spine. “That’s all I want, Sweetness, all we *both* want. To feel good. Do you want me to save you?”

I do. God, yes! If he can save me from my nightmares... that’s *all* I need! Though my head is pounding and I’m trying my best to fully grasp all that’s happening, I nod eagerly, hoping that he’ll stop teasing me and get on with it. I do want to feel good. I crave it. And he’s the only one who can give it to me right now.

“Mina?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you?”

My body starts to tremble and I shift a bit beneath him, my head spinning. I hadn’t heard his question, and I’m trying to get a grip, but his hands clutch my biceps, his leg holding me down, and he licks the spot just below my ear, distracting me again. “Mina!” he growls. “What do you say?”

*Oh shit...* What the hell did he ask me? He wanted to know if I needed him to save me, and I agreed. But what did he ask after? I shrink back into the blankets and pillows, as though hoping they’ll protect me from him. *Okay, keep him calm. Keep him happy. You don’t want him upset with you, you fool. If you don’t have Shay, who else do you have?*

Timidly, I reach up and touch the hollow of his cheek, my fingers lightly running down the length of his jaw, hoping to placate him, and I nod. The simple gesture seems to work, because his fingers seize the silk of my underwear, and slides them down my legs. I shudder a little beneath him, my heart swelling and breaking all at once. But right now, I don’t want to think. I just want to *feel!*

I whimper when I feel him move down my trembling body as his hand slides up the inner thigh of my left leg, tenderly caressing it.

“I’m going to taste you now, Mina.” he breathes against my pussy and I shiver.

For a moment, he doesn’t move and I’m about to sit up to make sure he’s okay when one of his hands glides up the middle of my chest and rests over my heart. Before I can react, his open mouth latches onto my clit and he sucks hard. I feel a jolt run through my lower body, and my hips spontaneously push up into the air. Shay chuckles darkly, his other hand encircling around the outside of my left thigh, holding it as his hand presses down on my lower belly, keeping me in place. His tongue swept out then, and slowly ran up and down between the folds before he latched onto my nub again, only to start circling it with his tongue.

I grip the blankets beneath me, my breaths coming out in small little gasps as I tilt my head back into the pillow, and close my eyes. Shay continues using his tongue, flicking it against my clit again and again, then takes several long, licks along my pussy, before he latches on and sucks hard again. *Holy. Shit does that feel good.* That familiar build starts to rise in my lower belly and I try to focus on it, willing, *praying*, that I’ll come. As his tongue moves faster, I feel the hand over my heart shift to the side until he finds the low collar of my dress. With a sort of furious swipe, I hear the material tear as he yanks it down to reveal the matching silk bra I’ve got on. He roughly pulls the cup aside and palms my breast while he buries his face between my legs.

I let go of the blankets and run my fingers through his hair, clinging to the long, dark locks as I feel my body start to pulse, and my cheeks flush as his tongue circles again and again...

My breathing starts to pick up, my heart racing as he sucks again when suddenly, his tongue moves down and actually enters my pussy. He groans against my flesh, the vibration of it only encouraging that hot throbbing sensation. The hand on my breast pinches my nipple as he plunges his tongue inside me, while his other hand drifts down to flick at my clit,

circling with his thumb while applying pressure on and off again and again in a way that soon has me quivering beneath his touch.

I'm too caught up in the feeling to think about the fact that it's *Shay* doing this, touching me so intimately, in a way that I never would have imagined, the whole time, his silver gaze looks up the length of my body at me like I'm his whole world. I hold his heated stare, biting my lip as that familiar coil starts to tighten. *Yes! This is what I wanted! What I needed...*

Shay's whisker rubs against the sides of my labia, his teeth running over my skin as his tongue continues to lap at me. His thumb slides up my folds and presses against my clit, and I can't help the small cry that escapes me. His moves faster and faster, and the hot, throbbing pulse that has been building inside explodes, sending that hot, rushing, tingling sensation surging through my body, turning my bones to mush. My body is shaking uncontrollably, and I pant with quick, gasping breaths.

Shay pulls back only to press kisses along my inner thighs, moving his lips up and over my belly. I lie beneath him, trembling and glowing, overwhelmed with a staggering shyness that I've never felt with him before. I can't bear to look at him in the eye, so I shut mine and bring my hands up to my chest, clenching them tightly together into fists. I'm overcome with another feeling, too, but at this moment, I can't figure it out. My mind is too scrambled to focus on anything other than Shay and how he just made me feel. He moves up onto the bed and smooths my dress back down. His mouth sweeps over mine with one last, firm kiss, and I can taste myself on his lips. He resettles on the bed beside me, being extra considerate by making sure that my broken leg is propped up on a pillow and free from his weight. With an arm draped over me, he guides my face back to himself so that it's pressed against the bare skin of his chest. His fingers lazily comb through my hair for a minute, the room now unbearably silent.

“Get some sleep, Sweetness.”



*The Past...*

*Mina: Fifteen Years Old*

*October*

“You can do better than that. That jump was shit.”

I spin on my heel and glare daggers at Keenan from his spot before the stage. He’s lounging back in one of the old, cushioned theatre chairs, smoking a cigarette, with his legs stretched before him, crossed at the ankles. He is the epitome of utter relaxation and not-giving-a-fuck. He reminds me of a housecat, beautiful but lazy. So hearing him criticize my dancing has me seething.

“Are you kidding me right now?” I snap at him, hands on my hips.

“Nope. Totally serious.” He brings his cig to his mouth and takes a long drag before letting the smoke slowly drift out from between his lips. “You’re all over the place today. I’ve seen you jump higher than that. And your back leg didn’t extend as much as it usually does.”

“Since when do you know anything about ballet?” I snap again as I move back across the stage, resuming my starting position.

“Since I started coming twice a week for years.” The corner of his mouth lifts. “I’ve seen you do better. You’re miles ahead from where you started. What’s going on?”

“Nothing.” My gaze moved to the floor as I stretched out my legs, preparing to try again.

“C’mon, you can tell me. The last note you gave me was filled with all kinds of rainbow and butterfly crap, but none of it was actually *real*.” I can feel his beautiful, icy blue eyes on me. “Like I give a shit about Becky and Ainsley.”

“Becca and Ashley.” I roll my eyes. He very well knew their names. I mentioned my friends enough in our letters and

conversations here that he should by now. But he continues to keep referring to them as *Becky* and *Ainsley*, for some reason. I think it was just to bug me.

“Doesn’t matter. The point is, you’ve been blocking.”

“No I haven’t,” I insist, still avoiding his observant stare.

“Yes, you have. C’mon, Sunshine. We’ve been talking for years now; I’ve seen you nearly every week. I know you pretty well, by now. And know something’s up. So spill.”

I *really* didn’t want to get into it right now. This theatre, my time with Keenan, it was my escape. My chance to get out of the house and bask in a few hours of rebellion and peace with him. The last thing I wanted to do was bring up my home life.

“Please, Key, just don’t push it right now...” I said softly as I bit my lip, holding in my anxieties and little stresses. I didn’t want to be a wet blanket and cry on his shoulder. What twenty-one year old guy would stick around for that? He wouldn’t. And I *needed* these moments of freedom with him.

“Okay.” he said finally, letting the subject drop. He knows when to push and when to back off by now. When I want to talk about anything with him, I will. But right now, the last thing I want to discuss was my drunk mother or my insane stepbrother threatening to beat up some guy from gym class because he was forced to be my dance partner.

I sigh in relief when Keenan stops prodding, and get into first position again, before I glide across the stage and push myself into the air. As I extend my back leg, I feel that same sharp pain that has been inhibiting me from successfully completing my jetes as of late. I hiss as the sharp twinge races up and down the back of my leg and stumble on my feet, limping slightly. Before I can move back into the starting position, Keenan is on his feet, crushing his cigarette beneath his heavy boot, and leaps leapt onto the stage, moving towards me so quickly it catches me by surprise.

“Sit!” he orders. I obey, only because my legs are shaking from overexertion. I’ve been pushing myself for months,



wanting to stand out amongst my peers at the dance studio. I sit down as he crouches on his heels at my side and reaches for my right leg, forcing me to extend it. I hiss again as the pain travels up and down my muscles, and he frowns, his brows pulling together. “Have you not been stretching?”

*Fuck, no...* I’m usually in too big a hurry to make it home after dance class. My curfew is strict as hell, and the few times I’ve been late, Shay freaked out and ended up picking me up on his motorcycle as I walked home. I ducked my head, avoiding Keenan’s accusatory scowl. My silence was enough.

“Mina!” he snaps at me. “You *have* to stretch! You’re going to injure yourself if you don’t! Isn’t that dancing 101 shit? Stretching?!”

“I know, I know!” I cover my face with my hands, frustrated by my own stupidity. “I just... I can’t be late getting home!” I left it at that, letting him put it together himself. He knew enough about my home life and how overprotective Shay was. Sure enough, he let out a disapproving grunt.

“I don’t give a shit how mad he gets... you stretch before *and* after you dance. Period. Or you’re going to fuck up your leg!” He sets my legs straight out before me and applies pressure to the tops. I grit my teeth and squeeze my eyes shut as he forces a stretch. “We’re going to do this every fucking time you dance, got it? It’s a stupid mistake to make, Mina.”

“I *know*, Key!” I snap, tired of his berating.

“Then *do* it!” He forces the stretch again, making me wince. “If you fuck up your chances of reaching your dream because of a stupid, careless mistake, and injure your leg, you’ll never forgive yourself. Understand?” His voice softens a little as he speaks, and he moves on to my other leg. I couldn’t swallow back the small cry from the sharp stretch. At once, his warm, rough hand moves underneath my calves and starts to massage the muscles.

I couldn’t help myself as I lay back on my elbows, relaxing into his touch. God, I needed this. It feels amazing. Maybe I should ask Mum if she can take me to a massage therapist once in a while.

Keenan's hands work expertly at the muscles on my calves, moving up behind my knees, his fingers and palms soothing the aches.

"Holy crap, how are you so good at that?" I ask him, opening my eyes, watching as he works away.

His expression suddenly shifts from sombre concentration, to troubled and a little alarmed. He tears his hands from my legs as though afraid of catching something. Confused, I watch as he stands and takes a step back, his expression chagrined.

"Keenan?" I whisper, bewildered by the guilty look on his face.

"It's fine, Sunshine. Just... just do your stretches. I'll get you some water." He turns away, jumping down from the stage. I did as he said, moving into a front split and bent my torso down until my nose touched my knee. He was right. I shouldn't be careless about this. It was a stupid decision on my part to skip stretching. I guess I figured the walk home would be enough. I was wrong.

I feel him tap the back of my head and I right myself as he hands me a bottle of water. "Thanks." I smile up at him. He doesn't say anything as he shoves his hands into the pockets of his dark grey leather cut, still looking a little perturbed. I couldn't take the strained silence any longer, and after drinking half the bottle, I screwed the cap back on and got to my feet. "I'm ready to try again."

His frown shifts into that crooked grin of his that I love so much. "Okay. Don't fuck it up this time." He moves away, heading back to his chair in the front row and starts digging through the black backpack he always brings with him. As per our after-rehearsal ritual, he gets out the snacks he always brings with him, setting down the containers and packages on a small towel that he lays out on the floor. Today, it's homemade turkey sandwiches, some apples, plus a bag of jerky for him, and a container with a mixed green salad for me, all made by him. The fact that he does this every time we get together is so incredibly touching and thoughtful.

Keenan knows that sometimes when I get home at the end of the day, the house is empty. Shay and James are working but Mum... God only knows where she is. Though I've assured him time and time again that I'm fine and can cook for myself, he still brings something along with him to share with me. He always finds little ways to spoil me, but it doesn't feel like he's forcing it, or even bothered by it.

One day, I scraped my knee on the stage after a bad fall. The next time we met up here, he brought a first aid kit which he stashed away, hidden in the mess behind the dusty old curtains in the back, for any future cuts and scratches. Another time, I mentioned how frustrating it was practicing using the music on my phone. It was out of date and Shay refused to get me a new one. He claimed all I really needed one for was to get a hold of *him*. The next week, Keenan gave me a fancy new player, loaded with all the songs I liked to dance to. While I rehearsed, he manned it, pausing it when I needed, or restarting it if I had to go again.

When I've gone through my routine for about the fiftieth time, I'm sweating and a little shaky, my body about ready to give out. Keenan makes me go through my stretches before he allows me to join him on the floor before the stage to munch on the small meal he brought for us.

"So, what costume have you chosen for the Halloween dance, Sunshine?" he asks as he takes a bite out of his sandwich. I told him last week about the dance at my school that I was hoping to attend with my friends. He'd been all for it, and we spent the better part of a Sunday afternoon brainstorming on costume ideas.

"I really like the 'leftover' suggestion you had," I said, digging into my salad.

He chuckles under his breath. "You won't regret it, I promise you. No one else will have anything like it. You'll stand out, for sure."

"I still don't understand how you came up with it." I snigger.

Keenan shrugs, trying to look casual and detached. “When I was a kid, we didn’t have much money, love. I had to make do with whatever I could find around the house...”

My head snaps up at that. I was trying to picture him, little Key, a small boy with bright blue eyes and blond hair, alone in his trailer while his dad was at the club and his mother... well, that was another story. He was often left to fend for himself. I tried to imagine him scrambling through his house as a kid, searching for something that could pass as a costume so he could go trick or treating and get a bunch of candy. It broke my heart.

If he was Shay, he would want me to coddle him. To wrap my arms around his neck and hold him while he battled the darkness in his mind. Not Keenan. No, he sat there, munching away on his meal, looking as though he didn’t have a care in the world. But I could sense the deflection, the ruse. He *did* hurt. He just never openly talked about it with anyone. Apparently, I’m the only one he’s ever spoken about his mother to. Why he opened up to me, I have no idea, but I took that olive branch that he extended my way and clung to it fiercely.

*God damn drugs... The fucking Faceless... As if I didn’t have enough of a reason to hate the whole gang aspect. And seriously, FUCK addiction... fuck it!* I thought furiously as thoughts of my own mother stormed to the forefront of my mind.

Keenan’s bright blue gaze flickered up and caught me staring at him wistfully, and he made a face, his lips pursing, and shook his head at me. “Don’t, Mina.”

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t pity me.”

“I-”

“Tell me about what Becky and Ainsley are going to wear... what was it? A sexy smurf and a sexy drainpipe or something?”

I sigh and shake my head at him. He does this every time a little piece of himself slips through his tough facade. He turns the conversation to something ridiculous, hoping it will distract me. But I know better. I know it's because he's uncomfortable. I let him believe that it's worked and correct him. Becca is going as a sexy My Little Pony, and Ashley is going as a sexy Tin Man. I really don't know where they come up with this stuff...



“Where the hell have you been?” Shay steps out onto the porch as I stroll around the corner of the long driveway leading up to the house. The whole area is surrounded by trees and woods, so when the house finally comes into view, Shay is out the front door, waiting for me and looking absolutely livid. The sun had set about twenty minutes ago but there was still a little light left in the sky that I could easily watch my step on the uneven dirt drive. Keenan had dropped me off after we had lingered for a little too long at the theatre, though it was a little way down the road, just to be cautious. He had watched as I headed up the drive to my home. When I looked back, he was still there, sitting in his charcoal SUV, keeping an eye out for me. He gave me a little wave, which I returned, and then I rounded the corner, disappearing from his view. The moment I lost sight of him, I felt a pang in my chest that I'd never felt before. Huh, wonder what that was all about? Shaking it off, I fought back a smile the entire walk up to the house.

“I was practicing,” I said. It was a half-lie, but even so, I kept my gaze on the ground. I hated lying to anyone, and I was terrible at it. Shay was so observant, he easily picked up on it when I did, even when I thought I was doing a good job at concealing certain truths from him.

“You're supposed to be home by six. It's 6:45, Mina!” he scolded. “I was about to tear apart the town looking for you!”

I slowly approached the house, my eyes still on the ground as my smile and thoughts of Keenan quickly vanished.

“Sorry, lost track of time...” I muttered and trudged up the steps to the porch where he was waiting. As I tried to move past him, one of his large, rough hands shot out and stopped me, holding my shoulder. I froze in my tracks. His other hand moved up under my chin, tilting my head back so that I was looking up into his silver gaze. *Oh, shit... can he tell?*

“Lost track of time?” he said, his voice filled with doubt.

“I-I just wanted to get some more practice in for dance. Auditions for the town’s Christmas Pageant are November first.” When he continued to stare at me suspiciously, I quickly changed tact, squirming under the searching look in his silver eyes. Occasionally, I could fool Shay, as long as I made it sound like an appeal to him. “I know you are usually at the club on Saturday’s... but you did say you were going to come watch me try out, right?” I made my voice sound as sad as possible and let my chin quiver slightly in his grip. Seriously, sometimes I needed an Oscar for my performances. I needed them to be believable so Shay wouldn’t go off the deep end.

At once, his face softened and he pulled me into a tight hug. “Of course I’ll be there, Sweetness. I’ll pick you up after school and take you.”

I hugged him back feeling like, for a brief moment, the old Shay was holding me. He was still one of the only people who made me feel truly loved. When he hugged me like this, I couldn’t help but wrap my arms around his waist and sink into his embrace, and pray he wouldn’t see through my guise. He kissed the top of my head. “You hungry?”

“Starving!” Though I was actually still full from Keenan’s little picnic, I was just so filled with relief that he bought it, I’d force some more food down my throat.

“I made lasagna.” He kept an arm around my shoulders and led me inside, locking the door behind us. As usual, James and Mum were gone, at the club no doubt, and it was just the two of us here. Over the years, Shay had gotten more creative with our meals, and when I was home, he enlisted my help. But on days when I had practice, he took it upon himself to cook for us both. That is, if he wasn’t working.

“I’m going to shower first,” I said, heading off to the bathroom that we shared. “I stink after dancing for so long.”

“No need to tell me that.” He wrinkled his nose playfully. “I could smell you coming down the driveway.”

“Ass.” I glared at him and headed off, ignoring his amused chuckle.

I took a hot shower, letting it ease my sore muscles, and my mind drifted to Keenan. The little bits and pieces of himself that slipped through his tough-guy front were so heartbreaking. Lost his mother to addiction. While mine was an alcoholic, his was into drugs. He basically raised himself in a shitty trailer, learning how to cook, clean his clothes, and made sure he was in school everyday. But when his mum died when he was nine, his dad started grooming him for biker life. And now, he’s a full fledged member of the Black Spades. But he was different from Shay. I don’t know exactly what the Spades were about, but whatever it was, it was clear Keenan, though he had obviously seen some shit, wasn’t as damaged as my stepbrother.

I turned off the water and toweled off, plaiting my hair into a French braid, changed into a pair of grey sweats and a lavender sweater, and headed out to the kitchen. I sat at the table where a plate of hot food waited for me: lasagna, peas, and a piece of garlic toast. I dug in as Shay cleaned up the kitchen.

“How was school?” he asked, drying off some dishes from earlier.

“It was okay. We’re studying the Russian Revolution. It’s boring as hell, but I think I’ll do alright on the first test,” I said. I’d already gone over the first few chapters several times, trying to familiarize myself with the timeline and foreign names. “And Becca and Ashley got into a fight today.”

He scoffed and rolled his eyes. My two friends, who were incredibly close with each other growing up, but as of late, were constantly butting heads over petty shit. However, it was no less entertaining for everyone else in our group. “What now?” he asked, his tone bored.

“Well, Scott asked Ashley to the Halloween dance, but Becca’s been crushing on him since the beginning of last summer. Anyways, Ashley said yes, and when Becca found out, she lost it and they had a hair pulling match in the cafeteria. Mrs. Taylor walked in and gave them both detention. Now, they are both in charge of helping the social committee decorate the gym for the dance.” I smirked. I’d drifted further and further away from those two over the years, so I never felt like I had to pick sides or intervene when they went at each other.

Shay rolled his eyes. “Halloween dance.” He shook his head. His school, St. Matthews, had been a disciplinary institute. They never held dances. “You all are fifteen years old... why do you need to go to dances?”

“Because they’re fun and you get a night out with your friends.”

“You’re not going.”

“Yes I am. James already said it was okay.”

Shay’s head snapped to me. “He did? Did someone ask you to go?” His tone had dropped then, a danger sign. Whenever he did this, I knew he was getting to a point where he was getting angry and could possibly lose his shit. Ever since I hit puberty and started getting male attention, Shay had become increasingly protective and strict (*God, poor Eli*). It was annoying as hell, and I was terrified if a guy ever came up to ask me anything, worried for his safety in case my crazy stepbrother saw us together. He was taking his role as big brother a little too seriously.

*It’s not as a stepbrother...* a small nagging voice at the back of my head whispered to me. *No...* I instantly quashed that down and ignored it.

“I’m going with my friends,” I clarified. “I want to go as leftovers.”

He raised a brow at me, his anger receding. “Leftovers? What the fuck is that?”



“I’m going to roll myself up in tinfoil and write meatloaf on my side.” I smiled inwardly, trying to picture a young Keenan dressed this way, heading out around the trailer park, trick or treating. I bet he looked super cute!

Shay tossed his head back and laughed hard. “Oh shit, Mina. You are something else. Are you sure you don’t want to go as a slutty nurse? A slutty snowman? A slutty showerhead or some shit?”

“Could I?” I asked, knowing what he will say.

“No.”

“Well, then, leftovers it is!”

He smirked and shook his head, putting the rest of the dishes away. I cleared my plate and washed it, letting it air dry in the rack and sat down on the edge of the couch, my muscles screaming at me from the endless training I had been putting myself through. Shay meandered over and lay out on the couch so that his head was resting in my lap, his face angled up at me. His silver eyes were focused on my face and I idly ran my fingers through his long, messy hair, our usual custom when we relax together.

I was almost always on edge around Shay, trying to think of ways to keep him calm and mellow. I learned that one of those things was cuddling up and having me stroke his untidy, dark locks. So I obliged as often as I could. Or at least, as often as he was around.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

I hated how perceptive he could be. He was always so aware of me, if I was off in any way. When I was younger, it was great because I could lean on him. But now, I was just afraid of him diving into darkness if I mentioned *anything* that could possibly set him off. The *last* thing I was going to do was tell him that my mind was preoccupied with a man whom he loathed, but was one I found myself fantasizing about as of late. “I’m just... tired, I guess.”

“Tired, you guess?” He narrowed his gaze on me. “I call bullshit. Tell me what’s up.”

I sighed and tilt my head back so it was resting on the back of the couch, staring up at the high beamed ceiling. “Shay, what did I do?”

“What?” he snapped, sounding surprised.

“Why are you so hard on me?” Deflection. Another tool of defence against Shay. *Thank you for teaching me that one, Key.*

“What do you mean? How am I hard on you?” He reached up and held my chin between his thumb and forefinger, but I refused to look down at him.

“For instance... my curfew. I’m not a bad kid. I don’t drink, or smoke or do drugs. I’ve never shoplifted...” I remember telling him about how Becca and Ashley had gotten away with taking a few tops from a favourite outlet of theirs. Shay had been pissed and warned me against doing such things (which now in hindsight, is a bit rich coming from him). “I get good grades and I keep myself busy with dance, and yet, you keep me locked up in here like I’m a prisoner.”

“Do you want to go out?” he said lightly. “I’ll take you anywhere you want to go.”

“I’d like to go out with my friends,” I stipulated.

“I’m your friend, Mina. I’m your best friend, aren’t I?”

I sighed again, weary. Yes, in a way, Shay *was* my best friend.

“Those other girls are useless idiots. Honestly, you are wasting your time with them. In five years, you won’t even be talking to them anymore.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Yes, I do.”

I rolled my eyes and let out a long breath. “It’s not just the curfew, I mean...” How could I explain this? “Remember Eli?” I whispered tentatively. I was playing with fire right now, I know, but I wanted to ascertain his reaction to the idea of a guy being around me.

But when I mentioned Eli Jacobson, Shay bristled and angled my head down so that I was looking at him. He was glaring now and his silvery eyes were sparkling with rage. “Has the little fucker come back? Has he come near you again?”

Panic. Panicking now. *Oh God, Mina, you are so stupid!* “He just walked me home that one time... Jesus Christ!” I tried to get up off the couch, but he wrapped his arms around my waist and held me there. I fought back the resentment that was rising in my belly. Because of Shay, my dating life was non-existent. No one looked my way. Even my friends were starting to scatter to the wind. But if I dared speak up, I worried about Shay losing it. So I was kept in a constant state of upset...

“None of those boys are good enough for you, Mina,” Shay said, his head still in my lap as he kept his arms around me. He buried his face into my stomach, holding me close. “None of them deserve you. You’re *my* girl. How could you let him hold your hand like that?”

I tried shoving him away, but he kept me there, with his face pressed into the material of my sweater over my belly. I felt my lip tremble as I pushed against him, my breathing coming fast. When he spoke possessively of me like this, I couldn’t breathe. I needed to get away. But he was a solid weight and didn’t budge an inch.

“Mina,” he snapped, “other guys... they’ll hurt you. They’ll use you up and throw you away like you’re garbage! They’ll never love you, or cherish you. They won’t appreciate what you are... how perfect you are. Not like I do.”

This was something he always said to me about other guys. They would hurt me. They would use me. Then they would dump me. But never him. Despite the fact that Shay whored himself out all the time to women, he claimed that only he would ever truly love me. I knew he loved me in his way; that our bond was close. Despite him telling me that we were not siblings, I loved him like an older brother. But as the years were passing, I could feel a shift, one that I was not

comfortable with, but I didn't know how to gain control. Not when I was so afraid of upsetting him.

Shay pressed his mouth over my stomach, but the sweater I wore dulled the touch. His fingers were holding me so tight, it hurt. I lightly touched his wavy hair again, trying to calm him down.

"You can't let other guys touch you; they have no right. That punk kid was holding your hand and I wanted to fucking kill him. I know what he wanted from you. What he would have taken if he got the chance. I'm glad I kicked the shit out of him. I'd do it again if he gave me half a reason to." I remain silent, knowing that it was best for Shay to talk himself out. "What if he did something to you? What if he tried to take you away from me? Fuck, Mina... there have been too many close calls..." I knew he was talking about the time my mother had tried to run off with me and crashed her car. And then there was the time Dana had attacked me, and then only two years later, there was the day Keenan had me in his arms in the woods. I never forgot the look on Shay's face. I didn't know what it was at the time, but now, as I reflect back, I realize it had been actual fear. I'd never seen that look before on him, and hadn't since.

"I would die if something happened to you, Sweetness," he whispered and shuddered when my finger slid over his ear.

"Nothing is going to happen to me, Shay," I said, trying to keep my voice calm and steady, and closed my eyes to keep the tears from falling. The little warning voice at the back of my head was screaming at me, but there was nothing I could do in this moment to stop what was happening. "...but I need a little breathing space. I need some freedom."

"No, it's not safe. It's not safe out there. Not without me to protect you."

*He's paranoid...* I thought. It was something I picked up about him as he got older. He was always suspicious, always watchful, and always ready for an attack...

"I'm okay, Shay. I'll be fine. You can't live thinking that the worst is always going to happen. How can you be happy

existing that way?”

“I’m happy when I’m with you,” he said and nuzzled into my belly. “When I’m with you, that’s when I feel at peace.”

“You need to find yourself a woman, Shay,” I sniggered, going for humour to ease the tension. “And not one of those club ho’s. I mean a nice girl who adores you and cooks for you and makes you smile every day.”

His grip on me simply tightened but he didn’t say anything for a few minutes. “Don’t ever leave me, Mina.” he whispered, his voice muffled against my sweater.

I felt like I was going to choke. I kept myself still as I fought to breathe and blinked hard to make my tears go away. That familiar ball of anxiety in my chest was growing again and my nerves were nearly shot. I didn’t like the demanding words he used, or the possessiveness behind them. We’ve been over this. That whole blow-up at breakfast two weeks ago when I had announced I was going away to pursue a career as a ballerina... I never told him I would stay.

I sighed heavily and continued stroking his hair. At my silence, his grip tightened and he shuddered, but he didn’t press it.



“I can’t, Key,” I sob as I try again to pull my leg back toward my chest.

“You have to, Mina,” he says, standing over me as I lay on my back on the stage. “I’ve seen you do this before,” he goes on, sounding a little exasperated. Why won’t he look at me in the eye? He seems to be looking everywhere else but at me.

“I *have*, but I also wasn’t in as much pain then,” I hiss at him, annoyed by his bossiness. He wasn’t Miss Riley, but he certainly acted like her. *Sit up! Suck in your belly! Extend, extend, extend!* I try again to pull my leg, hooking my hands behind my knee, but I just felt too weak today. It had been a rough night. Shay came home acting like he just discovered

the cure to world hunger, though I know he would never celebrate as loudly as he did over such a selfless notion. He was slightly inebriated as he stumbled into the house, laughing and joking around with his friends who followed him in. Luckily, Mum and James were out on a date night together, and weren't home to be disturbed. I shoved my pillow over my head, trying to drown out the noise as he and his buddies continued their little celebratory party in the main room. I couldn't make out much of what they were saying. Just the occasional *guttled... scarred... screamed like a little girl... Aw, shit, there's fucking blood under my nails...*

I can only imagine what it was he was talking about. It was moments like this that Shay gave in to the demons in his head and revelled in the horrors of his job. And he and his friends partied and celebrated into the early morning hours. Now here I was, exhausted, sore from endless dance classes, and all I wanted was to lie on this stage and sleep.

I released my leg, letting it fall on the wooden planks of the stage with a loud thunk, and lay there, eyes closed, feeling like I was on the verge of crying my heart out. Covering my face with my hands, I tried my best to control my breathing, but it just came out in quick, shuddering breaths. Next thing I knew, Keenan was on his knees at my side, lifting my leg up until he was pushing it into my chest. My eyes flew open in shock when I saw how close his face was to mine as he bore down, helping me stretch.

Unable to help myself, my gaze flickered down between us, and I flushed red when I realized that he was basically lying over me, holding himself up on one elbow, while his other arm and shoulder was pushing my leg back. His body didn't touch mine, but I could feel the heat radiating off of him. *Holy fuck...*

Keenan kept his eyes on mine the entire time, so close that our noses were nearly touching. It was only for a minute, before he released my leg to bring up the other one. "How does that feel?" he asked as he leaned forward against that one, pushing it to my shoulder.

I grunted from the strain. "It's... good. Tight."

“Mm-hmm,” he nodded, his eyes drifting over my face. His expression was unreadable, blank, with no sign of his usual playful smile. My hands pressed against the floor to keep them steady as my body began to tremble. “You look tired, Mina. Have you not been sleeping?”

“Just last night...” I couldn’t stop myself from yawning right in his face. But Keenan was undeterred. He just smirked.

“You’ve been killing it lately,” he says. “Don’t let the assholes you live with fuck it up for you.”

As usual, Keenan always seemed to know exactly what was bothering me, even if I didn’t share details with him. He could just... tell.

Being so close to him, I found myself getting lost in his gaze, picking out the light and dark shades of blue in his eyes. I wondered, were his eyes like his mother’s? As mine were?

When his blue gaze flickered over my face, then paused on my mouth, I felt my heart flutter and my palms turned clammy. Was he going to...?

“Okay. Now, get up and let’s get going.” I blinked, and he was gone, having set my leg down and was already on his feet, jumping down from the stage to take his usual seat. “I have a meeting at the club tonight that I can’t be late for.” I lay there for a second, my mind whirling and confused. Keenan had never touched me in a way that made me uncomfortable. Mostly because of his adverse reaction to it.

For the rest of the afternoon, he watched me dance, teasing me when I messed up, but always ended up encouraging me to try again. Whatever had just happened, I clearly had read too much into it.

When we were through, after eating another meal prepared by him (cold pasta salad, bacon sandwiches, and some mandarin oranges), he led the way outside the theatre. In the distance, the sun was starting to set, reminding me of my stupid curfew. I glowered at the sunset, knowing that when I got home tonight, it would be to an empty house. Mum and James were going out together, and Shay had club obligations.

A loud, obnoxious caw snapped me out of my sudden dark mood. At once, I peered up into the trees until I spotted the beautiful black bird in the canopy, eyeing Keenan and I as we stood there in the golden sunlight.

“Bad crow,” I whispered, my lips curling up into a small smile. The simple word, *dad*, slowly ebbed in and out of my mind, as it always did when I spotted his favourite black birds. When I turned back to Keenan, it was to find him watching me with a curious expression on his face, “What?”

But he doesn’t say anything for what felt like a full minute, his gaze piercing through me in a way that left me speechless. Why was he looking at me like that?

“Just... seeing you standing there in this light... with your sad, little smile...” He lets out a sharp, shuddering exhale. “You are breathtaking.” I stare up at him as he reaches out and very lightly cups my cheek, his touch burning my skin. “I’d just like to see your real smile... not the forced ones you give me when you hide behind the so-called good things in your life... not the sad ones you make when you get lost in thought as you relive moments of your past that haunt you... your *real* smile.” His thumb brushes my cheek so softly, it’s like the feather touch of a butterfly’s wings.

“*I* want your real smile, Mina. And one day, I’ll get it,” he says, the corner of his mouth lifting in that beautiful crooked grin as he gives me that slow, sexy wink I love so much. “See you around, Sunshine.”



## Chapter twelve

*The Present*

*Mina: Seventeen Years Old*

*July*

WHEN I OPEN MY EYES, the first thing I become aware of is how dry my mouth is. *Yeuuuch!* I make a face as I smack my lips and try to sit up, but my head is swimming, and I swear, someone must have used a nail gun on my skull last night because it's *pounding*. So I sag back into bed, my eyes squeezed shut, and I take a minute to gather myself. Slowly, my other senses start to kick in, and I realize how different the sheets feel beneath me... soft, but not silky. The air smells of leather and... *Shay!*

My eyes fly open as last night's memories come crashing back to me. My birthday at the club, drinking, playing pool, sitting with Shay and his friends, sitting *on* Shay, then there's a bit of a blank space after that. I can't remember how we got home.

Beside me, I hear a deep, breathy moan, and the mattress rocks a little as Shay rolls over, still asleep. I stare at him, a strange numbness washing over me like a cold shower as the

rest of the night's events come back to me. His kisses, his touches, his *tongue*... how I chased that feeling, how greedy I was to feel something that didn't make me feel afraid or alone. But all of that was followed by something else, something that seemed to wake up in my brain and latched on, but I'd been too drunk and exhausted to focus. And now, finally, I fully understand what it is he wants from me. *Exactly* what he wants from me.

Not wanting to think about this here, I start to shimmy myself down the bed, silently cursing my stupid broken leg. Luckily, he seems to have fallen into a deep slumber, and doesn't move an inch as I unsteadily slide off the mattress and cautiously rise to my feet. I keep my eyes on him the entire time that I maneuver myself around his room. All I want right now is a giant glass of water, and to put some space between us. I fully intend to lock myself in my room until he leaves... *if* he leaves. For the first time in a week, I actually hope that he does. I desperately need to sort out my feelings...

In the bathroom, I wash my face, scrubbing at the skin when I see that my makeup is smeared down one side. I'd take a hot shower if I could, but I don't have the energy to wrap up my leg, right now. So I stick my head under the faucet and swallow as much water as I can, before I breathlessly dry my face and stumble to my bedroom. After carefully locking the door, I hobble over to my bed and collapse onto it.

I stare up at the ceiling, an odd feeling of hopelessness washing over me, and I silently cry as I focus on the patterns in the wooden grains of the boards above. Soon, great shuddering gasps wrack my body like I can't get enough air. I shove a fist between my teeth and bite down, desperately trying to hold back the urge to let go and bawl my eyes out, to keep myself from waking Shay.

Laying there in a quaking mess, I think back on every moment I can remember with him... Was this something he had always wanted, but repressed, because it had been taboo and not to mention, illegal? Had he been expecting this all along? I remember how his fingers felt against me, and how I had stopped fighting it as the sensations he stirred up started to

overrule every other thought in my head. I remember how good it felt. And now, I realize what was actually going on.

I remember what it felt like each time after Shay did anything to me. I wanted *him* happy, but there was a small bubble of shame in my stomach that I ignored, because I've been so fucked up lately, I didn't want to pay attention to anything that made me feel bad.

When I compare last night, and all those other little moments with Shay, to how I felt with *Keenan*... there's no comparison. With Keenan, I know he is selfless with me. I know he wants me to succeed and get out of this shithole. The feelings I get when I'm around him are *everything* to me. While Shay, he's more like a crutch.

The more I relive last night, the harder I find it to breathe. My hands start to shake and they even feel a little numb. I gasp for air, finding that I can't get enough...

My body responds like it's on autopilot, like it knows exactly what I need to regain control. While my mind is in turmoil, my arm swings down, reaching under the edge of the bed until it finds that familiar knot in the floorboard. I twist my body on its side as I slide the panel back, and reach in for the burner cell. My fingers wrap around it like it's a lifeline and I quickly power it on as I fall back against my pillow, trying desperately to calm my breathing. As soon as the cell comes to life, a message comes through, and I immediately open it.

**Captain Stud Muffin: Hey there, Sunshine, happy 17<sup>th</sup> birthday! From what I heard, it was quite the rager. At least, that's what it sounded like from outside.**

I still as I read his words. He had come by the Beasts club? *Oh my God! Keenan, you idiot!* I know he hadn't come inside, obviously. But he can be so stupid sometimes. Why would he risk himself like that? I keep reading.

**When you've had some aspirin, food, and water, go check out the old spot. I wish I could have given it to you in person but... I'm a lot of things... crazy? Yeah, a little bit. Good looking? Not even a question. Charming and super suave? Obviously. But suicidal? Not on my list. Happy birthday, love. I'll see you soon.**

The anxiety that had been eating away at me temporarily subsides as I read his words over and over. Every time I read, *Happy birthday, love, and I'll see you soon*, my stomach flutters and my heart hammers excitedly in my chest. So I *am* going to see him again! And I can't believe he got me a gift. I desperately want to go see it now, but Shay is home, and James... well, I have no idea where he is. He might be here, and I can easily find out in a minute by simply checking the garage.

In the end, the anticipation is eating away at me, and I decide to go check. I need this right now. I feel so lost and overwhelmed that I am desperate for anything that can help center my emotions. My crutches are still in Shay's room, so I don't even bother getting them. Instead, I quietly slide my leg along the floor as I use the wall to steady myself. When I get to the kitchen, I find what I'm looking for by the front door, a cane that James bought for me weeks ago, for when I would be out of my cast. I grab a hold of the flat handle and use it to semi support myself as I quietly disarm the alarm, and step out onto the front porch.

It's still early in the morning, and the sun is slowly rising over the trees in the distance. Everything is washed in beautiful pale, pink light, and dew drops decorate the grass like shining little crystal beads. To my relief, James' motorcycle isn't here, which makes it a little safer for me to be doing this. Any time Shay has partied hard, he's slept in till the afternoon, so I feel pretty confident to quickly check the back. I move as swiftly as I can, grunting a little when my stupid cast catches on a pit in the ground, or grinds against a stone.

But I manage to get around to the boulder in the back and breathlessly take a seat on it and wipe my brow.

My hands tremble a little from nerves and excitement as I move aside the smaller stones that are piled up on the side of the house, and find a small, white package. It's not wrapped, nor is there a card, but obviously this was what Keenan has left for me to find.

Unable to resist waiting for when I'm back inside, locked in my room, I rest comfortably on the rock with my back against the logs of the house, and open the lid. Inside, is a solitaire pink pearl necklace on a fine gold chain. I stare at it, finding it hard to believe that this is the gift he bought for me. I tell myself that it must be fake, but the longer I study it, the more I doubt it. It's utterly perfect and beautiful, and in the pale morning light, it still manages to shine. Tentatively, I touch it, my heart twisting and constricting. Keenan bought this for *me*...

My mind flashes to our day on the beach and to that time I had tried to help him Christmas shop. I remember when I'd encouraged him to buy his girlfriend a necklace just like this. He seemed reluctant to spend so much on her, whoever she was. And now here I am, and he bought it for *me*. I don't even realize I'm crying until one of my tears falls onto the soft, silk cushion in the box that cradles the pearl. I quickly shut the lid and tilt my head back, closing my eyes as I try to get a grip.

This gift means so much to me, and not because of its value. The meaning is in the memory, in my mind, signifying the start of our relationship. It was the day Keenan reached out and provided me a lifeline, a connection outside of my family, someone to turn to when I needed support or safety. He has been there the whole time, listening to everything I've ever told him, always promising to be there, and coming through for me.

I let out a shuddering sob, unable to hold it in any longer, and cover my mouth with one hand as I hold the package tightly to my chest with the other.

*Keenan.*

*Keenan...*



Shay is still asleep in his room, and I hoped to avoid him as much as possible today, but I needed to speak with James first. I'd heard his motorcycle pull in about half an hour after I had come back inside and locked myself in my bedroom. He came in, armed the house, and headed upstairs, most likely to catch a bit of shuteye after a long night. Spurred by Keenan's gift, I forged a plan in my mind, one that will hopefully help stop this... *whatever* this thing is between Shay and I. So, I'd hidden the necklace and phone under the floorboards beneath my bed and got a few more hours of sleep before the sound of James moving around the kitchen woke me up. Grateful for the opportunity to have a moment alone with him, I quickly climbed out of bed. It was early afternoon by this time, and I stumbled into the kitchen to see him at the stove, making some scrambled eggs and sausage.

"Morning, Baby Girl." James smiled at me, as I sank into a chair at the table.

I had changed from my dress into a pair of pink sweats and a black Celtic Beasts club tank top, and my hair was up in a ballerina bun.

James was wearing his plaid, cotton pants that he liked to sleep in, and nothing else. Like every other guy that was a part of his gang, he had tattoos all over. There was a Celtic cross on the left side of his neck, a Celtic dragon across his back, and tribal tattoos up and down both arms. He also had my mother's name on his chest, Emily, his newest tattoo, which tugged at my heartstrings whenever I saw it. He had Shay's and my name scribed on his skin, too, on his inner left forearm in black script. I had been twelve when he had gotten my name permanently etched onto his skin, and had been incredibly touched by the gesture.

James put a plate of eggs, toast and sausage in front of me, kissed my forehead, and moved back to the stove to make

more. He had a cigarette hanging between his teeth as he cooked and his dark, silver streaked hair fell over his brow.

“James, may I ask you something?”

“Of course, what’s up?” he said, without looking up.

“It’s about college.”

His shoulders tensed for just a second before he resumed what he was doing. It had been a slight movement, but I had caught it. “What about it?”

“Well, I had always planned on studying dance before... before...” My voice trailed off. Ugh! I didn’t want to think about that now! Luckily, James nodded, understanding, saving me from having to talk about it, so I moved on, “Well, I’m done with high school next year, so I need to start making plans for after.” He nods, still not looking my way, and keeps his focus on the stove. “I obviously can’t study dance anymore...” I choke a little at this confession. It was one of the many things I’d been refusing to dwell on this past month. I let out a long, steady breath. I’m testing the waters here. “What do you think I should do?”

His dark eyes flash in my direction, and I can’t help but notice how he glanced down the hall towards Shay’s room, before he turned back to me. “Well Mina, what are you interested in studying?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. My previous plans are kind of shot to hell. I don’t have a backup. But I think it would be good for me to move out on my own and go to school and try to find something new to become passionate about.”

I notice as I start talking that James has started making more noise than necessary in the kitchen. He moves around, letting plates clatter down on the countertop, washing the dishes and letting them bang into the sink. He was going to wake up Shay if he didn’t keep it down, and I wanted to talk just to him... not my stepbrother. I spoke up again, “I always wanted to see another city. I think it would be good for me to get out and gain a little independence, don’t you think?”

“College is expensive, honey,” he said, not looking at me as he dropped the pan loudly off to the side, “And moving away to a whole new city is going to be pretty scary and nerve-wracking, and you don’t want to waste the money on classes you probably won’t even like.”

I was frustrated by his lack of enthusiasm and support. “I know, but the first year is usually the year people take to find themselves, to explore and find a subject that interests them so that they can be more selective for the next year. Lots of people do it.”

James scooped some fresh eggs out of the pan and onto a plate, before tossing the dirty dishware into the sink with a loud bang, and started washing. He didn’t look angry. Not at all. But I could sense the tension rolling off of him. “Do you think that would be safe for you to move to another city where you don’t know anyone? What if something ever happened to you, Mina? We already lost your mother...”

I felt my face turn red at his words. Was he seriously trying to guilt me right now? I sat up straighter. “You’d be surprised how many people go away to school. Some go to different countries where they don’t even speak the language! As for safety, even living at home has proved to be dangerous.”

His dark eyes flash to me again, obviously bitter by my comment, and stubs his cigarette into a glass ashtray off to the side.

I quickly go on, hoping to placate him by being understanding of his comments. “But, I get what you’re saying about money. If I don’t know what I want to study, I can postpone going to school,” he relaxed then, and so I pressed onward, “so I was thinking I’d travel a bit, instead.” And right away, he tensed right back up like a spring. “I’d love to go to Europe. And there are sites online for women who want to travel but don’t know anyone, so you can sign up with them and be travel buddies. You can go in groups so it’s safer, so security isn’t an issue. As for money, I have a bunch set aside from my dad that I’ll get on my eighteenth birthday, and I’ll just be a penny-pincher while I move around until then-”



“While you move around where?”

I freeze at the sound of Shay’s voice. He walks up the hall in his dark sweats, topless, showing off his frightening tats and muscle, the lines on his hips that create the V leading beneath the hem of his pants are fully on display. His dark hair is mussed from sleep, and he heads over to the coffee machine with half-lidded eyes as he pours himself a cup. I really didn’t want to have this conversation with him, and remembering last night, it only cements that notion... but looks like there was no going around it. Remembering his touch, his lips on me, I lower my eyes to my plate, wracked by shame and apprehension.

“I was just talking with James about my future plans,” I say as casually as I can, taking a bite of my toast as I try to calm my nerves before continuing, “like moving away for school, or traveling.”

If James had seemed tense, it was nothing compared to the way Shay froze up. Watching him in my peripheral, I saw how the muscles in his back actually bulged a bit, and the arm holding his coffee cup was so strained, I could make out the veins popping up from under his skin. “Oh?” he said, his voice dark and tight.

“Yeah, well, graduation is next year. I need to figure out what I’m going to do with my life. Dance is out. I’d like to apply for college, but if I don’t know what I want to study. So, I was thinking of travelling for a bit. Maybe to Europe.”

“It’s not safe,” he said, keeping his back to me.

James was leaning against the counter, holding his own cup of coffee in his hands, but his dark eyes were moving back and forth between Shay and I.

“I was just saying that there are these online groups for women who want to travel but don’t know anyone, travel friends, you know? You move around together as a unit. It’s totally safe and legit-”

“It’s expensive.”

“And I have money coming to me on my eighteenth birthday, just a month after I’m done high school. And I don’t plan on staying in five star hotels or anything. I’ve never been that girl.” I try to keep my tone light and confident. If Shay senses any weakness or emotion in my voice, he’ll pounce. “I think it’d be good for me.”

“You are needed here.”

“For what?”

“You know what,” he snapped, still not looking my way.

“No, I don’t, Shay,” I said, raising my voice slightly. “I don’t have a purpose here. What am I going to *do*? Sit around in this house all day? Get a job in town waitressing or... or... bartending or something? Oh no, wait, can’t do that. I have a goddamn curfew! And if I don’t follow it, my crazy stepbrother will hunt me down and haul my ass home and embarrass the shit out of me.”

Shay spun around and threw his mug across the room. It shatters against the wall, sending ceramic shards and hot coffee everywhere. I flinch back, while James doesn’t even move a muscle, like he saw it coming. Shay storms forward, standing over me as I huddle back in my chair. His chest is heaving and his silver eyes gleam dangerously. “It’s for your own good, you fucking brat!” he shouts directly in my face. “I look out for you! I always fucking have! You should be goddamn grateful that you have someone in your life who loves you enough that-”

“Shay,” James’ voice holds a warning bite in it.

“You aren’t travelling,” he goes on as though this was final. “And you sure as hell are not leaving for school!”

“Watch me!” I throw my hands against his bare chest and manage to shove him back. The only reason he moves at all is because I caught him off guard. He’s a huge guy, and being so slender and tiny, I wouldn’t have been able to make him budge if he had seen it coming. Getting to my feet, I hobble down the hall, intending to hide in my room, but Shay’s hand whips out and seizes my wrist hard and yanks me back. I cry out in pain

and fall over, the weight and rigidness of my cast unbalancing me.

James hurries towards us, hands extended to me. “Let her go, son.”

“She’s not leaving! I won’t let her!” Shay pulls me up from the floor, his entire body is shaking so hard, it makes my teeth rattle.

“You’re hurting her...”

Shay froze and looked down to where he was grasping at my arm. When he let go, my skin was red and angry. Wincing, I brought my wrist to my chest, cradling it carefully.

“Mina, I...” He reached for me, his tone rueful.

“Don’t touch me.” Breathing hard, I fight to control my emotions, and move out of his reach. “Just... leave me alone. *Please...*” I back away from him, leaning against the wall for support as I make my way down the hall to my room. I hear Shay struggle behind me, and before I disappear through the doorway, I look back to see James restraining him, hissing into his ear to calm down. Ignoring them both, I close the door behind myself and carefully bolt the locks into place.



*The Past...*

*Mina: Sixteen Years Old*

*May*

Dance school...

At the very mention of it, Shay went off the rails. In the morning, I’d announced that I was hoping to be accepted into a school for dance once I graduated, then move to New York and try to join a theatre company. I’d live in a studio apartment, and work my way up to become the prima ballerina. But this meant I would be leaving our little town and most likely moving to a whole new state to get the best training. Mum had been all for it, and though James had

nodded in approval, his mouth had pressed into a tight line as he glanced warily over at Shay, who stared at me from across the kitchen table, his mouth open, and his dark brows drawn down over his shining eyes. With a wild sweep of his arm, he sent his plate of food flying, including the vase of fresh daisies I'd gathered the other day in the woods, the first ones of the year. Everything went smashing to the floor as he leapt to his feet, sending his chair soaring back with a crash.

"Like hell you are!" he shouted at me, his face turning red as he screamed.

"Shay!" James moved forward, but was shoved back as my stepbrother spiraled.

"No, no! You promised me, Mina! You promised you wouldn't leave me!" He stomped around the table and grabbed my chair, easily pulling it away from the table so that it scraped across the floor. My mother let out a shout, but I couldn't hear her words as my ears buzzed and the sound of my heart pounding drowned it out. Shay placed a hand on the arms of my chair and bent his face so that it was inches from mine. Rage and despair rolled off of him in hot, angry waves, and I recoiled back in my seat, terrified of this version of him.

"Mina!" he snapped at me. "You promised you wouldn't shut me out. You said you would never leave!"

"Shay, I-"

"She has a future ahead of her!" Mum yelled, her steps pounding up behind me as she grabbed the back of my chair. "She has a life outside of yours! She has always wanted to dance; you know this!"

"She has always danced, and she can keep doing it. But she stays *here!*" he snarled, not moving his eyes from mine. "She takes part in the local performances and Christmas ballets, why can't she keep doing that?"

"She wants *more* than that!" Mum snapped at him. "She can do better than small local plays-"

"How would *you* know?" he snarled at her. "When was the last time you went to one? Oh, that's right, *years* ago, and you

were drunk off your ass!” As usual, when he addressed my mother, his jaw was tight and clenched, and his face twisted into a hideous expression of pure animosity. “*I’ve been to every single one! No one else has been as supportive or as devo-*”

“She is *not yours!*” Mum raised her voice and I felt her hands suddenly grip my shoulders.

Shay moved so fast, I cried out in a panic when he righted himself and lunged over me, reaching for my mother. I screamed when I heard her smack him in the face, and he went off, calling her every ugly name in the book while fighting to get to her.

James let out a shout and raced forward, trying to intervene. I reacted in the only way I knew how, and that was to reach out to Shay to calm him. I wrapped my arms around his waist and pressed my face into his hard stomach, still sitting in my seat. Overhead, I could hear him and Mum screaming, their hands and fists clipping each other. Shay twisted his upper body, shifting into a better position, as he continued to fight my mother. I squeezed him harder, trying to distract him and de-escalate his terrifying outburst.

“Shay? Shay!” I cried when someone’s fist came down and cracked the top of my head. I closed my eyes, fighting back the ache, ignoring how my vision blurred, and gave him another squeeze around his waist, “Shay!”

A pair of hands seized me around my waist and ripped me away from him. I stumbled to the side and quickly spun around in time to see James punch Shay right in his face. Shay, who had been gripping the front of my mum’s shirt as he screamed at her, let go and staggered backwards. James closed in on him and swung his fist again, knocking Shay across the jaw, sending him to the floor in a heap. I stared in horror, my ears buzzing as my brain hurried to catch up with everything happening. *Holy crap... holy crap! What just happened?*

“He hit me! The little fucker hit me! I’ll call the cops! I’ll get him locked up for assault!” Mum was screaming. I slowly turned her way, noting that she did indeed look like she

suffered a punch or two to the face. Her left eye was swelling, and her lip was cut. Her hair was a mess, and her eyes were shining with angry tears as she practically growled at my stepbrother. “I’m done, done! Done with him! I’m done, James!” My stepdad rushed over to her, holding her face in his hands as he inspected her wounds, his eyes tight with worry.

Across the space, Shay was staggering to his feet, his lip bleeding, and an angry bruise was already forming on his jaw. The furious grimace on his face was locked onto my mother. He didn’t even look like he realized his father had just punched him twice. His silver eyes didn’t even bother looking in his direction. I didn’t approve of him striking my mum. Far from it. If anything, I wanted to pull a James and clock him across the face, too. But I couldn’t. Not now. Not when he was spiraling and looking like he wanted to lunge at my mum again. James turned to block her from view, his stance ready and fists clenched.

“Back the fuck up, Shay!” he shouted at him. “You lay your hands on Emily again, and I’ll fucking knock you out! You *never* hit her! Ever!”

But Shay looked as though he couldn’t even hear his dad. Instead of answering, or even looking in his direction, he simply narrowed his eyes as he stared over James’ shoulder at my mum, who glared right back. His body was literally shaking with rage and adrenaline.

“Shay?” I said loudly, and took a step forward. I don’t know what I was doing... how I was going to get him to stop. I was hoping to distract him, to get him to forget about Mum so James could help her. It worked.

He blinked and his silver eyes flickered over to me, looking surprised to see me standing so close. He really hadn’t noticed... he’d been so far gone...

Releasing a long, unsteady breath, his entire body shuddered uncontrollably, and he reached for me so fast, he was like a viper trying to strike. I could hear Mum’s opposing shriek, followed by James’ more soothing rumble, “It’s okay, Em. He won’t hurt her. I promise, alright? Come on, babe,

let's clean you up, huh? Get you a nice hot bath?" Their footsteps grew fainter as they climbed the stairs to their room, leaving me alone with Shay.

He was still shaking hard as he held me, until his legs gave out and he sank to the floor in a heap, dragging me with him. He crushed me to his chest and guided my legs around his waist, so I was sitting on him like a koala bear. Satisfied, he buried his face into my hair and held on like he was afraid he would drown without me there to cling to. His own personal life preserver. I wrapped my arms around his neck, doing what I'd done so many times before when he was like this. I let him hold me, kiss my head, and rock us both side to side as he fought back his demons. I "shushed" him over and over, occasionally running my fingers through his hair as I tried to soothe him.

"It's okay, Shay," I whispered, "It's okay. We're here, we're home, we're safe... we're in a safe place. We're together. It's okay," I said again and again, waiting for his demons to retreat. This time, it only took an hour for him to silence the dark whispers that haunted his mind.

"You can't leave, Mina," he said finally. "You *won't* leave."

"I will, Shay. I'm sorry, but this is something I want *so* bad-"

"No."

"I'll visit, okay? I'll see you all the time on weekends and-"

"No."

I sighed heavily, still clinging to him, feeling like a baby monkey. "Look, me going away for dance... it's not supposed to be an attack against you. Mum-"

"She doesn't understand shit, Mina!" he hissed vehemently. "She just wants to take you from me!"

"That's not true. She wants what's best for-"

"No! She wants to fuck with me. She always has!"

“Shay...”

But before I could say anything else in her defence, he rose to his feet, and set me back in my chair. Without another word, he stormed out of the house, the sound of his Harley roaring as he drove away in a rush.

This all happened two weeks ago.

Since then, I’ve only been even more determined to practice like a madwoman. I couldn’t live like this. I was tired of Shay trying to warp me into something he needed, something he wanted. Well, what about what *I* wanted?



School was almost over for the year, and my final recital was coming up on the first of June, only a month before my seventeenth birthday. Miss Riley was going to record my performance so I could use it as part of my application into dance school once I graduate next year.

Determined, I took my place once more on the old stage, and went through my routine for what felt like the hundredth time. I wanted to be perfect. For myself and, if I’m being completely honest, for my mother. She told me a month ago that she would be there for my performance, but Mum had become even more unreliable the past few years, and I knew I’d have to remind her again.

She was a flat-out drunk.

She is always at the club, with James or without, drinking heavily into the late hours of the night. If she was at home, she was hungover, or on the cusp of passing out. Her drinking had only amped up after my Gran passed away a year ago from a sudden stroke. After that, James told me that my mum signed him as a legal guardian for me, and since then, she seemed to have collapsed in on herself like a dying star, like she just decided to give up on *everything*.

I missed my mum. How she used to be. I remember how sweet and caring she had been when I was a little kid. She was



fun, all smiles, we'd grown closer after Dad died. Now, we rarely talked. We couldn't. How could we when she was either passed out or piss-drunk? And when she was neither, she was too busy arguing with Shay to pay attention to much else.

God, I hated being in that house. I fucking hated it. I hated the club. I hated what James and Shay did for a living. Once, I walked in on them both coming home in the dead of the night, burning the clothes they had on in the fireplace. I stopped in the hall, unseen by them, and gaped as I took in the blood spatter that covered them both. Another time, I needed to borrow a screwdriver for the new locks I'd put on my bedroom door, and snuck into James' garage. As I searched for his toolbox, I came across sets of handcuffs, guns, knives, jugs of bleach and other cleaning products that filled one of the black cabinets in the back. It had been left open (when it was normally locked), and seeing all of these weapons and tools for restraints... well, it didn't take a genius to put it together. I just didn't need the details. I'd slammed the cabinet shut and ran out of there as fast as I could. Later, when James came home, I just asked him if he could get me the screwdriver, and pretended I hadn't been anywhere near that cabinet in the garage.

I felt sick that the money they earned through their bullshit was what paid for my clothes and dancing. That was why I needed to be perfect this weekend. Dance was my ticket out of this shithole. Keenan had been right the whole time.

I held a pose on my toes, but through my canvas slipper, my big toe suddenly twinged and I fell sideways, catching myself at the last second so I wouldn't sprawl across the floor. Gasping for air, I meandered over to where my bag was sitting by a row of empty seats and grabbed my water bottle. For a minute, I stood there, my thoughts running away with me when I quickly checked the time. I had a few hours before I needed to start heading home, but where the hell was Keenan?

I clenched my teeth.

I was really looking forward to seeing him this week. I found that I needed his presence like I needed air, because at home, I was suffocating...

### *Fucking Shay...*

He turned twenty-three in March, and was now a full-fledged member of the Celtic Beasts. Even without the tantrum he pulled when I mentioned leaving for dance school, he still had enough dark spells that it kept me at his beck and call. James *always* appeased to him when he got in those moods, and because all he wanted was yours truly, I was forced to be available. I was even hauled out of dance class a few weeks ago because Shay had had a rough night after some stupid assignment in Ashland. It had been mortifying to have James burst into the middle of my dance class and literally carry my ass out of there in front of Miss Riley and the other students.

No, apparently it was *my* responsibility to keep him in control. The few times that he had gone off on a tangent, I was brought in to help him come back. I was the only one who could. But despite the fact that I tried to keep Shay away from the dark thoughts and twisted urges that tormented him, I could see that he also seemed to enjoy it at times. I could tell by the way his lips curled into a smile when I overheard him talking with James about the “take-outs” he did for the Beasts. He sounded... proud. Excited. I got chills every time he spoke that way.

Shay was huge, with muscles and a frighteningly dark disposition about him. Any girl friends that I had, all crushed hard on him, like Becca, in particular. They loved the messy dark hair and scruff on his chin. They swooned at his silver eyes and dark tattoos and lip ring. When he pulled up on his motorcycle to pick me up from school on occasion, or at a day-outing at the lake or the mall, my friends would blush and giggle and wave at him. He'd wink in return, and they'd lose their minds, all jutting out their boobs or would flip their hair at him. I'd roll my eyes and feel my cheeks turn red with embarrassment by their crushes on my stepbrother.

I loved my stepfather and I loved my stepbrother... they were nothing but sweet to me. But there was an ugly side to them that I couldn't stand. I hated how James treated my mum. I mean, I know he loved her in his own way, but his

unfaithfulness just ate away at me. I hated that he was involved in some serious shit that I would never dream of touching in my life. And Shay... Shay was headed down a dark road.

The thought of Shay had me squirming uncomfortably.

Today, I just needed a break. I needed Keenan.

I took a long draught of water from my water bottle and moved back to the stage to go through the routine one last time. I don't know what was keeping him, but without him here, combined with my sour mood, I felt less than enthused to keep going. I took position and started a pirouette, spinning on the spot several times while balanced on my toe, and then leapt through the air in a grand jetes. I landed (ignoring the pain in my toes, which I would ice later) and drifted in spins to the side, using the momentum from the jump to move myself. I stopped and spun back around, and let out a surprised shout when I saw that I wasn't as alone as I originally thought.

Standing in front of the seats, right in front of the stage, was Keenan. His hands were in the pockets of his jeans. He wore a dark blue t-shirt under his cut, and his sunglasses rested in the neckline of his shirt. His blond hair was shoved back off his face, his blue eyes glinting playfully, gorgeous as always, something I've only become too painfully aware of as I've gotten older. My cheeks involuntarily flush at the sight of him and I smiled shyly as he strolled along the edge of the stage towards me.

"About time you got here, Mathers," I teased him. "Need me to teach you how to read a clock again?"

"Well, hello to you, too, Sunshine." He grinned and pulled himself up onto the platform. "Why the attitude today? Miss me that much?" He straightens and I can't help but notice how his gaze seems to roam all over me, like... he's checking me out or something. "Because *I* missed you." He winks. I stare at him, my throat suddenly dry and I can't find the words to speak. I try to ignore the butterflies that are fluttering about in my stomach. He was normally like this, wicked with a subtle hint of flirtation that's only become more pronounced over the

years of meeting here. But ever since that day he called me *brehtaking*, when he talked about my smile, I've been more shy of his flirty behaviour, though I was actually thrilled to receive it.

"You're amazing, you know," he said as he eyed me, hands in the pockets of his jeans. "Your dancing? You're perfect."

I cross my arms, bashful, my face now beat red. "I still need to work on my grand jetes." I quickly avert my eyes, shy from his praise.

"I have no idea what the fuck that means, but it looked beautiful from where I was standing."

I laugh, shaking my head as I jump off the edge of the stage and head to where my bag of clothes, shoes, and water are waiting for me. He knew damned well what a grand jete was, the smartass. "What took you so long today?" I ask, not looking at him as I have a drink.

I can't help but feel a little resentful towards him. I looked forward to our visits, which ended up being twice a week now. Wednesdays after school, and Sunday afternoon, which was today.

"Club business, Sunshine..." he murmurs, darkly.

My head whips up to see him looking away from me, towards the back of the stage. It feels as though he is hiding something. I quickly shake that thought away. No... Keenan has been nothing but a sense of serenity and calm in my life. A constant. I didn't want to taint that. But I couldn't help but wonder what he meant by *club business*. From what I gathered over our years of contact, the Spades ran two successful and legal businesses. They had a garage where they fixed up trucks and bikes, and their own club lounge that was open most nights to civilians. As far as I heard, from Keenan and from whispers in town, they were a typical, honest biker club, with no shady connections to speak of for years. So why did he sound so sour now?

"Well, you didn't have to come by if you were busy," I tell him. "I don't want to keep you from your club obligations." I

knew how serious club matters were. When James and Shay were called in by Uncle Shawn, they hauled ass to the Beasts clubhouse and everything was sworn to secrecy. I didn't want to be the reason that Keenan could possibly get into some serious shit with his brothers.

"You're not keeping me from anything," he said, turning back to look down at me.

"But... the club-"

"I wanted to see you, Mina," he says, straight-faced and for once, absolutely serious.

I gawped at him for a moment, staring at his face as I read the conviction in his expression, and shook my head, sceptical.

"You don't believe me?"

"No," I said honestly. To him, I was just a teenage girl from an opposing biker gang who he babysat twice a week and traded notes with. Why he continued to entertain the whole pen-pal thing was beyond me. I'd even offered once or twice to end the charade, but he'd always write back a long-winded refusal. Once or twice I even tried to talk to him about it when he came to watch me dance, but he silenced any attempts I made to end our little rendezvous.

He chuckles. "Oh Mina, always so self-sacrificing." He shakes his head. "Is it really so hard to think that I want to see you? That I enjoy spending time with you?"

I sat on one of the seats and took off my slippers, gratefully stretching out my toes. I didn't know how to answer that. Keenan was always so playful, but now that he was being so direct, I found it a little disarming. I quickly slipped on a band shirt over my leotard as well as a pair of tights, and zipped up my hoodie before slipping on a pair of comfortable flats, then took my hair out of its bun.

"I always want to see you, Sunshine." He moves to the edge of the stage and sits down, his legs dangling off the side, facing me. I remain where I am, and slowly peer up to meet his beautiful, blue eyes. "I like it when you tease me. I like watching you dance. I like making you angry when I make fun

of you.” I scrunch my nose at his words, and he only laughs lightly in response. “We’ve been talking for... what? Five-six years now? I like to think we’ve gotten close.”

I twist my fingers in my lap, unsure of what to say. I want to believe him... *so* badly. But it seems too good to be true. That was the issue with Keenan. I had no idea *why* he bothered with me. *Why* did he check in on me? Why did he continue to? I wanted to ask him, but chickened out instead and continued to sit there like an idiot as he fixed me with a thoughtful sort of look.

“One thing you’ve never mentioned, here or in our messages, is why you no longer go to the club picnics or family events,” he says suddenly and I stare at him in confusion.

“What?”

“The past few years, you’ve been absent. I know, because our club has the same event on the same fucking day as yours every year at the same fucking park. You don’t think I look for you?”

“I don’t like taking part in club activities anymore.” I lower my eyes as I take another sip from my water bottle, trying not to show how pleased I was at the idea of him wanting to see me.

“Why not?”

“Would you believe me if I said I finally woke up and realized what it’s all about? And that I want no part in it?” I can’t hide the disgust in my voice. I’ve never mentioned to Keenan what I walked in on that day at the clubhouse. What I saw James and Shay doing, along with all the other men I’d once looked up to. I was embarrassed and disgusted. And Keenan, as kind and as supportive as he has been, he’s a biker, too. I quashed the wave of nausea in my belly when I pictured, not Shay, but *Keenan* with that girl...

He tilts his head sideways a bit, his look contemplative. He pauses for a moment and then says softly, “Yes, I would believe that.”

I blink once, not expecting his answer.

“Come on, Sunshine... you aren’t meant for this life. You’re not a gangbanger, or a groupie, or an old lady.” His lips purse, as though the thought upsets him. “You belong on a stage somewhere, with adoring fans, and a nice flat in the city.” Keenan runs his hands through his golden hair, looking even more exasperated. “You’d wither and die if you became a part of the life they lead.”

“It feels like it already. I mean, look at my mum,” I mutter, toying with a loose thread on my white t-shirt.

“She’s given up.” I can’t help but note the touch of sadness in his voice when he says this. My mum being an alcoholic is not news to him. I’ve vented about her to him for over two years now. For a minute, neither of us speak, but I can feel him watching me. “You seem unhappy, kiddo...”

“You’re observant,” I snap and instantly regret it. Closing my eyes, I shake my head, hating that I was acting so bitchy to him when he had been nothing but kind to me, and starred in my late-night fantasies. *Ugh! Don’t think about it now, Mina!* I scold myself, hoping he can’t read my thoughts on my face. “I’m sorry. I’m in a mood today... ignore me.”

“Hard to do.”

My head snaps up to see his glacier coloured eyes looking me over. I flush slightly. Keenan was twenty-two... I was a teenager... was he seriously checking me out? Though I’d finally grown boobs and hips over the past few years, I couldn’t believe he saw me in that way, though I always daydreamed about the idea. What was it he had said to me? *You are breathtaking...* I brush the thought aside. “How about you?” I asked him.

“What about me?” His brows rise high on his forehead as he reaches into his pocket and pulls out a smoke. I watch as he lights up.

“Your life in the club? How is that going for you?” It wasn’t something I’d ever dared ask him before. I was always careful to mind my business when it came to members of biker

clubs. I was not privy to their activities, and I respected that. Keenan, being from a rival club, would be even more out of bounds for me to question. But now, my curiosity got the better of me. His notes about his life were usually so circumspect, and I can only assume it's because he's hiding his identity in case a certain stepbrother of mine should find them.

He shrugs. "Same old, Sunshine... biking, boozing, fighting, and fucking. What else is there?"

I cringe at his words. It was exactly what I'd walked in on almost three and a half years ago. It was as I feared. I fought back the rising resentment and disappointment in my mind. Apparently, Keenan was exactly like my stepbrother. I fix him with a hard stare. "Well, I mean, if that's what you want to do with your life, then good for you," I say brusquely, and stand up to start gathering my things.

"What happened to you?" he asks as he watches me shove my ballet slippers and water bottle into my bag.

"What do you mean? I'm the same girl I was last week..." I freeze on the spot when he suddenly jumps off the stage and saunters over to me. Tensing, I grip the bag in my hands and flinch back a little when he stops not even a foot away, standing so close, I can feel the heat coming off his body. He blows the smoke out the corner of his mouth, preventing it from getting in my face as he intently stares down at me, making me feel like he can see my soul through my eyes.

"I mean, what happened to that little girl that was so full of trust and light? You're like a nervous cat... guarded and unhappy... you're the opposite of what you were when we first met." He takes a drag on his cig and blows it, again, out the corner of his mouth. "Even in your notes, when you tell me about your mum and stuff, you don't seem so... surly. Did something happen this week?"

"I guess I opened my eyes and realized the world wasn't as good as I thought it was."

He doesn't move at my words, but his frown deepens. For a long time, he says nothing, but stares hard at me. I tremble from his scrutinizing look, but stubbornly hold his gaze.



Finally, Keenan seemed to make a decision about something. He drops the cigarette to the floor and stomps it out with his heel, never taking his eyes from mine, and grabs one of my hands. “Come on.”

Without waiting for me to answer, he turns and starts climbing the stairs that lead to the exit I use to get in and out of this place. I hurry to keep up with his long stride, my bag clutched in my hand. “Key? What the hell?”

Instead of answering, he presses against the loose sheet metal that’s propped over the exit door and guides us out into the bright, afternoon sun. Hidden amongst the shrubs, his black Harley is waiting, and he hands me his helmet. “Put it on, Sunshine.”

“What are we doing?” I ask, not moving.

Sighing, he takes it back and carefully sets it on my head before adjusting the straps and snapping it into place beneath my chin. “We’re going on a little excursion.”

“Where?”

He rolls his beautiful eyes and laughs lightly. “Geez, enough with the twenty questions! Just go with it, okay?”

Nervously, I shifted on my feet, clutching the handles of my bag hard as I peeked over my shoulder towards the railroad tracks, afraid of Shay suddenly stumbling upon us together.

Keenan reaches out and lightly touches my chin, turning me back to face him. His expression hard and sombre as he murmurs, “You need a break from your home life, from dance, school... all that bullshit. Don’t worry so much, Mina. Enjoy yourself a little.”

“But-”

“We won’t get caught. I promise.” He grants me his slow, sexy wink that makes my stomach jump excitedly.

I can feel my face gradually break into a smile. “Okay, let’s do this.”

“That a’ girl. Now get your bag strapped on and climb up on the bitch seat. We’re taking the back roads and won’t be

coming back this way.”



He takes me to a lake I never even knew existed. Clearly, no one else did, either. The beach is deserted, and the crystal blue water sparkles from the sun. The area is surrounded by beautiful, tall aspens, making me feel like we were in our own little world. I thought he would park his bike so we could walk on the beach, but instead, Keenan drove on, heading straight for the waves. We shifted a little as the wheels slipped slightly on the uneven ground. But when we reached the harder packed sand by the waves, I screamed as the cold spray peppered my arms and soaked through my tights. I clung to him, my hands wrapped around his waist as I held on to his hard stomach. I could feel him laughing beneath my death-grip, and we flew down the length of the beach.

When we reached one end, which ended with boulders, as big as my bed at home, rising up from the sand to the grassy ground of the forest, Keenan turned the bike, managing it smoothly as we faced the way we'd come.

“Hang on, love!” he shouts above the roar of his engine. I whoop and cheer, holding onto him tight as he revs his engine, before we shot forward. I thought my face was going to crack from smiling so much. I cling to him, trusting him completely, as we fly across the sand, sending a spray of water into the air as we break through the waves. I peer over his bulky shoulder to see a flock of seagulls gathered ahead in the distance, pecking away in the sand.

“Key!” I shout at him, but he just laughs again and accelerates. We speed through the cluster of birds, who angrily screech as they take flight, surrounding us in a cloud of white feathered bodies as they rise into the air. Keenan chose that moment to move closer to the waves, sending up a brilliant arc of water, soaking my clothes in the process. I shriek and squeeze his middle, burying my face in between his shoulder blades. For the first time in a long time, I felt so free of

anxieties and stress that I felt lighter than air and the usual heaviness I carried around in my heart was gone.

Keenan pulled away from the water, moving out of reach of the waves before stopping us on a soft section of sand. I climb off and step away as he turns off the ignition, then moves the kickstand forward, allowing his beautiful bike to rest. I quickly take off the half helmet, shaking out my hair in the warm breeze. Keenan swung his leg around, still sitting on the seat of his bike as he turns his attention my way. My dark tights cling to my skin from the water, but my hoodie and white t-shirt is mostly dry, save for the bottom hem. My hair is a mess around my face, but I honestly don't care. In a matter of minutes, he had managed to make me forget my worries, if only for a short time.

He crosses his arms over his chest and I could make out the twisted black vines, skulls, and dead looking rose tattoos that cover them. His skin is tanned, despite how we are only in late spring, which only makes his eyes look bluer. His blond hair was a mess around his face from the wind and water. He is so heartbreakingly beautiful, it almost hurts to look at him.

I turn away, ignoring his intense gaze, and kick off my flats as I head back to the cool water. It swirls over my aching feet, and I can't help but sigh with relief. God, that feels good. I idly stroll along the beach, not wandering too far from where Keenan still lounges against his bike, giving me time to enjoy myself. Every once in a while, I stop to investigate something in the sand, and I can feel him watching every move I make. I feel a wild thrill race through my veins. When I toss my hair over my shoulder and catch him staring, I laugh and flip him off. "Stop being a creep!" I shout to him.

"Mina," Keenan calls back. I watch as he lifts a hand, beckoning me to come to him with a simple curl of his fingers. I skip back in his direction, grinning huge as the wind whips my hair from my face. I love how quiet and secluded this beach is, how it feels like we found another secret spot we can share together.

"Hey, old man! You going to just stand there all day?" I laugh as I walk up to him. Putting my hands on my hips, and

scrunching up my nose, I say playfully, “Let me guess, hurt your knee climbing out of bed this morning, am I right?” I loved teasing Keenan. It was probably one of my favourite things to do when I’m with him. He always rose to the bait, too, often calling me a whippersnapper or a brat, or teased me right back.

But this time, his impassive expression doesn’t change when I innocently taunt him. My smile swiftly disappears, and I feel a sense of dread pool in the pit of my stomach. *What was wrong? Had I somehow managed to offend him?* “Key?” I whisper, my brows arched high on my forehead as my chest compresses uncomfortably.

Keenan steadily reaches out, gently wrapping his fingers around my wrist, and tugs me toward himself. My breath catches from the sharp movement as he pulls me so close, our chests are touching. It feels like my blood is singing in my veins as it races through my body, sending a pulsing thrill that had my hands shaking.

“Told you I’d get your smile...” He never takes his eyes off mine as he reaches up with one of his huge, rough hands and cups the side of my face, his palm warm against my cheek. I want to run, and at the same time, I wished I was brave enough to wrap my arms around his neck and close the distance.

Keenan tilts his head a little to the side and moves in so close that the tips of our noses are barely touching, his lips hovering over mine. He keeps his icy stare on me as he gauges my reaction, as though waiting to see if I’ll push him away. But I won’t. I can’t. I’ve fantasized about this very moment for years. Now that it’s here, I’m terrified that something is going to stop him, that something will intervene and this will all be ruined.

Keenan licks his bottom lip before sucking it between his teeth. His blue eyes seem to come alive then, that familiar spark now alive again in his gaze. His lips brush against mine for a moment, our breath intermingling briefly, before he finally presses them tenderly to my own. I melt against him

and close my eyes as his arms come up and wrap around me, caging me in his embrace.

His lips are soft, almost pillowy. The dark scruff on his chin scratches a little against my skin, but it doesn't hurt. I feel lightheaded when it finally hits me that I am having my first kiss. I didn't know what to do with my mouth, but he certainly does. Keenan leisurely moves his lips against mine, his tongue eventually sliding out to sweep across my lower lip, before taking it between his teeth, and tugging gently. Finally, he pulls back, his face inches away from mine as he opens his eyes again and his lips curl up into that mischievous grin.

I'm frozen, completely in a state of shock on the outside, but inside, I was squealing like one of my friends. *Why did he kiss me? Was it some sort of a ploy? Was it a trick to manipulate me somehow? To get at the Beasts? To get at Shay?*

"Calm your busy mind, Sunshine. Sometimes a kiss is just a kiss..." Keenan gifts me that slow, sexy wink and leans in again, pressing his mouth a little harder to mine this time. I try to reciprocate, closing my eyes, as he coaxes my lips to dance with his. He lets out a small groan and runs his tongue over my mouth until I open it at his prodding, and he sweeps it inside. My fingers reach up on their own accord and tightly grip the lapels of his leather jacket, carefully massaging my tongue against his. The kiss is unhurried, slow and raw, and it makes my head swim. Keenan was not a boy... he was a man... and damn, this kiss would ruin any others from boys my age for me.

"Fuck, I love this mouth..." he murmurs, breathing against my lips before diving in again. One arm encircles around my waist, crushing me against himself, while the other slides up to the side of my neck. His thumb strokes my jawline as he releases a sort of agonized moan. "Goddamn it, Mina." His forehead presses to mine, his breathing uneven and harsh. Peering up from under my lashes, I'm shaken by the tortured expression on his face. "I knew you would grow into a beauty..." he says in a broken whisper. My heart batters against my ribcage, but before I can respond, Keenan shakes

his head. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done that. I shouldn’t *want* to...” But he doesn’t release me, even when his entire body tenses.

“Then why did you?” I ask, my voice breaking slightly.

“Would you believe me if I said I couldn’t help myself?”

“No,” I said honestly. I really, *really*, didn’t understand why Keenan felt compelled to kiss me. At all.

His wicked grin was back, his thumb still stroking my cheek. “You have *no* idea, Sunshine...”

But whatever he was about to say is cut off when his lips crush against mine again. This time, he kisses me like I’m the air he needs to breathe. One hand drifts up my back as he pulls me down into the sand with him, arranging me in his lap so I’m straddling him. The hand cradling my face moves down the side of my throat, his fingertips brushing over my skin so lightly, it leaves a trail of goosebumps in their wake. They skim over my collarbone, stroking, before moving lower, tracing the neckline of my shirt.

“Mina?” he says, his voice cracking. I crane my head back to look up at him, and see the desire burning in his eyes, his pupils blown. As I find myself getting lost in his fervent stare, his hand drifts down and cups my breast, carefully massaging it in his large palm. His jaw clenches, like he’s restraining himself from going any farther with me. Bringing his other hand up to the back of my head, he seizes a handful of my hair and jerks me forward again, bruising my lips with his kiss.

“I don’t want to let you go.” He moans into my mouth. “Fuck, I want you. I want you so fucking badly. But...” His hands come up so that they’re gripping the front of my shirt, as he struggles with some sort of conflict in his mind. For a heartstopping moment, he pulls back slightly, like he’s about to stop altogether. *Oh hell no!* I think. I’ve waited too damn long to just have him get all noble and self-sacrificing on me now.

“No, you don’t.” My hands fly to the back of his neck and I pull him towards me and boldly kiss him. For a second, he

doesn't react, he just goes absolutely still, like I've stunned him with my daring. I start grinding on his lap, rubbing against the hard-on he's sporting beneath his jeans, and he lets out a long, agonized moan. Snapping out of whatever was holding him back, he returns my kiss with the same passion and urgency that I feel in this moment.

We practically attack each other in our lustful haze. He slides out of his leather cut, while I cling to him and suck on the side of his neck and pepper kisses over every part of him within reach. Next thing I know, I feel the warmth and weight of his Black Spades jacket as he settles it around my shoulders, carefully wrapping it around me to shield me from the cooler, late spring breeze. His fingers slide up the front of my hoodie, finding the tab to my zipper and yanks it down, and slips it off from beneath his cut, and tosses it aside.

When Keenan guides me back, he adjusts his jacket so that my head lies across the leather. It was soft, and smelled like him, that manly scent of his that I wished I could bottle up and carry around with me. It takes me a second to really process his actions, and when I do, I feel like I can't breathe at the gesture. I know how important a biker's cut is. I've seen Shay, even in the midst of chaos, make sure that his cut never touches the floor, nor is left just laying around haphazardly. James and the other Beasts are the same. And here was Keenan, using his as a shield for me, from the ground and seaspray that was carried by the wind. I look up at him, my eyes stinging as I fight back tears, but one slips out, slowly falling back into my hair. His sharp gaze spots it, and using the pad of his thumb, he tenderly wipes it away.

Keenan drapes his body over mine, nudging his knee between my thighs so they spread for him. He settles himself there, pressing his hips into me. I gasp as the hard bulge beneath his jeans rubs into me in *just* the right way, but he doesn't give me a chance to really register what is happening before he ducks down and sucks my lower lip between his.

Sighing into his mouth, I wrap my arms around his neck, my fingers running through his soft, blond hair while he clutches the swell of my hips in his large, rough hands. As his

tongue leisurely begins to stroke mine again, his hips start to move in slow, meticulous thrusting motions, rubbing his erection against my pussy. I'm still in my spandex and tights, but I can feel his massive hard-on beneath his jeans as it presses against my clit, and soon, I'm eagerly pressing back. When I do, Keenan lets out a low, rumble from deep in his throat, and his kisses only become more ardent and unyielding. I feel like I could kiss him forever...

The sand beneath me shifts as Keenan presses a little harder, moving his hips to mine a little faster now, and his hands slide from my waist to my ass. Gripping it firmly, he adjusts me so that my hips tilt up to his a little more, and his thrusts become more frenzied. Both of us are gasping as we move together. Deep within my core, I can feel a rising, tingling sensation that I feel myself instinctively pursuing. I greedily arch my back, seeking more, rolling my hips against his hardness, seeking out my pleasure.

"Jesus... FUCK!" he groans as he bites my bottom lip, pulling on it as he moves even faster as he grinds into me. My eyes flutter closed and I snatch fistfuls of his hair, yanking his head back as I reach up and run my tongue along the length of his neck. "Holy shit, Mina," he pants as he continues to thrust, furiously rubbing against where my clit is beneath my pants. The sensation that was building and throbbing within my lower belly suddenly reaches its peak. Keenan doesn't stop, even when I let out a broken sort of cry as an explosion bursts within me, flooding my body with a tingling rush that leaves me breathless and shaking.

The pulse slows in waves and I feel like my body has become boneless, like I'm made of jello. As the rush abates, I feel incredibly tranquil and content, as if I just had a major release of all the stress I'd been bottling up inside and was finally set free for the first time. An orgasm. I just had an orgasm. *Holy shit...* Keenan just gave me my first orgasm!

Above me, Keenan continues until finally, he grunts and, panting hard, slowly rubs the hard bulge in his pants up and down my pussy. He shudders, his arms giving out and collapses upon me, his head on my chest, and slowly wraps his



arms around my waist. We both lay there on his grey Spades jacket, listening to the distant sounds of the waves splashing upon the shore, and the gulls crying out as they fly overhead. I can feel his heart pounding against my stomach and I know mine is mirroring his as he listens to it intently. Neither of us speak as we slowly come down and catch our breath.

I'm suddenly overwhelmed by a completely new feeling. It tugs at my heart, but feels more like it's swelling, like a bubble of pure joy and ecstasy is blossoming in me. I run my fingers through Keenan's hair, enjoying the soft touch, loving how close he is to me, and how he holds me like something he cherishes more than anything else in the world. He turns his head and presses a kiss over my heart, and I think I actually might cry. The tears I fought back before sting my eyes, but I fight to keep it together. I don't want to ruin this perfect, beautiful moment.

"I don't want you to go back to that house..." he whispers against my skin.

*I don't want to go back, either,* I think. I don't want to leave him. I just want to stay here and be with him and hold onto this feeling. For the first time in years, I'm *really* smiling, I feel free, and I'm in the arms of someone who actually wants what is best for *me*, and not for some other selfish, ulterior motive.

"I have to..." I breathe, my eyes still staring up at the sky. I have a leg hooked around his thighs, my other one stretched out to the side on the sand. He's still lying between them, but it's a comfortable weight. In fact, I don't want to move at all. I feel like I could stay this way with him forever.

"You're so fucking beautiful, you know that?" he tells me. "Seeing the young woman that you have grown into after all these years of putting up with your snarky, bratty comments." Though he is being absolutely serious, I still pick up on the playful teasing in his voice, "watching you dance... how you put *every fucking person* before yourself, because you are so selfless and good." He shivers a little and gives me another squeeze around my waist. "And I'm just a piece of shit biker, bringing in minimum wage working at a garage, with nothing

to offer that could help you with your dreams. I shouldn't take you... but I *want* to."

He shifts up a little more so that his face is buried against my neck. I wrap my arms around him, my hands clutching the muscles of his back, needing to be as close as possible.

"Mina," he breathes against my skin, "I know this is wrong. I shouldn't have... I shouldn't..." He trails off and I'm suddenly feeling panicked, like he is about to break my heart. *He regrets this? Now that it's done and over? Well, great, that's just fucking great...* I'm about to angrily shove him off of me when he presses his soft lips beneath my ear and along my jaw. "But I couldn't hold back anymore." He shudders when my fingers start running over his back, drawing lazy circles upon it. My sudden disappointment and anger recedes to relief. "But Mina... I don't want to trap you in this life, either. My mother... she-she..." His voice sounds strained and his hands squeeze my hips tight. "She didn't want this life. She didn't understand what came with it until she was pregnant with me. And then, she turned to drugs to deal."

I instantly think of my own mum and my heart tears a little as his words sink in.

"I don't want you to become that, Mina," he whispers, finally. "As much as I want to keep you. It wouldn't be fair to you."

"Key," I whisper, hating his words. He truly does believe that he's no good trash, that he doesn't deserve to be with me. How can he? I want to shake some sense into him. He is the most selfless person I've ever met! Despite the trauma he's endured, what with his poverty, his mother's addiction, her death, and then getting swept up into the lifestyle that destroyed her... he still smiles and fights for me. It has become so clear to me now... he wants to save me from the life his mother, and mine, were both chained to.

"So, here's what's going to happen." One of his hands slides out from under me to cup my cheek, and he shifts up a little so that his forehead is pressed to mine, his gaze locked on me. "I'm going to kiss you one last fucking time, and then I'm

going to take you home. And at your recital, you dance your fucking heart out, because that will be how you escape this fucking place.” Keenan breathes in quick, sharp spurts, as though what he’s saying is causing him pain. “And you *need* to leave, Mina. Shay is... Shay’s...” His voice trails off as he struggles to speak.

“What about Shay?” I’m so overwhelmed from all of this, I can’t even fully grasp it all.

Keenan tenses a bit, but his expression becomes determined and fierce as he speaks, “Listen to me... I can’t say for sure, but just in case, a time might come when you will be looking for someone to turn to, someone to trust, and I want you to know that you can always come to me.” The hand on my face slides back into my hair, gripping a fistful as he gives me a small shake. “You got that? If you need to run, to hide, to escape... you come find me. Alright?” Before I can answer, he pulls closer, kissing my forehead, my cheeks, and the tip of my nose. “I won’t hurt you, darlin’... I would never hurt you. But I don’t trust those closest to you. It kills me every time I have to let you go back to them...”

“What do you know about Shay, Key?” I ask, wondering why he mentioned my stepbrother at all.

Keenan is so tense, he’s shaking slightly. “Everyone in our world knows that he’s insane. Combine that with the fact that he’s capable of *anything*, well, knowing that someone like that is so close to you scares the shit out of me.”

“Keenan.” I lay my hand alongside his face. “Shay won’t hurt me. He never would.”

“I agree, but...” he stops as though he’s struggling to find the words. “Just... be *careful* around him.”

We don’t say anything after that. I don’t have words to say that will make it all better, and now, I think I finally understand why he pulled away from me every time we got too close when we were together at the theatre. He wants me... he wants me like I want him. But, he was letting me go to live my dream.

*Oh, Keenan... Goddamn it...*

Before I can say anything, he reaches up, touching my lips with his thumb. “The worst thing you could do is throw it all away for a guy, Mina. So don’t even fucking think of it. You go and dance on the stage and be the star you are supposed to be... I’ll still be here for you. Whenever you need me. Understand?”

“I-”

*“Understand?”*

He was making the decision for me, but for once, it was a decision that was made entirely for *my* desires and well-being. He wasn’t going to be selfish with me. My eyes fill with tears and, unable to stop myself, I throw my arms around his neck and kiss him hard, dragging him back down onto his cut with me.

*I’m going to kiss you one last fucking time...*

And he does. He kisses me in a way that sends me reeling and everything around us simply fades away. I have so many questions for him. Will he still come see me at the theatre? Would we keep up our correspondence? Were we just going to go back to the way things were? Or... was he officially saying goodbye?

I want to ask, I have to know. But the look in Keenan’s eyes when he finally releases me from our kiss, hurts my soul. He looks so... torn up inside. So I won’t ask now. I don’t want to ruin this moment with him... because right now, being here with him, is the most perfect moment of my life.

## Chapter thirteen



*Present Day*

*Mina: Seventeen Years Old*

*July*

I'M in the kitchen making some chocolate chip banana bread, when the sound of an approaching motorbike catches my attention. It's nearly six in the evening at this point, and I've been left on my own for most of the day. After that altercation in the kitchen, both Shay and James had taken off on their bikes, and for once, I was glad to be left alone.

I've spent the day in turmoil, going over last night and the fight we had this morning, and every other moment I could recall with him and wondered what the hell was I going to do? What was I going to say to him? I watched out the window as the bike veered off towards the back of the house. I couldn't tell who it was at this point, and my nerves were getting the best of me. My hands were shaking as I mixed the wet ingredients together, listening hard for the sound of footsteps on the porch.

I was just combining the wet and dry ingredients when the heavy thumping of boots bang on the steps outside, signalling

that I was no longer alone. I freeze and watch the door, my heart racing as I get a flashback to the night of the attack. But when it unlocks and James steps in, wearing his cut and his usual dark shades, I let out a heavy sigh of relief.

“Thank God, it’s you.” I place a hand over my heart and laugh shakily. “Almost had a heart attack.”

James’ face is held tight and his mouth is pressed into a firm line, a look I recognize on him when he’s stressed. I can actually feel the air in the room change, shifting uncomfortably. Reaching for my phone, I shut off the music, which was playing some Death Cab for Cutie, and smile at my stepdad. “I’m making some chocolate chip banana bread.”

A small grin tugs up the corners of his mouth as he removes his glasses and shrugs off his leather cut. He hangs it carefully on the coat tree by the door and sinks heavily into a chair at the kitchen table. He looks beat, just by the way he slumps back and stretches his legs before himself. He lets his head fall backwards and closes his eyes, and releases a long, drawn out breath slowly from between his teeth.

“Want me to heat up something for you?” I ask him, tentatively, unsure of his mood.

“That’d be great, Baby Girl,” he says, his voice deep and gruff.

I stop what I’m doing and dig inside the fridge, searching for some leftovers from earlier in the week. I put a plate of honey garlic chicken and a side of cheesy broccoli into the microwave and grab a beer for him, too. James remains silent while I get his dinner, and I know my stepfather well enough by now that if he had something to say, he would simply say it. Never nag him or try to dig for updates; it just pissed him off and made him even more irritable. Most likely, he was stressed about work stuff, which was information he never shared with the family, anyway.

When his food was warmed up, I brought it over to him with his beer.

“Thanks, hon,” he said softly. Something in his voice made me pause and watch him as he continued to sit there, his eyes closed, looking like he had a huge weight on his shoulders. I never really noticed how much older he looked now. He was forty-nine years old. The grey in his dark hair was more evident, and it mixed in with his darker locks and the whisker on his chin. The corners of his eyes had deeper wrinkles. For a moment, I felt like I could see how Shay would look when he got older. James was a handsome man, and as I thought of my mother, I wondered if he was lonely... if he was missing her.

I reach down and wrap my arms around his neck from behind, and give him a hug, resting my chin on his forehead.

“What’s this all about?” he asks. Even though he sounds surprised, I can also detect the affection in his voice. His rough hands reach up and grip my forearms, giving them a gentle squeeze.

“Just... wanted to say I love ya.” I smile down at him.

James’ lips curl up into a real, genuine smile, and for a moment, his dark eyes shine just a little bit before he blinks it away. But he gives me another little squeeze. “Love you too, Baby Girl.”

I give his forehead a chaste kiss and nod to his meal. “Eat. Then take it easy. You need a night to yourself. When I’m done cleaning up the kitchen, how about we put on an old Arnie movie?” One thing that the guys and I loved was Arnold Schwarzenegger’s old films. Once in a while, we sat down and went through a list of our favourites over the course of a week. It had been a while since we last did that.

James gives my shoulder a pat. “Sorry, hon, I’m done in. I think I’m just going to eat something and then get some shut-eye.”

“No worries.” I move back to the kitchen and resume my baking project. “Another night, yeah?”

“Sounds like a plan.” He takes a long draught from the bottle and then digs into his meal. I changed my music to something a little more neutral, knowing James was *not* a fan

of most of the stuff on my casual playlist. So I put on some Led Zeppelin as a compromise, pour the batter into a greased loaf pan, stuck it into the oven, and set the timer.

Just as I was finishing cleaning up the dishes, including James' empty plate, a roar of another motorcycle came slowly up the drive. I knew at once that it was Shay, and my heart instantly started to pound. I also noticed James tense up as we listened to Shay's bike approach and then dull as he rounded the back of the house. This was... weird. I've never seen James react that way to his son's presence before. Even when he had been lost in a moment of violence or depression, James had never shirked away from him. I wonder if the reason for his tension tonight was because of something Shay had done... what if James had spent last night and today cleaning up after a mess he'd made? I shudder at the thought.

"Want another one before you go to bed?" I ask, gesturing at his empty beer bottle.

He stretches his arms up high over his head. "I'm alright, Baby Girl. It was just nice sitting here with ya."

I grin at him. "We didn't really do anything." I want to beg him to stay. The last thing I want is to be alone with Shay right now.

He shakes his head. "Doesn't matter. When you get older and have kids of your own, you'll learn to cherish every moment."

Rolling my eyes at him, I fake bemoan, "Oh my God, you are *so* lame."

He laughs lightly. "Sorry, Mina, your dear old stepdad loves ya. You've always been a good girl. A good head on your shoulders. None of my grey hairs are from anything you've done."

I want to laugh at that, I really do, but I feel a little bit of resentment at the thought. Again, being called a 'good girl'... it made me cringe. Yeah, I stayed home and did my homework and was at their beck and call. But really, it hadn't been by choice. I had been forced to by him and Shay. But I didn't



want to burst his sudden happy mood. So I just shrug my shoulders and move over to the oven as the timer starts going off.

“Mina?”

“Yeah?” I set the pan aside, pleased with how the loaf looked, and glanced over at my stepfather.

His face has lost its good humour and was once again shadowed with weariness. He was quiet for a minute before he leaned forward, his elbows on the tabletop, and his dark eyes sadly fixed on me. “I just want you to know that, with everything you’ve had to go through at such a young age, you’ve done me proud.”

I go absolutely still at his words.

“You worked hard in school and before the... attack...” he swallows hard at the mention of that night, “You were so dedicated to your dancing... and just with how you’ve been lately, picking yourself up after going through your grief... I’m proud, Baby Girl. I’m damned proud of you.”

I felt tears sting my eyes and find that it’s difficult to swallow. It’s as if I’ve swallowed a peach pit and now it’s lodged in my throat. I look away and keep my gaze on the countertop. James has never really been sentimental. Never a big talker. To hear him say these things about me, well... It means a lot. I didn’t realize how much I needed to hear a parental figure say those words to me.

From outside, we both hear Shay’s approaching footsteps through the open windows that flank the front door. My hands suddenly become clammy and I feel my face pale when he steps into the range of the porch light. He’d been *pissed* this morning, and I’d left him in a state. Had he spent his day going nuts, picking fights, and trashing anything and everything in his path? Was that why James looked so tired and beaten down?

James didn’t even bother turning around to look behind him. His face had fallen, and he was staring off across the

table at nothing, from what I could see. He looked... deeply troubled and conflicted.

“James?” I whisper, alarmed by the look on his face. *What the hell happened today?*

“It’s nothing,” he mutters and casts me a regretful sort of look.

His words didn’t reassure me. If anything, seeing his unusual, darker response to Shay was scaring me a little. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I’m just tired.” He got to his feet just as Shay unlocked the door with the numerical password on the button pad, and stepped inside. He saw his father first and at once, both men froze. I remained absolutely still, my eyes moving from one to the other, wondering what was going on. A range of emotions flitted across James’ face... resentment, remorse, grim acceptance...

“Sheik,” Shay says curtly, addressing his dad by his road name. His brows were pulled together over his silver eyes, the look threatening and challenging. But James didn’t say a word. He simply fixed Shay with his penetrating stare, gave a jerky sort of nod, and turned away. Without another look to either of us, he headed towards the stairs, and went up. I watched him walk down the hall that overlooked the sitting room and kitchen, and then disappear into his bedroom, shutting the door a little harder than he needed to.

I turn to Shay, my brows raised high on my forehead, and my eyes wide. “What the heck was that all about?”

Shay’s expression immediately shifts from one of tense intimidation to relaxed contentment. He shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans and strolled over to where I was, his eyes on the banana loaf. “You been baking again?” He sounds pleased by that. In fact, he looks absolutely mellow and calm, like he hadn’t spent his entire day in turmoil and wrecking havoc. What was up with James, then?

“Yeah. It’s been so long since I felt the urge to... it just kind of struck me out of the blue today,” I say, relieved that I

didn't have a moody Shay to deal with tonight. "I was just about to wrap it up so we could all have some for breakfast tomorrow." I move away from where he'd stopped at my side, just a few inches closer than necessary. "Have you eaten?" I ask him. Even to my own ears, my voice sounds shaky. I'm so anxious that I'm worried I'm going to make myself sick.

"Nope."

"Let me fix you up a plate. Have a seat." I take this as an opportunity to distract him, and myself, as I rummage through the fridge to prepare him something. Shay moves over to the table and takes James' vacated chair. I get him the same meal I'd given James, heat it up, and bring it over, moving carefully on my heavily plastered leg.

Shay has a wide smile on his face, watching as I set his food on the placemat before him. Before I can move away, his arm snakes around my waist and pulls me in close so I'm pressed against his side. He presses his face into my stomach, and kisses it. I jump at the gesture and immediately my guard goes up. *Too much, too much!* Quickly, I spin out of his hold, moving with surprising agility in my condition, and shuffle over to the kitchen again to clean up the mess I'd made. *He's your crutch, Mina. It's not the same as what you have with Keenan...*

"What did you do today?" Shay asks, completely unperturbed by my reaction, and starts to eat.

"I cleaned out all my old school stuff and just kind of lazed around. I only started feeling better a few hours ago." I hide my eyes from him by turning away, hoping that his good mood will stay. But I'm nervous as hell. This morning had been intense, and last night, well... my cheeks redden at the memory and I refuse to meet his eye.

"I think you had a good time last night."

"From what I could remember, yeah," I say hesitantly. I don't know if he meant the party, or what had happened at home, but I chose to play innocent and act like he meant my birthday. "It was nice seeing everyone."

“I’d like you to come back with me, sometime.”

“Maybe... but I felt terrible today. I don’t need to drink to have fun,” I tell him, remembering how he had pressured me at first to have my first cocktail.

“Good. You don’t want to get into that shit.”

I raise my brows at him, confused by his sudden change of heart. “You didn’t seem to have a problem with it last night,” I say as I dry some of the dishes.

“Last night was your birthday. That was different. If we go to the club again, it’s because I want you to hang out with me... not to drink.”

I glance up and see that his eyes are locked onto me, watching as I move around the small kitchen space, wiping things down and putting the plates and bowls away. His look is heated, and I feel the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

*Ignore it, Mina... stay nice, don’t piss him off...* I bite the corner of my bottom lip and carefully remove the loaf from the pan so I can wrap it up.

“Where did you go this morning?”

I freeze on the spot. *Oh shit... the alarm! Keenan’s gift!* I force myself to relax as I finish wrapping up the loaf and put it away in the fridge, avoiding his eyes. “I just felt like going for a walk, is all. Been cooped up for a long time now.” He says nothing, but I can feel him watching as I search for more things to clean. My heart is pounding...

“What are you up to tomorrow?” he asks me, suddenly. He reaches up and shoves his longer hair out of his eyes. The heel of his left foot is restlessly bouncing over and over again at a quick pace, as though he’s on edge, and it only adds to my jumbled nerves.

“Um, I was thinking of calling up Becca and Ashley. I haven’t seen them in weeks,” I lie quickly. In truth, I don’t have any plans, but I don’t want him to linger like he’s been doing the past six days. His eyes narrow suspiciously. Shay can be very perceptive, so I think quickly about how to throw

him off. “They want to tell me about their new boyfriends. I guess they go to a school in Ashland that’s a little rough around the edges. They’re part of a gang or crew or something. I’m going to try to talk some sense into them.” The lie comes easily enough, but I sense an interrogation coming.

“What school?” he asks.

“Harley Institute.”

“What are their names?”

“I don’t know.”

“What’s the name of their gang?”

“I don’t know...” I repeat.

He finishes his food and I lean across the table and take his plate, not wanting to get too close. Now that I am finally understanding why I’ve needed Shay these past few weeks, now that I understand the difference between how he makes me feel, compared to how Keenan makes me feel, I am unsure of how to tread around him. It feels awkward and uncomfortable.

For a while, neither of us speak as I wash, dry, and put away his dishes. It feels like I’m an unwilling subject under a microscope with the way he watches me the entire time I clean, and I fight hard to act as natural as possible. When I’m done and there’s nothing left to do, I find myself twisting my fingers together, wishing I had more of a mess to occupy myself with. I want to tell him that I want to sleep alone tonight, but I was terrified of his reaction. What if he loses it because he thinks I’m shutting him out? Or maybe he’ll come up with some far-fetched assumption, like I’m hiding a secret boyfriend of my own, and come storming in.

*Keenan...* the voice at the back of my mind whispers to me. Quickly, I shake that thought away.

“Well, I’m going to bed. Goodnight,” I tell him, deciding to just go rather than give him some long-winded explanation or even an opportunity to fight me on it. I don’t even bother looking his way as I hurry down the hall on my crutch, somehow managing to keep myself from stumbling. After

closing the bedroom door, I collapse on my bed. I'm not tired at all, but I couldn't be out there for another minute. The tension in the air was suffocating and I'm struggling to act normal around him, but after my revelation, I just don't know how to act anymore.

I roll over onto my stomach and pull my laptop towards me, hoping to distract my anxious mind with a movie or some music, when my door opens with a loud bang. My whole body jumps in surprise and I look over my shoulder to see Shay come storming in.

"What's up?" I ask, watching nervously as he slams the door behind himself. Alarm bells go off in my head as I take in the look on his face. His eyes are shadowed, his face determined and set, and he stalks over to me with purpose. I sit up on my bed and move back towards the wall, startled by his aggressive entrance, and dread pools in my stomach.

"Shay?" I whisper, my voice cracking.

He strides over to the bed, kneels on the edge and grips my shoulders. Before I can say anything, his mouth smashes to mine in a searing kiss. I gasp in surprise and raise my hands to shove against his chest. Shay lets out an angry sort of growl, and wraps his arms tight around my back, pressing me against his muscled frame. I twist my face to the side and try to say something, to tell him to stop, but he raises a hand and grips the back of my neck hard, holding me still. His mouth is soft, surrounded by his coarse, dark stubble, and his lips move over mine with a sort of fiery passion.

"Shay!" I squeal as I try to twist out of his grasp, but he refuses to let me budge. The hand on my nape releases its hold, only to snap forward and seize my chin, holding me still so he can continue his assault on my mouth. I reach up and shove again, trying to push him back, but instead, he grabs my waist, turns us, and forces me onto my back on the bed.

"Shay, stop!" I cry out as he crushes me beneath him, his weight holding me down.

"Mina," he pants, holding my wrists on either side of my head against the blankets. "I love you. I've always loved you."

His voice is shaking and his eyes are practically glowing. “I protected you for years. Treated you better than I’ve treated anyone. It wasn’t until that night you shut me out, remember? It wasn’t until then, when I thought I lost you, that I realized...” His eyes were moving over my face as though he was trying desperately to read my reaction to his proclamation. “I’m sick of waiting. I want you to be officially mine. I love you more than anything, Mina.”

“Shay,” I whisper and my voice breaks with a small sob.

“Just-just hear me out, okay?” he says, wildly, cutting me off as if sensing that I’m trying to voice a refusal. “I’ll be forever faithful to you... I’ll protect you and give you everything you could ever want. I’ll love you like this for the rest of our lives. Just say you’ll be mine.” He sounds like he’s begging. “The only thing I’ve ever wanted was *you*... only you.”

I blink hard and feel several tears slide back into my hair. Slowly, I reach up and cup the side of his face, my thumb gently stroking the skin. His eyes close for a moment and he leans into my touch, but he’s shaking, as though terrified of what I might say.

“Shay,” my voice but a whisper. “I do love you... but as my *brother*. You’ve been amazing these past few weeks, helping me, being there for me... and I am *so* grateful for it. But, I can’t. I’m so, so sorry that I-I led you on... I didn’t mean to-”

His eyes become shiny as he fights back angry tears, and his cheeks flush. “*No!* No, Mina, stop blocking! You feel this connection between us, I know you do. This past week, it’s been... *amazing!* We have something that no one else has-”

“Shay, don’t,” I close my eyes, unable to bear seeing the hurt on his face. “Please, don’t...”

He’s still on top of me, his weight settles between my legs, and he buries his face into the side of my neck. “You’re just so fucking stubborn and so worried about what people will think that you’re fighting this.”

“No, Shay. It’s not that. I just don’t see you like I see-”

His head snaps up, his eyes wide and furious, and I can *feel* the change in him. The shaking stops. His body becomes stone as he fixes me with a malicious glare. “What did you just say?”

*Oh. My. Fucking. God... No!* “I-I...”

“*What the fuck* did you just say?” He speaks slowly and softly, and it only makes the words sound more threatening than if he had shouted them.

*Keenan!* What the hell did I just do? I shake my head and squeeze my eyes shut. “Nothing. It’s nothing.”

“Who is he?” He seizes my face tight and gives me a small shake. “Who? Who the fuck is he?”

“There isn’t anyone!” I cry desperately. “That’s not what I meant-”

“Then *what* did you mean, huh, Mina? What else is it supposed to fucking mean?” He lurches up from the bed and punches a hole in the wall over my dresser. I shrink back into my pillows and recoil at the sight of his bloodied knuckles when he retracts his fist from the drywall. He shakes his hand out, and droplets of blood splatter on the floor. I’m immediately hit with a wave of nausea.

*The blood oozed off the edge of the table to the floor. The sound of it dripping, the small splat... splat... splat... the blood hitting the floor seems so loud, it was deafening. I couldn’t tell if she was breathing or not, but she lay so still that...*

Shay runs back to me, kneeling on the mattress again as he grabs my shoulders and forces me to look up and meet his cold glare. “You love me, I know you do! You belong to me, Mina! You always have.”

“I don’t belong to anyone, Shay,” my voice breaks again, and I keep fighting back the bile that is creeping up my throat, from the sight of the blood. No matter how hard I try to stop, tears keep sliding down my face, falling into my lap. I reach up and try to pry his hands loose but he refuses to let go. “I am



my own person. I need to live my own life. I need to get away and-

“You aren’t going fucking *anywhere!*” he shouts, his face red and his whole body was shaking. “If you ever try to fucking leave, I will drag you back here!”

“I’m not meant for this life, Shay!” I sob.

“You are meant to be *mine!* I am not letting this go, Mina... you need to wake up and realize that I’m the only one for you. I’m all you will ever need.” His uninjured hand snaps out and grasps my chin and he crushes his mouth almost painfully to mine before he pulls back just enough so that we’re staring into each other’s eyes... mine, which are swimming with tears, and his, which are filled with rage. “I won’t let *you* go. So whoever this other guy is, if he tries to take you from me, I will kill him. Do you understand? I. Will. Fucking. Kill. Him.”

I feel the blood drain from my face at his words. I’m so paralyzed with fear that I simply stare back at him, silent tears running down my cheeks, and my mouth hangs open in shock.

“If you do as I say, if you commit to me, I’ll spare him. I won’t hunt him down and make him suffer... I won’t even try to find out who he is. But if you *don’t,*” at this, the shadows around his eyes seem to grow, and the smallest of smiles curl up the corners of his mouth, “I will find him, and I *will* figure it out, Mina. I promise you. And I will make him hurt. I will make him bleed. He’ll scream and beg, and I’ll smile and revel in his suffering. And you know what? It will be *your* fault... because you told me *no.*”

I can’t breathe. My hands fall limply to my lap, and I stare at the man who I now realize is a monster, one I had trusted my whole life. And now, in a matter of seconds, he shattered all the memories, all the confidence and love that I’d placed in him. It was gone, and all that was left was a hollow sort of void in my heart.

“This is what I need now, Mina. This is what you need to do if you want those three things I once asked you. If you want to be happy, if you don’t want to cause any problems, if you

don't want to push me to the edge," His words send a chill through my veins and I actually start shivering. "Then you'll do this. You'll be with me like this... do you understand?" When I don't speak, he gives me another hard shake. "Mina!" he snarls. "Do you want me to lose it? Do you want to be the reason I fucking tear this house apart?"

I quickly shake my head, terrified when I see how he's hanging on the edge of his control by his fingertips.

His hands relax, going from gripping my face, to cradling it gently as he watches my body visibly deflate as the fight drains out of me. "Mina," he murmurs, his voice still using the same, soft threatening tone as before. "What are you going to do? Will you be mine and stay with me? Or..." One of his dark brows arcs, almost like a challenge, as though daring me to not pick him. Like I still might consider risking someone else's life...

I open my mouth to speak, but nothing comes out. I can't talk. I feel like a shell. His thumb strokes my cheek, encouraging me to give him an answer. I try again, but nothing comes out.

"Mina?" his voice rises slightly, coming off a little harsher, a warning.

I have no other choice. Since I couldn't speak, I could only lifelessly nod before my body gave out, and I slumped against him, feeling like I was truly drowning in this moment... I was never going to get away...



*The Past...*

*Mina: Sixteen Years Old*

*June*

"Mum, may I talk to you?"

Mum stirred from where she lay in the master suite of our house. She wasn't drunk... maybe a little hungover, but sober

enough for a conversation. James and Shay were downstairs having breakfast, but I wanted a few minutes to talk to her alone. It was Saturday, the night of my recital, and I needed to talk to my mother before we went over.

Mum's eyes, which were so similar to mine, drifted my way. The room was dark, the curtains closed, and she was sprawled across the king bed she shared with James. She looked like a mess... her dark hair was tangled and unkempt, and she looked like she hadn't showered in a few days. She was in a pair of sweats and wrinkled t-shirt that had a stain on it... a stain of what, I couldn't tell. Honestly, I really didn't want to know.

"Sure, honey... just... speak softly, okay?" Mum murmured, remaining where she lay. I sighed, casting my mother a critical once-over before stepping into the in-suite bathroom. I came back with a glass of water and handed it to her. Mum gave me a small smile and drank nearly all of it before she set it aside on the bedside table. "What do you want to talk about?"

I perched on the edge of the bed, my hands clasped in my lap. I found I couldn't look into my mother's eyes without feeling a bubble of disappointment and bitterness swelling inside me, so I focused on the dark swirling pattern on the dark comforter instead. "Tonight is my recital."

"I'll be there, you know that," Mum moaned slightly and pressed her fingers to her temple as though she was suffering from a horrible headache. Most likely she was.

"Sober, Mum. I want you there sober."

Mum's gaze was sad as she shakily looked up at me. I stared pleadingly down at her, pitying the woman my mother had become. For a long time, neither of us spoke, until Mum cleared her throat. "I really fucked things up, didn't I?"

I stilled at her words and held my breath. Never had she admitted to any fault. She always cast the blame to Shay, the club, and occasionally James. I stared at her, feeling lightheaded as she went on.

“After your father died... I was so afraid of being alone. James seemed... he was so confident and sure of himself. I fell hard. I wasn't thinking...”

I glanced at the doorway nervously before looking back to my mother. I lowered my voice to keep the sound from travelling out into the hall. “You fell in love, Mum. That's not your fault...”

“I didn't protect you. We should have gotten out a long time ago... but I'm weak, Mina.” She shook her head sadly and closed her eyes. “And now we're trapped.”

I didn't know what to say. I always knew my mum was unhappy, that she was struggling. But she had never openly talked about it. She knew James cheated on her on occasion with the sweetbutts. She fought with him about the club often. She drank to make herself feel better. My heart suddenly ached for my mother. I reached out and gently took a long strand of her dark hair and carefully started to run my fingers through it, working through the knots and tangles.

“You need to get far away from here, Mina... before they trap you, too...”

I scoffed a little at that. “Please, Mum... once I graduate high school, I'm off to study dance and I'll move to a city and join a company.” I thought about Keenan's words about how he pictured me living my life and smiled, fighting back the bubble of happiness in my belly as I thought about the beach.

“Shay won't let you go...” Mum said, her voice incredibly heavy.

I looked at her sharply. “Shay is busy with the club and his whores. And I know he wants what's best for me, despite how domineering he can be about it.”

“He loves you...”

Alarm bells were ringing sharply in my head at her words. “He just... he is super protective and-”

Mum shook her head earnestly. “No, Mina. Shay is in love with you... he won't let you go... you need to find a way to

escape because he won't let you just walk out of this life. He'll find a way to keep you here with him."

I let out a soft laugh, but it was shaky. I felt sick. Her words scared me. "Please, Mum, it's alright. You're seeing things that aren't there." Who was I trying to convince? Mum or myself? No. Mum was just hungover right now and she's always disliked Shay. That's all. That's all...

"Mina!" She sat up suddenly and gripped my shoulders hard. "Listen to me! He's-"

"Everything alright here?"

Both of us snapped our heads over to the doorway to see James step into the room. His dark eyes took in the sight of Mum's grasp on my arms and our troubled expressions... Mum's being one of desperation, while I probably looked scared shitless.

"We're just talking... about her recital..." Mum lowered her face and spoke softly.

"Is that so?" James moved his dark gaze to me. "Is that true, Baby Girl?"

I simply nodded, worried that if I did try to speak, my voice would break.

"Go on, get out of here. I need to talk to your mother alone."

I looked back at Mum, who simply nodded and released me. Hesitantly, I got to my feet and headed to the door. James stepped aside, giving my shoulder a little squeeze before closing the door behind himself and locking it. Minutes later, their loud, aggressive lovemaking filled the house and I quickly ran outside to hang out at the stream so I wouldn't have to listen to it.



Backstage, I was finishing up prepping for my performance. I was one of the only solo dancers tonight, and I knew the other

two girls were about two years younger than me. I wore a white bodysuit and a gauzy skirt that flowed around my knees. My slippers were white, and I decided against wearing stockings and went barelegged. I lined my eyes with a sweeping black liner and put on a layer of mascara, blush, and pale pink lipstick. Last minute, I also chose to take my hair out of its bun and let it hang loosely around my shoulders. My dance is meant to be sensual, graceful, and sad, and will be to the song Breathe Me by Sia. Overall, my dress, especially compared to the other dancers, was quite simple. Even the lighting would be soft, while others had flashing backgrounds and colourful motifs.

The first couple of dancers were the smallest girls and they barely know what they're doing, which makes their performances incredibly endearing and hilarious. I stood to the side of the stage, hidden behind the curtain and chuckled as one of the girl's started spinning in a circle while the others stumbled as they tried to follow their teacher's steps. The audience laughed a bit, too. I took that opportunity to peer at the crowd to see if I could spot my family, my fingers crossed as I searched for one face in particular...

Sure enough, front row, I saw Shay, James, Uncle Marty, Uncle Shawn (much to my surprise), and their old ladies... but my mother is nowhere in sight. Where was she? There was no empty seat to signal that she was in the washroom at that moment. No. There was no sign of Mum anywhere. I felt a lump in my throat as I realized my mother had let me down... again.

I retreated backstage and found a small, quiet corner to sit in. I tried to steady my breathing. I'd been practicing for weeks for this. I couldn't let my mother's weakness hurt me, not this time. Besides, at least James and Shay showed up, when they could be at the club doing God knows what. I stretched, using it as a distraction, warming up. The other solo dancers went in between the larger groups, but because I was the most experienced dancer, I would be last.

"Mina!" My teacher, Miss Riley, motioned me forward. "You're up!"

I exhaled long and slow. I was always nervous before performing in front of a crowd, but I knew once I started, I would get lost in my routine. The lights to the stage were down, hiding me from view, and I did my best to ignore the sick feeling in my stomach... the one that you feel right before you take the plunge on a roller coaster. I oriented myself and struck my beginning pose, my body hunched over as I hugged my knees, my head down so that my hair fell around me.

The beginning of the song started with that lovely piano and the lights came up. As Sia's beautiful voice filled the space, I allowed myself to not only glide through the movements, but feel the heavy emotion I associated with the song. I tried to move as though I was gliding on ice, my arms extending and moving around myself as though they were made of water. I tilted my head around, letting my hair fall where it may as I performed the spins, poses, and small jetes. I made sure my movements were elegant and graceful, while at the same time bearing the heaviness of depression, loss, and heartbreak on my shoulders. I managed to stand on my toes, even though I wasn't in point-toe shoes, and threw my arms back, letting my hair flip around me and fall where it may. I drifted to the side of the stage, the song reaching its crescendo and I performed one of the hardest moves, a grand pirouette before taking the giant leap, tossing my head back with my arms spread behind me and my legs completely split in front and behind, a perfect grand jetes. When I landed and slowed with a series of pique turns before striking a penche pose, I spun back with a final reverence pose just as the song ended. The lights went down and the audience got to their feet and cheered, the loudest being from the front row of my family and friends.

*I did it. I fucking did it! After the months and months of hard work... I pulled it off!*

It feels like my body was made of rubber as I stepped off, using the darkness of the stage to hide myself. I feel like my face is going to split in half, my smile is so wide. My hands are shaking and my heart is beating so fast against my chest, but I don't care. All the practice I put in, the sore toes and swollen feet, my muscles screaming in protest from the hours

of dance I put in to be perfect... it had all been worth it. I actually feel tears sting my eyes as I bend over, hands on my knees, and laugh while crying happy tears at the same time.

My private moment is almost immediately broken when I'm suddenly assaulted by the other dancers and teachers, all congratulating me on my performance. I could feel the huge, shit-eating grin on my face, but I'm embarrassed by the praise. I've never been very comfortable receiving compliments and having a dozen thrown my way is only adding to my emotions right now. My cheeks turned red. I thank them politely before peeking out of the curtain to see Shay stomping his feet, as he continued to cheer and James let out a shrill whistle between his lips, and my smile broadened. Despite their bullshit, I was glad they were here to see this.

But it was the shadowed figure in the dark, near the exit, that caught my eye. He was leaning up on the wall right by the door, mostly concealed in the shadows, looking like he'd been there watching the whole time. While everyone else was cheering loudly, he wasn't moving at all. I stared at him through a crack in the curtain and watched as he finally turned and stepped out the door. It was for the briefest moment that I caught sight of his profile beneath the light of the red "Exit" sign, and realized it was Keenan.

My heart stuttered when I realized he had been watching and felt my cheeks flush even more than they were already. He came... after everything that had happened, he came to watch me dance.

But before I could really savour the thought, Miss Riley had stepped onto the stage under the spotlight to thank the family and friends for coming to support the dancers that evening, and encouraged everyone to help themselves to the tables in the main hall that were laden with snacks and coffee.

I quickly change into a pair of black tights and a baby pink hoodie and white sneakers before hitching my bag over my shoulder. I run my fingers through my hair and put it up in a typical ballet bun and step out into the hall where all the parents and friends of the students are waiting. Even though I



saw him leave, I keep hoping I'll see Keenan's breathtakingly handsome face watching from the crowd.

"Sweetness!" A huge figure descends upon me and scoops me up into the air, holding me under my butt. I squeal and laugh as I look down at Shay's messy head. He grins cheekily up at me, "You were beautiful! Perfect!" he says as he spins us around. Behind him, James, Marty and Helen, and Shawn and Raya step forward. I've barely seen any of them since that unfortunate day years ago, and felt suddenly shy around them. Shay puts me down and, catching me off guard, he cups my face and kisses me right on the mouth.

I freeze from the kiss and my eyes widen in shock, but it doesn't last long. He pulls back, grinning wide, acting as though it was perfectly normal for him to have kissed me in such a way. The blood drains a bit from my face as I take a step away from him. Still in shock, I turn to greet the others as they each come forward to give me a hug. The grown-ups act completely unfazed by what they just saw, and not at all nervous or as uncomfortable as I feel. So maybe I'm just overthinking it.

*No, you're not...* that small voice in the back of my head whispers nastily as I receive hug after hug, though the ones from Marty and Shawn were stiff as hell. Last I saw them they were... *Ew, no!*

James comes up last and holds me tightly, "Congratulations, Baby Girl," he murmurs into my hair, "You were amazing. So proud of you."

"Thank you... thank you all for coming. It means so much to me." I step back and smile shyly at them. Shay then produces a bouquet of daisies for me and I can't help the smile that pulls up the corners of my mouth. I take them but avoid his intense gaze, and look away, hoping that perhaps I had been mistaken and that Keenan was hiding in the shadows, watching... or Mum *was* here somewhere.

James seems to know what I'm thinking because he places a heavy hand on my shoulder. "Your mother wanted to be here, but she couldn't make it."

I feel that familiar ache at his words. Lowering my gaze to the flowers and nodding, my smile slides off my face. When I manage to compose myself, I look at the others who are all watching, clearly concerned about how I'm going to take this. Aw shit, I don't want this to ruin my mood, so I force a grin at them and try to count my blessings. At least *they* had made the effort to be here, "Well, thank you all again for being here."

"Wouldn't have missed it." Shay drops an arm around my shoulder and pulls me into his side. "You were the best one out there... by a longshot."

"The others were all like, eight years old!" I laugh, trying to push past the awkwardness between us from his kiss.

"Not the other solo dancers. The second girl looked like she was eighteen."

"She's fourteen!"

Shay rolls his eyes. "Just take the damn compliment, Mina!"

I chuckle and lower my gaze as I clutch the bouquet. "Alright then, thank you."

"You're welcome."

"As much as I would like to stay and hang out, there's a meeting going on at the club tonight that I have to be there for," James said, breaking the moment. I look up to see him and Marty exchange wary looks. Huh, maybe it wasn't going to be a typical night of boozing and whoring. I could feel the sudden tension between them.

I look up at Shay. "Are you going, too?"

He frowns, nodding. "Sorry, but I have an assignment in the city tonight. I left you some supper in the fridge. You just have to warm it up in the oven first."

"Is Mum home?"

"She's asleep, so try to keep the noise down...." James adds.

Of course she was, I thought bitterly. “Okay. I guess I better get going then before it gets dark.”

“I’ll drop you off,” Shay said.

I shake my head, suddenly not really wanting to be alone with him. “No, it’s okay. It’s early enough that I can make it back before sunset. Go ahead and do your... assignment.” I turn red. What kind of bullshit was he up to? Nope, never mind. I don’t want to know. The less I know, the better I’ll sleep at night.

“Congratulations again, sweetie.” James pulls me from Shay and gives me a chaste kiss on the crown of my head.

I left the auditorium on my own, prepared to take the twenty minute walk home. The performance had been in town at the regular studio and theatre so I wasn’t worried about being out on my own with so many others around. I knew this area well, and I knew the way like the back of my hand. It was only when I was walking up the lonely road that led to my house that I felt suddenly nervous. I stopped and glanced behind myself, but there were no cars, no people... just a long empty street with thick forest on either side. Unable to shake the feeling like I was being watched, I hurried up the steps, eager to get inside. Even the hairs on the back of my neck were standing on end.

I unlock the front door and throw myself inside. I quickly secure the locks behind myself and turn on the lights. The house is quiet, and there is no sign of Mum.

“Mum?” I call. Despite James warning me to be quiet, I was uncertain as I stepped into the place. Where the hell was she? “Mum!” I called again. I headed up the stairs leading to the hallway that overlooked the bottom floor and went straight to my parents’ room and tapped on the door, “Mum?” I opened it.

There she was, lying in bed with a huge almost empty bottle of vodka at her side. Her breathing was steady and deep, fast asleep. Relief washed over me, despite my feelings of resentment towards my mother. But she was okay. Piss drunk, but okay.

“I’m sorry you weren’t well enough to come to my recital...” I whispered and closed the door.

I heated up the meatloaf that Shay and James had prepared for dinner and some peas for the side. I ate in the dining room, my muscles now getting sore from the dance. I would allow myself a few days to take it easy before getting back into it again. I’d pushed myself for tonight and it had paid off. I was feeling pretty damn good about myself. I was proud. Miss Riley had recorded my recital and it would be part of my audition tapes to get into a dance school once I graduated.

It’s then that my mother suddenly decides to make an appearance. She stumbles out of her bedroom upstairs and makes her way down the hall and almost falls down the steps as she enters the kitchen. She sees me sitting at the dinner table, nods, and goes to the sink. Turning on the faucet, she dips her head under and sucks up the water, drinking noisily and heavily.

“When’s your recital thing?” she mumbles, finally rising and turning it off.

“Um, it already happened...”

She turns, her eyes glassy and confused. “Huh?”

“Mum, it already happened, like, an hour ago. You missed it.”

“I missed...” Her voice trails off, her face screwed up as she took in the information. It looked like she was piecing something together before her expression twisted into an ugly grimace. “That fucking asshole! Fuck!” She kicked one of the chairs at the table and almost lost her balance. She clutches the edge of the counter and lets out a strangled yell that made the hairs on my arms stand on end.

I jumped up from my seat at her unexpected outburst. “Mum? What’s wrong?”

“Mina!” Mum faces me, tears falling down her face and remorse evident in her eyes. “I-”

Before she could finish, there came a rattle at the door. We both froze and stared for a moment as the knob tried to turn,

but because I'd locked it, nothing happened. I moved towards it, thinking for a moment that maybe James and Shay had decided to come home early after all, but Mum threw herself forward and shoved me back. "No! Don't! Let me..." She rushed forward, stumbling slightly as she was still a bit inebriated.

I laughed softly, shaking my head at her drunken paranoia. "Mum, what-"

"Shhh!" she hissed at me. I bit my bottom lip and rolled my eyes, hands on my hips, watching as she stumbled to the window instead of the door. She pulled back the curtain and peeked out. "Oh... my... God..." she whispered.

"Mum, what is it?" I felt my mood shift at the unsettling tone she used. When she didn't say anything, I moved up at her side and peered through the crack in the curtain, too, and to my horror, saw four huge black clad bodies standing on the porch. It was fully dark now, but the light was on, and I could see that they were wearing skeleton masks to hide their faces.

"What the hell?" I half-screamed and launched backwards. "Mum! Get away from the window!" I grabbed her elbow just as a loud bang against the door shook it in its frame. They were trying to break the door down! "Mum! Come on! Let's go! Where does James keep the gun? Where's your phone? We need to call the police!" I looked around frantically, caught up in the fear of the moment and forgot where I had put my bag when I'd gotten home. My phone was inside it.

"Mum!" I pulled on her arm again and we both stumbled backwards. "Mum, where is the gun? Where does James keep it?"

My mother became as still as a statue, her eyes slightly unfocused as though she was remembering something.

"With him. He always takes it when he goes out... we don't have anything..." she muttered, more to herself than to me. Desperately, I grabbed one of the large kitchen knives from the block and grabbed a handful of my mum's sleeve just as the door crashed again, and a gaping crack appeared close to the knob.

Tears were stinging my eyes as I gripped my mother's arm and gave her a shake. "Where is your phone?! Your phone, Mum! Call the cops! Call James. Call the club!" She seemed to come out of her trance and stumbled along with me, seizing the first thing she could, a large saucepan which sat on the dishrack. I half supported her by holding her elbow and guided us down the hall to my room. She fell forward onto my bed while I slid all the locks I'd installed in place, something I'd done the day James told me Shay was no longer allowed to sleep in my room with me. As my mum watched, I ran to my desk where I'd tossed my bag and dug through it until I found my phone. From the kitchen, we could hear the pounding against the door. There wasn't much time.

"Don't call the police!" my mother suddenly hissed at me when I started dialing 9-1-1.

"Why the hell not?!"

"James... call the club. They'll get here faster. *Now*, Mina!" She was leaning against her elbows, looking like she might be sick.

Too panicked to really think about what she just told me, I dialed James and waited, my eyes locked on my bedroom door. It felt like my heart was going to break through my ribcage. *Who were these men? Why the fuck were they here? What did they want?*

But as the phone rang for James, I realized how obvious it was... it was something to do with the club... a rival group or, or... shit, I don't know! I don't know what kind of crap James and his club are involved in? But who else would come to James O'Hare's house in the night and try to break in wearing masks? There was no other explanation...

"Mina?"

The sound of his voice on the other end was like a lifeline being tossed my way. "James! Oh my God... okay, listen... four guys are trying to get into the house! They're-they're..." My voice cracks when I try to speak. I quickly clear it and whisper urgently, "They're breaking the door down!" The hand holding the phone to my ear is shaking so badly, I'm

worried I'll drop it, but my other hand is still clutching the huge kitchen knife, so I fight to steady myself. Mum is still on the bed, the pan in her hands as she watches the door, her expression unreadable.

“What the fuck?” In the background, I can hear several members' voices suddenly call out, sounding concerned.

“What's going on, Sheik? Is she hurt?”

From the kitchen there came a sudden, loud, crash as the door was finally broken down. I fell back on the floor at my mother's feet, crying out in fear at the sudden explosion, and one of her arms wrapped around my shoulders across my chest, holding me back against her legs. “James! They're in! They're in the house... I...” It's taking everything I have to keep my voice quiet and not to scream, and it comes out strangled. They haven't found us yet, I need to keep my shit together.

“WHAT?! They're in the fucking house?” James shouted and as the yelling and cussing of the others in the background suddenly erupted. “Where are you? Where is your mother?” he demanded.

“We're locked in my room,” I managed to whisper, my eyes on the door as tears streamed down my face.

“Okay, listen up, Baby Girl... I want you and your mother to sneak out the window and run. You got me? Fucking run north, along the creek. We're all on our way.”

“James,” I whisper again as footsteps thump heavily along the wooden floorboards of our home. They were searching... I felt a shiver of pure terror flood my veins at the realization that they were inside. How long did we have until they came back here?

“Give your mother the phone, Mina. Now!”

I immediately pressed my cell into my mother's palm and she held it to her ear. “Yes?”

I couldn't hear what James was saying, and my mother was silent as she listened to him speak, until she gently said, “Yeah... I know, babe... I know...” Her voice cracked a bit,

like she was fighting back tears. She took a deep, steady breath, and whispered, "I will. You, too..." She pulled the phone back, pressed 'speaker', and then shoved it into her pocket. Looking suddenly determined, she jumped to her feet, and unlocked my window just as the doorknob rattled. I had to bite my lip to keep from screaming. Even if I had, it didn't matter. They knew we were in here.

"Mina, come here," my mother murmured to me and held out her hand. I took it and got to my feet, my other hand clutching the knife, as she led us to the window, yanking it up just as the loud banging on my door began. We both jumped in response, my heart stopping for a moment. They were going to break it down, too.

"Don't even think about running, Emily!" A deep voice I didn't recognize, shouted from the other side of my door. "I have two of my guys circling the place. We just want to talk."

"Go fuck yourself!" My mother snarled, but her hands paused on the frame of the window. I clung to her arm, feeling like I was seconds away from passing out. If what he said was true, we couldn't run. Not with two guys watching the outside. My mum swore under her breath and snapped the window shut, locked it, and pushed me to the back of my room to my closet door. She threw it open and ushered me inside, guiding me into a crouched position in the back corner.

"Emily... come on out. I just need to know where-"

"Did I stutter?" My mother called over her shoulder. "I thought I told you to fuck off!"

"Where is Mina Westberg?"

My body turned to stone at his words. *Me? They were searching for me? Why?* I looked up at my mother as she placed my cell phone on the floor by a pair of my shoes, keeping it concealed from view. It was still on speaker. James was listening to everything. The banging continued, until a shattering crack broke a panel partially off the middle of the door.



Mum didn't even glance back as she cupped my face, catching me off-guard with the tender gesture. It had been years since my mother touched me like this. What was wrong with her? Her face was filled with a sort of... understanding... grim acceptance. Seeing that look only heightened my panic.

“Mum?”

“Stay quiet, honey,” she whispered and pressed a kiss to my forehead. “When they find you, use that...” She nodded to the knife in my hands. “...fight like hell. Understand? No matter what you hear, you stay hidden. You got that? No *matter* what you hear. You *stay!* Now, promise me.”

“Wh-what?” I stammered, my eyes wide as I stared up at her in confusion. What was she talking about? Why was she saying this to me?

The men continued to pound on the door. “He just wants the girl, Emily! Tell us where she's hiding!”

“Promise me you will stay, Mina!” She gave my shoulders a desperate, little shake, bringing my attention back to her when a loud crack pierced the air as the men managed to break part of the frame.

“I-I promise... but what-”

I didn't get a chance to ask her what she meant before she gave my forehead another firm, quick kiss, reached up and moved my hanging clothes around so they concealed me as much as possible, and shut the doors. Peeking through the cracks between the slats, I watched her stand and turn just as the door smashed in. I flinched back, covering my mouth with my free hand as two of the men dressed in black, wearing those terrifying skeleton masks, burst in.

They looked right at her for only a second before the leader stepped forward. As soon as he was within arms' reach, she didn't hesitate as she swung the frying pan with all her might, and managed to knock the guys hand aside. He shouted in pain, but she didn't stop. Mum turned to the other one and swung at him, too. He dodged to the side and barreled into her side, knocking her off her feet. I shoved my fist into my

mouth, biting down on my own flesh to keep myself from screaming. As I furiously blinked away tears, the man who had knocked her down grabbed a fistful of Mum's hair and yanked her sideways. She landed on her hip and he dragged her across the room to where his companion was waiting, shaking out his hand after the blow she'd give him. My mum shrieked and kicked her legs the entire way, still fighting as hard as she could. The one she had managed to hit had recovered, and he seized the frying pan from the floor, the eerie face of his mask fixed right on her.

"Where is the girl?" he asked her.

"What girl?" she spat, breathing hard as she panted from exertion.

"Don't play dumb! Where is your daughter?"

"She's not home."

"Lying bitch." He swung at her then, using his hand, and I shut my eyes just before he struck her. But I still heard her cry out in pain. I choked back a sob as I listened.

"Where the fuck is Mina?"

"Not... here..." she panted, and then there was another loud smack.

I felt sick to my stomach, feeling like I was on the verge of fainting. *Where the hell was James? Hurry the fuck up! Hurry up! Please!*

Two more sets of footsteps came stomping into the room.

"Any sign?"

"She's not outside, but I saw her come home. She's here somewhere."

"Fine, you," the skeletal face nodded to the one holding her by her hair. "You wanted to take care of this one, go ahead while we search. We'll find her..."

*Take care... What in the fuck does that mean? Oh my God!* I watched helplessly through the cracks as the silent masked man dragged her from the room by her hair, heading down the

hall to the kitchen with her as she cried out in pain and kicked to free herself.

I felt sick, my mind wrestling back my impulse to protect her. *I promised... I promised...* I wanted to run out there and protect her, but really, what could I do? Yeah, I had a knife in my hand, but I didn't know how to fight. I'd never been in one in my life, let alone taking on four huge men. And I promised her I would stay, no matter what I heard. But-but...

One man remained behind in the room, stomping around as he overturned my bed to check beneath it when, from the kitchen, I heard my mother scream. An ear-splitting, bone-chilling scream that turned the blood in my veins to ice. I squeezed my eyes shut as the sound ripped through me.

*No matter what you hear, you stay hidden...* she had said. *No matter what you hear. You stay! Now, promise me.* God, I wish I hadn't. I was biting into my fist so hard, the sharp coppery taste of blood coated my tongue.

The closet doors suddenly flew open causing me to instinctively shrink back into the corner, praying to God he couldn't see me. Overhead, my hangers were thrown aside, the material brushing across the crown of my head, and I slowly looked up into the horrifying mask of one of the men. He didn't say a thing. He just reached out, gripped my upper arms and hauled me to my feet. Immediately, I kicked at him, managing to get him in the shin. He grunted a bit and I used my free arm to swing the knife at him. He dodged it effortlessly as he seized my wrist, and slammed it into the wall.

I clung to the knife, holding it as tight as I could as he repeatedly smashed it again and again on the panels. I grit my teeth, trying to bear the pain and hold on, but it only took him a few seconds before he managed to disarm me, and my weapon clattered noisily to the floor. From the kitchen, there were more piercing screams from my mother, and I felt a rush surge through my veins. Unarmed now, I pressed my back against the wall and lifted my legs as he held me there, and kicked against his stomach. He groaned beneath the hideous mask and stumbled back. Rushing him, I attacked him with

everything I had, kicking and punching at every part I could reach, when...

My mother stopped screaming... instead, she started wailing.

I shoved past my attacker as he bent over from my assault, and ran back for the knife I'd dropped. A hand snatched at my ankle, sending me off-balance so that I crashed to the floor onto my stomach, forcing the air from my lungs in a rush. I gasped desperately as he hauled me up to my feet and crushed me against himself.

Pushing back against his chest, which was thick with muscle, I could barely make him budge an inch. He was built like a brick wall. I was blinded by tears from being winded, and though I was still coughing as I tried to suck in air, I forced myself to keep fighting. As he tried to get a better grip on me, I fought the only way I knew how... by using my nails as I clawed at the mask, somehow managing to rake at the skin beneath. He snarled, but kept his hold. I then bit down on his forearm, which was wrapped right below my chin, and he cursed loudly as I broke the skin. I kicked and flailed, hoping to make it as difficult as possible for him so that he'd drop me.

The wailing from the kitchen stopped all at once, the only sound now coming from me and my attacker as we struggled together. All I could hear now was the blood rushing through my ears, which drowned out everything else at my mother's sudden silence, including my own screaming.

One of the other men stormed in and grabbed my legs, both easily lifting me into the air between them. Without another word from either man, they carried me out of my bedroom and into the hall.

As we entered the kitchen, I immediately sought out my mum, and when my gaze found her, I felt like I was going to throw up. Bile rose in my throat and the whole world slowed down the moment I saw what that silent masked man had done to her.

She was lying on her back on the dining table. There were deep, bloody cuts marring her cheeks, running from jawline up

to the deep gauges where her eyes had been. Blood, there was blood covering her face, oozing from her now sightless sockets. And... *Oh God...* her nose... her nose was *gone*. There was a single, deep stab wound in the middle of her chest, which blood was still seeping thickly from, down her sides, and then off the edge of the table to the floor. The sound of it dripping, the small *splat... splat... splat...* as the blood hit the floor was so loud to me, it was deafening. I couldn't tell if she was breathing or not, but she lay so still that...

I whipped my head to the side and vomited. The men holding me suddenly shouted out in disgust and let me go at once. I fell hard on my ass, but I didn't give a shit about the pain. I rolled to the side and heaved again, spewing my dinner everywhere, tears and snot streaming down my face.

The silent one grabbed my mother's ankle and turned, heading towards the open space where our front door had once been. Her body slid off the edge of the table with a sickening, heavy, thump. I could hear the sound of her being dragged outside by her killer. I was crying so hard I could barely see.

"No, NO! Mum, MUM!" I screeched as I tried to crawl forward to stop him from taking her. "Let her go! Stop! You fucking bastards! You sick, fucking-" As I put weight on my injured wrist, I crumpled to the floor just in time to see her hand slide out of view out the front door. "MUUUUUUM!" I screamed.

"Fucking grab her and let's go!" the leader of the group called over to us irritably, like my grief and being sick was some sort of major inconvenience. "Get her under control so we can get moving! He wants her at the exchange by eleven!"

Their hands were on me again, but this time, I was ready. I shot up off the ground, diving for one of their knees. He tumbled back, hitting the wall with a shout, and I crawled up his body and swung at his face. The crack of my fist on his jaw sent a sharp pain from my knuckles all the way up my arm, but I didn't care. These fucking pieces of shit deserved every bit of pain and suffering coming their way. I punched again at his masked face just as a pair of hands gripped me under my armpits and hauled me back. I twisted in his arms and pushed

all my weight into him, hoping to make him fall off-balance, but he didn't. The first guy had recovered, and he appeared out of nowhere, grabbing a fistful of my hair and viscously yanked my head sideways. I reached up behind me, attempting to claw at any part of him that I could reach, but was restrained by his companion as he grabbed my wrists and twisted them painfully behind my back. I started kicking then, and managed to get his friend in the knee. But I was in my stocking feet, and all I really managed to do was hurt myself as a result.

“I don't have fucking time for this!” their leader shouted impatiently as he stomped towards us, reaching into his jacket pocket. “She's a fucking teenager, not even half your size, and you shitheads can't even hold her still? For fuck's sake!” He withdrew a crowbar. At the sight, I began to panic, and fought even more. But the two men recovered enough to stretch me out on the floor by my hands and legs.

“No! Please! Please, don't!” I screamed as their leader stood over me and raised the tool high over his head. “PLEASE, STOP!”

His arm swung down, the metal connecting with my right knee. My body buckled from the pain as he swung up, only to strike again. I think I screamed. I honestly don't know, because blackness swallowed me whole, drowning out the rest of the world.

*To be continued...*

## AFTERWORD

*Dear Reader,*

*We are all thrown challenges in life. Sometimes they are small obstacles that we can easily conquer. But sometimes, life throws something at us we didn't expect, or even want. And it grabs us round our ankles and threatens to pull us beneath the surface, and every day we have to fight to keep from drowning. And we have no choice but to face these problems each day, feeling as though they are keeping us from enjoying moments of happiness or progression in our lives.*

*And sometimes, these struggles come in the form of a dark shadow or a malicious whisper in our mind that haunts us each day...*

*Please know that you are NOT alone.*

*Before you judge someone, they are fighting their own battles that you are unaware of. Be kind to each other. Always.*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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