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loxley prep
series

HATTIE JUDE

TRAITOR

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Traitor
by Hattie Jude

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ISBN-13: 978-1-7373619-8-5

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PROLOGUE

Age 12

The wind is brutal against my face. Like slashes of a knife across my skin. I trip, my hands flying out in front of me to break my fall.

“You’re not done. Get up. You need to move those rocks to the border.” The guard points at the pile of boulders that weigh more than ten of us put together and motions where he wants them to go. The makeshift driveway that took us a week to spread out from here to the distant paved street is made of small rocks that dig into my feet as I work.

Some of the kids cry and after it goes on a while, one of the men will drag them off, the echoes of the screams leaving everyone unsettled. Some of the kids don’t ever come back. If they do, they come back looking much worse than before they left.

I try to do my work as best I can, so a man never has to take me anywhere.

I don’t understand how the people who are supposed to take care of me and nurture me the most could send me here. And I really can’t believe the hell this place is.

I’ll never look at my parents the same way again.

I stand up and shudder against the cold and ignore the sting of the stones against the thinned-out soles of my shoes. I will move that rock and it will not draw unnecessary attention to me and then I can go by the fire and warm my feet and hands and face.

I stumble to the rock, dizzy with whatever happens to a body when it's been too cold for too long. The top of the rock reaches my stomach and when I try to move it, it won't budge. I try and I try and can barely get it to even tilt in the direction I want it to go. Tears roll down my cheeks and freeze onto my skin. The snot in my nose drips and freezes. I can't feel my feet anymore.

"On three, let's both shove it onto its side."

I turn and look at the boy who spoke. His hair is black, his lips full and red against his pale skin. I've seen him a few times around here. We're usually working outside or on opposite sides of the forest, but this is the first time he's ever talked to me. I assume he's twelve or maybe thirteen like me since we're doing the same tasks, but they like to switch it up around here, keep us guessing. It's hard to tell ages in this place. Hair for boys and girls is kept cropped to the neck. I'm the only one with a braid down my back and it feels like a curse.

I nod. "Okay."

He says it under his breath, so quiet, I almost think I've imagined it. "One, two, three."

We both shove and it falls to the side. I shoot an elated look at the boy, and he gives his head a slight shake. I see one of the guards coming closer to us and bite down on my bottom lip to keep from showing any excitement.

"One, two, three," he whispers, and we roll the rock again. We continue this way until we have it where it's supposed to sit.

The taller guard points at the next rock and the boy and I go toward it quickly, I have to run to keep up with him.

Jordan, the guy in my group who has had it out for me since day one, sticks out his foot and I go flying. I whimper when I hit one of the boulders, a sharp pain piercing through my leg.

My new friend moves so he's between me and Jordan, his fists balled at his sides. "Leave her alone," he says under his breath. I keep trying to get a look at his eyes, but he's always moving, turning away, looking down, anywhere but right at me.

I've learned that the eyes are a clue to how safe I am, how much I can trust a person.

A blond boy with laughing blue eyes and the cutest dimples steps out from behind another rock—I haven't even noticed him before now—and he smirks at Jordan before looking at me with concern. He jerks his chin up at Jordan, daring him to come closer.

Two other boys surround us, one taller and pale with such similar features as the blond boy but with assessing grey-blue eyes that I think they must be related, and the other with dark skin and eyes that remind me of a warm fire holds out his hand and helps me stand up. I thank him and a hint of a smile comes and goes faster than a blink.

Jordan's eyes are cruel and vacant. He swallows hard as he decides how far to push this.

"Hey, break it up." The guard walks over and motions for us to get back to work.

"Thank you," I say quietly as the first boy and I get back in place behind another rock. I smile at the other boys as they watch us. "What are your names? I'm—"

"No talking," the man shouts.

My friend taps on the rock three times and when he pushes it forward, I understand his new system. He has a mark on his arm that I don't notice until I see him tapping, a long scar that goes from his wrist all the way up his arm. I want to ask him if he got that here or if it's what put him in here.

Camp Capitree, no place I'd rather be.

Where you put your temper behind you,

Work hard and peace will find you.

Study and see what you can explore,

It's not that hard in the great outdoors

Of Camp Capitree.

I didn't want to come here, but I didn't have a choice. I only hoped it was a good sign that the theme song to Camp Capitree was catchy.

I quickly found out that everything about the song is a lie.

We continue working together this way until the rock is in place, not saying a word the whole time. We move fourteen of the massive boulders and by the time the day is over, my hands are bloody and my skin is raw.

That night when I crawl into the cot that I've slept in for the past nineteen nights, I say a quiet prayer that something good will happen to the boys who stepped in for me today. Something to reward their kindness. I fall asleep feeling a thread of hope for the first time since I got here.

CHAPTER ONE

Five years later

I step into the halls of Loxley Prep and already feel out of place. I swear I've stepped inside a log cabin, the rounded wood beams massive and the high ceilings and windows feeling more chalet than prep school. Everyone acts like they already know each other, and why wouldn't they? It's senior year and most of the kids have probably gone to school together their entire lives. I tug the cardigan tighter around me, the only part of this uniform that I don't mind. I hate plaid, I hate wearing a tie, and my combat boots are the only thing I'm wearing that feels like me. I wish I'd worn leggings under this short skirt, but it's September, and where we just moved from in Texas, September is still hot. September in Minnesota, from what I remember, is unpredictable.

Aunt Darby and I got into town yesterday and it was eighty-four degrees. This morning, when I got into my rickety yellow Jeep and tried to convince her to start, it was twenty-four degrees. I hug the cardigan tighter and wish for the zillionth time that I could be anywhere but here, but wishes have never done me any good.

I find my way to the office and get in the short line that has formed in front of the receptionist's desk. When it's just the girl in front of me left, I check the clock behind the desk to make sure I won't be late for my first class. I have five minutes, not long enough for someone who doesn't know her way around the school.

"What do you mean, you can't change it?" the girl snaps at the older

woman. She's wearing her skirt at least five inches shorter than I am, which is a much better length on anyone. Her blonde hair is straight and thick, and she whips it around like she enjoys the feel of it on her arms.

"Cassie." The older woman lets out a lengthy sigh. Her pouf is impressive, and I wonder if it's as stiff as it looks. "You know I already spoke with your father about this. You won't be able to get out of your math class. I'm sorry, honey."

She doesn't sound sorry at all, her nasal Northern accent lilting in an octave higher than I would've expected. Cassie isn't buying it either.

"I guess my dad will have to waste his precious time and come in," Cassie is saying, as the woman looks at me and says, "Next."

Cassie glares at me like I'm forcing her to take a math class, and I'm about to step forward when a guy moves in front of me and leans on the desk like I'm not even there.

"I was next," I say quietly.

He turns and I feel a bolt of energy zip through my chest. My heart gallops ahead despite me trying to remain calm on the outside. Aunt Darby would call it butterflies or something equally as magical. I'm going with acid reflux. He is beautiful though, in his tall, wavy blond hair and blue-eyed way that is far too dangerous to even acknowledge. The dimples are still on point.

"Hello," he says, lifting an eyebrow. His eyes roam over my face, sticking on my lips and then moseying down to my chest and getting stuck there for a little too long before trailing down to my legs.

"Should I turn around and twirl so you can see my backside too?" I ask, rolling my eyes.

His eyes light up as the muscle in his jaw clenches and he leans close, giving me a good whiff of sexy clean boy, a rarity at this age. Images of him dirty and smelly and a lot shorter flash before me and I have to blink to see him in the here and now.

"Nah, I've seen enough," he says in my ear. "Nothing I haven't seen before and done better, little Kendall Jenner wannabe."

I snort and it catches him off guard. "You can't get more original than that? Just because I have dark hair and dark eyes?" I shake my head, amused. "Disappointing."

I can see his surprise before he swallows it down and pulls out a smirk. "Your tits *are* bigger," he concedes.

"Mr. Ellison!" the receptionist gasps. "Apologize this instant!"

He turns to look at her. Ms. Birdie, her nameplate says. Oh, and technically her title is front desk officer. I had a momentary lapse in memory that I'm at Loxley Prep, but that properness brought me back. She's been watching our exchange on the edge of her seat, fascinated and horrified.

"Sorry you had to hear that, Ms. Birdie," he says.

"I meant for you to apologize to her, Mr. Ellison, and you know it."

I ignore the jerk and look at Ms. Birdie. "I'm here to pick up my schedule. I wasn't able to get it online yet."

"Oh, you must be Lennon Mae Gentry," she says, grabbing a file.

"Just Lennon is fine."

"I've asked Wells here to show you around," she says. "Wells, you'd better be a *gentleman* and show Lennon around the school. You have a similar schedule, I believe, so you can just show her as you go."

"Oh, Birdie. It's sad that you're misusing my talents for such triviality," Wells says, winking at her and scowling at me.

"If you could just hand me my schedule, I'd prefer to find my classes on my own," I tell Ms. Birdie. "I don't need this asshole's help," I say under my breath.

Wells lifts an eyebrow and I know it hit its target. "You're at Loxley Prep, so I'm sure you're incapable of putting two feet in front of the other without help." He holds his arm out like he's being chivalrous, and I roll my eyes and ignore him, reaching my hand out to Ms. Birdie.

She looks at me with eyes wide and hands me the folder. "I apologize for Mr. Ellison's inexcusable behavior. Here I thought he was one of the nicest boys in our school," she scoffs, shaking her head.

"Oh, I *am* one of the nicest boys in the school," Wells says. "It's just that *all* of us are assholes," he says in my ear. "But you look like you're capable of holding your own." His eyes wander down my chest again and I walk past him as he whistles. "Oh yeah, the view *is* better when you're walking away."

I lift my hand, giving him the finger and not wasting any more time with this idiot. By this time, we're in the hallway and I study my file, not bothering to find my locker now that I'm going to be late to class. My first class is Lit and Comp and I hustle down the hall, passing Wells as I do. He picks up the pace and when I reach the door, he opens it wide, and the entire class looks at us as we walk in.

"Nice of you to join us, Wells," the teacher says. He barely looks old enough to be a teacher and has probably gotten a lot of mileage out of his

good looks around here. His class is predominantly girls and they're all staring at him with enraptured looks on their faces. I don't mind because it takes the attention off of me.

Until he turns and looks at me.

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CHAPTER TWO

“I’m Mr. Ellison, Bishop Ellison,” he adds, shooting Wells a dark look. His hair is darker than Wells’, but it’s wavy like his, with a mind of its own, and his eyes are more of a grey-blue than Wells’ indigo blue. Their eyes have both gotten steelier with time.

“I’m Lennon,” I say.

“Do you have a last name, Lennon?” Mr. Ellison asks. It’s hard to think of him as anything but Bishop.

“Gentry.”

“Lennon Mae Gentry,” Wells says with a flourish. He waves his hands like he’s announcing me, and Bishop shoots us both a look that is indecipherable.

“Sit down, Wells. It’s good to have you at Loxley Prep, Lennon. I hope you’ll enjoy your time here.”

So that’s how we’re playing it. My nerves are running away with me, but I nod and sit in the only seat that’s left, a front-row middle seat. We go through what will be expected of us this semester, and I get distracted watching Bishop as he strolls back and forth across the front of the class, talking about the books we’ll be covering. He’s taller and more filled out than Wells.

Wells looks like sunshine with his hair and skin, and Bishop looks like a cozy day inside. Bishop’s eyes light up when he talks about books, and he doesn’t make eye contact with me again after my introduction.

When the bell rings, I rush out and Wells falls into step next to me. “You’re going the wrong way,” he says.

“Well then, which way should I be going?”

“Trig is the other direction, and we’ll pass the lockers on the way there if you need to stop.”

“So, you do have a decent bone in your body?”

“Oh, my bone is way better than decent, Lennon Mae Gentry. I promise you that.”

I make a gagging face and his eyes narrow either in disbelief or annoyance, I’m not sure which. From the way girls are calling out his name left and right, I’m guessing he doesn’t get much resistance from the females around here.

Wells points out the lockers as we get near them and I’m too paranoid of being late, so I just keep walking toward class. He jogs to keep up with me.

“You really don’t have to stay with me,” I tell him. “In fact, please don’t.”

“Believe me, if I didn’t have to go to the same classes, I would be long gone,” he says.

I round the corner and barrel into a hard body. My books go flying and I nearly do too, but hands clasp around my arms and I have to look up, up, up to the eyes of the body I just ran into. I didn’t know there were guys this big in high school. Texas had some muscle, but so far everyone seems taller and sturdier in Minnesota.

Neither of us says anything as we stare at each other. He looks like he wants to eat me for lunch and spew me out. What’s with all the attitude? I thought there was something called Minnesota nice that implied the people here at least pretended to be courteous and mild-mannered. So far, I’m not seeing much of that.

“Hey, Ronan,” Wells says.

After Ronan does a tiny head lift at Wells, Ronan lets go of me and they do this special handshake that goes on and on, while I take in Ronan. Now that I’m studying him up close, I recognize him under this hot new exterior. He’s the one who has changed the most.

It’s a shock to the system to be this close to them again.

Ronan has rich brown skin, and his eyes are a rusty amber. His perfectly straight teeth flash when he says something to Wells. Another beautiful boy that’s too pretty to have manners. I step around him, picking up my books.

“Sorry about that,” I say.

He doesn’t say anything, and I keep walking. When I reach my class, I turn, and Wells and Ronan are walking toward me. They go in before I do

and again, I'm left with the front row. Ronan ends up in the seat behind me, and I feel his eyes on me during class.

It's going to be a long year.

The next class I'm on my own. Wells disappears and I manage to find the gym on time and change without running into anyone.

Joy of joys, Cassie is the first person I see when I walk in and she rolls her eyes when she sees me, flipping that hair right and left. The teacher calls everyone to the volleyball net.

I feel the hair on the back of my neck stand up and I turn, seeing the source of the stare in the back of the group. His hair is on the longer side, dark, and it flops forward, covering his eyes half the time and making his eyes that much more of a surprise when they show. His eyes are piercing into me, a green that reminds me of my favorite stone. The teacher claps his hands and students scatter, and I realize I missed everything he just said.

The teacher motions for me to go on the right side, and I jog over to get in place. I turn back and *he's* still standing there. He says something to the teacher and then leaves, turning to look at me one more time before he walks out of the gym.

It's him, I'm sure of it.

Looks like the gang's all here.

I rub my hands over my arms, trying to smooth down the chill bumps.

This place is turning out to be more frigid than I expected. I hope my aunt's day is going better than mine. God knows we need our luck to turn around soon. She thinks this move is a sign that it's already happening, and I haven't wanted to disappoint her by disagreeing.

There's no question that they don't recognize me. And if they didn't, the second I said my name, everything would've kicked into place. I'm not sure why we're pretending, but I'm not complaining—I'd hoped my return to Minnesota would be a quiet entrance.

This is the last place I should be, but I'm not going anywhere.

CHAPTER THREE

I survive volleyball without too many embarrassing moments, and before I go to lunch, I find my locker. The building is nice, much nicer than any school I've been in before, and I feel more comfortable without Wells hanging over my shoulder.

I check the folder Ms. Birdie gave me for my locker combination and am focusing on making sure I hit the right numbers so I don't hear anything until it's in my ear.

"What do you think you're doing here?"

I shiver. Will I always associate his voice with the cold? Or is that just because I'm back in close vicinity of where it all began?

I turn around and they're all here...all but one. I suspect Bishop doesn't have time to intimidate students. I glance over Wells' shoulder and Bishop is standing in the hallway, back propped against the wall. I take it back, maybe he does have the time.

"I thought with the lackluster greeting maybe you guys had forgotten about me, or I don't know—" I shrug.

Wells waves his hand for me to hurry up and come out with it.

"I thought maybe you'd grown up since the last time we saw each other," I finish.

I stare at Abel as I say it, his eyes cutting through my heart and leaving it in ribbons. I still trust what the eyes say, and they're saying that he hates me more than ever.

I turn back to face my locker, and someone leans close to my ear.

"Oh, we've grown up all right." It's Ronan, and my heart rate kicks up a few dozen notches. "And so have you. So don't make us spell it out more

than this: *we don't want you here.*"

"Well, I'm here." I place my books and bag in my locker and slam it shut. "You'll learn to deal with it." I skirt under Ronan's beefy arm and take a few steps before Abel blocks me.

He doesn't say anything, just stares at me for seconds that seem to last forever. Finally, he lets out a prolonged exhale like he's bored, and his next words stab me deep. "You won't survive this time," he says.

"I'm not the same person I was," I whisper. "I can survive anything."

Wells grins until his dimples pop, but his eyes are a dare. "You're not listening."

I move past the three and Bishop steps forward and blocks me. The way he's looking at me is entirely different than in class. To anyone else, I suppose it looks like he's just standing with a group of us, but his expression and posture are pure aggression.

He says it so only I can hear. "Find a reason to run. We won't be as kind this time."

"If that was your version of kind, I'll stick to piranhas, thank you." I take a step back, running into Abel's chest. It feels like a wall of heat against my back and I'm warm for the first time today. He pushes his chest against my back, bumping me forward. I move past Bishop and away from all of them.

"Are you friends with The Valiant?" A girl moves into place next to me and we walk to the lunchroom.

"Who?"

"The Valiant—Wells, Abel, and Ronan. Mr. Ellison is part of it too, maybe an honorary member or something? But I think Abel is the one who started it."

"What is it, a gang or something?"

She laughs like I must be joking. "You've really never heard of them?"

I shake my head.

"They're amazing," she sighs, "like, really amazing."

"But what do they do?"

"I mean, did you see them? Do they really need to do anything?" She laughs and walks off when she sees one of her friends.

I choose a chicken panini and sit down at a table with three girls. I haven't had much luck meeting people yet, and I sort of need to regroup after that run-in with the guys. The Valiant? What is that about?

"Hey, I think we might be neighbors," the girl closest to me says. She has

gorgeous long red hair. She's beautiful.

"Oh, I don't know—"

"My name's Everly Walker. Everyone calls me Ever," she says. She leans in closer. "I live in Valley Haven. I thought I saw you moving into that yellow house across the street from our entrance yesterday...you know, the trailer park?" She takes a big bite. "I guess that's not legitimately neighbors, is it?"

She smiles and I smile back.

"Probably a lot more than everyone else around here," I say.

"You're not wrong." She laughs. "I'd say the majority live around Lake Gitchi and we're just on the wrong side of that. Together. And I have to say, I'm glad to have the company."

I laugh with her and feel some of the weight lifting off of my chest.

"It's not so bad around here." She looks over at a table of huge guys, all way too good-looking—what is in the water around here?—and rolls her eyes. "Well, if you stay away from the hockey players and the girls at the table next to them."

The girls are doing everything in their power to get the attention of the hockey players and the guys are too busy laughing at something on the table to even notice. One of the guys with long sandy hair looks up and stares Ever down.

"Whoa. Yeah, I feel the chill from here," I say.

She shakes her head. "I don't know what his problem is with me..." She looks down at her food and sighs.

The other girls at our table have been in their own conversation all this time and seem to just now notice that Ever is talking to someone else.

"Who are you?" the blonde girl says.

"Lennon," I say, smiling.

"Weird name," she says. "Like the material?"

"Uh, no, like John."

She looks confused and then shrugs. "I'm Britney. And this is Carly."

"Nice to meet you."

Carly waves but doesn't say anything and then her eyes get wide. I turn to see what she's looking at and they're walking in. Abel is slightly in the front, with Wells and Ronan flanking him on either side. Abel is maybe an inch shorter than Ronan, who must be at least six foot five. Wells is maybe six two and Bishop is behind them, keeping his distance but close. Just as he always

was. He was the tallest of them when I knew them before, and he's the same height as Abel now. I see the versions of them five years ago. I wasn't sure I'd recognize them, but there are still markers. The eyes, the way they interact with each other, the protective shield they surround themselves with...that part is all still there. They're just now in these hotter than fuck bodies that make it hard to remember why I need to stay far, far away from them.

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CHAPTER FOUR

They zone in on me and the hatred emanating from each of them is palpable. Bishop does the best job of stifling it, but even he is sending it my way. And Wells...he used to be such an open book, and now I can't read him at all. He's assessing me like I'm a puzzle he can't figure out, a mixture of rude and flirty.

Ever whistles. "Girl, I don't know how to say this, but...it looks like you tinkled in someone's cereal. What did you do to them?"

That gets my attention and I turn, wrinkling my nose. "Tinkled in someone's cereal?"

She waves a hand. "Pissed in their Cheerios...I can't always think of the right saying at the right time."

"Is pissed in their Cheerios a saying?"

"You know what I meant, right?" She grins and I kind of love this girl.

"Yeah, totally." I laugh. "You know those guys?" I ask.

I watch as they get their food. Bishop grabs something fast and leaves. When the others have everything, they move to a table in front of me and sit down. All facing me.

I keep my eyes on Ever.

"They kind of keep to themselves. I think Abel is into older girls maybe? I hear they're at all the Loxley University parties. I'm not really popular around here, so I'm the wrong person to ask."

"You should be—you're prettier than all the girls at the table over there and I'm sure you're a lot nicer."

Two of the girls near the hockey table get up and move toward Abel, Wells, and Ronan. Ronan is on the end and the petite girl with straight black

hair hangs it in front of his face, her chest in his line of sight.

“That’s nice of you to say. I’m not prettier, but yes, I am a lot nicer.” She giggles and when I don’t, she turns around to see what I’m looking at. They haven’t stopped staring at me. “Geez. I’ve never seen them do that before. They keep to themselves and don’t really bother anyone. Pretty sure all the girls here wish they’d bother them sometime.”

She narrows her eyes when she turns around. I swallow hard, forcing the food past the lump that’s forming in my throat.

“Did one of them make a move on you and you turned him down?” she asks, leaning in. “I know you don’t even know if you can trust me yet, but you can.” She looks at the girls next to her who are chatting happily about nonsense and leans in closer. “I’m not really close to anyone but my sister and she’s older, doesn’t go here. What I’m saying is I could really use a friend, so if you want to spill, lay it on me.” She holds her hands out on the table and I laugh.

Abel’s eye twitches. Wells runs his hands through his waves, sending them in disarray, and Ronan looks like he’s about to stalk over here and pull me up by the hair.

“I knew them in a past life,” I say. “Well, I thought I knew them. Turns out I didn’t know them at all.”

“Did you murder one of their pets or something?” She shudders. “Make out with one and made another mad?”

“I wish I knew,” I say. It sounds like I’m innocent when I say that and I don’t want to lie to my new friend, but the truth is, while I have a good idea of why these boys don’t look at me as fondly as they did in our early days, I will never understand why that was enough to take what I thought was a friendship—no, more than that, my *saving grace* during one of the worst times of my life—and light it on fire.

Nothing they can say will ever make me understand that.

I thought the connection we had could never be broken.

“Why didn’t they cut your hair off?” Bishop asks.

I don’t want to tell them. I’m embarrassed that I was sent here. Embarrassed that I’m different. Embarrassed that it’ll seem like I’m someone special when I’m really not.

“They threatened that if I didn’t cooperate, it would come off.” I shrug

nonchalantly even though my insides are shaking.

“It looks nice,” Wells says. He’s always smiling and he’s sweet. He’s Bishop’s younger brother and the two of them rarely leave each other’s side. Wells tried to give me his pudding one night and I didn’t take it. I told him he should eat it since he’s bigger than I am and he said the truth is that he hates vanilla pudding, even in this place. I laughed because I knew what he meant—we work so hard around here that by the time we’re eating, everything tastes good. Bishop ended up swiping the pudding out of Wells’ hand and tossed it to me, and they both grinned as I ate it.

Abel’s smiles come few and far between, but he’s smiling now. “I heard you kicked Jordan in the mouth yesterday, so you must just be good at hiding when you aren’t cooperating.”

He looks so proud of me, my heart nearly bursts into rainbows and shooting stars.

We’re divided into groups, and I rarely get to talk to the boys for more than a few minutes at a time since we’re not usually in the same group except for bigger projects, but it’s the highlight of my week when I do. Jordan still bullies me, but he acts like we’re friends when they’re around. Seeing how they stuck up to him on my behalf has given me confidence to not put up with it when he starts. He tripped me again yesterday, and I pulled him down with me, sailing a swift kick right in his mouth. He groaned but didn’t make a big deal out of it. I’d guess his vengeance is coming and I need to watch my back, but fortunately the guard had his back turned yesterday and we were both on our feet by the time he looked at us again.

“We found a way out,” Abel says.

“What? What do you mean?”

“There’s a spot we can crawl through under the electrical fence. It’s maybe three miles from here, but we could do it after everyone goes to bed.”

“And go where?” I ask. The thought of leaving feels too impossible to me. Coming here was my punishment. I can’t imagine what would happen if I left and got caught.

“Anywhere but here,” Ronan says, smiling.

The bell clangs in the distance and I groan. This was just getting exciting.

“Bonfire’s over!” the guard yells. The other blows an obnoxious whistle, and we all file into our group lines and go our separate ways. I don’t want to sneak out of this place. I hate it here, but this is the first time I’ve felt like I belong anywhere.

Because of them.

“Lennon?”

I jump, and Ever is looking at me with concern.

“Are you okay?” she asks.

I take a shuddering breath. “I’m fine.”

I’ve been lying about so much, what’s one more lie?

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CHAPTER FIVE

Chemistry is painful. Wells and Abel are in this class, and I get paired with Abel. Wells can't stop checking to make sure Abel is okay, and Abel is so busy whispering threats at me that I have no idea what the class is even about.

"Why would you ever come back to Minnesota?" is how he starts.

"I would've thought your blue blood was too good for this place and you'd never be back..."

"Shall we have Bishop put snakes in your bed again? I bet you've perfected your scream even more by now."

"Who all did you have to sleep with to get your precious daddy to allow you to slum it at Loxley?"

I turn and stare at him with that one. "You didn't know?"

"Know what?"

"He's dead."

Abel jolts back like he's been hit. He blinks slowly, his green eyes assessing me for the truth.

"When?"

"Two weeks ago."

"And you're here."

"As you can see, I am."

"And your mom?"

"I don't talk about her." I try not to think about her if I can help it, but that's easier said than done.

"Were you always this mouthy, or is this new?" He turns to look at me as the teacher tells us what we have to look forward to this semester.

“Can you be quiet so I can listen?”

His fury has been at a steady boiling point since he saw me, but it’s elevating now. I can practically feel it bouncing off of him.

He doesn’t say anything else during class and I’m a little cocky about that as I stand up when the bell rings, happy to have won that little exchange. He stands up and grabs my arm, his face lowering until there’s barely an inch between us. He smells like pine and peppermint.

“It seems I haven’t been clear enough. You need to leave and don’t come back. I can’t be responsible for what we’ll do if we have to see your lying, manipulative face here every day.”

The truth of how much he hates me is written all over his face.

“I’ll leave when you tell me why you hate me so much.”

His eyes narrow and a cruel smile plays at his lips. “You can’t expect me to believe you don’t know. I’m not playing your game this time around.” He drops my arm like it’s disgusting him to be anywhere near it and takes a step back. His hair falls over his eye and his one eye drills into me.

“If you insist on staying, I’ll destroy you.”

I lift a shoulder. “You’ve destroyed me before. What’s one more time?”

He blinks like he doesn’t know what I mean by that, and I stare him down, trying to pretend that I’m not shaking a little bit on the inside.

I’ve had five years to learn to control my emotions. I’ve lived with a controlling, narcissistic father up until two weeks ago. Losing control is what put me in Camp Capitree to begin with. I haven’t lost control again since the day Abel, Bishop, Wells, and Ronan betrayed me, and I damn well won’t let that ever happen again.

He walks away, and despite his scare tactics, I’m fine. It would help if I didn’t have all the memories, and it would be a huge gift from the universe if they hadn’t turned out to be such goddamn sexy beasts.

I’ll never show how they affect me. And I’d say my tolerance for hot boys that I once cared about has reached an all-time high. Nothing they do can shake me. I’ve put in the time and the hard work to make sure of that.

They’re in the parking lot when I walk outside later—Wells, Abel, and Ronan. I spot them immediately near a massive black SUV. Ever is with me and I offer to give her a ride home.

“No, thanks. My sister will be here in a few minutes. We have to run errands this afternoon. But I’ll take you up on that another time.”

I wave goodbye to her and move toward my Jeep, choosing the longest

way so I don't have to walk as close to them. Someone moves next to me and starts walking. Bishop.

"Abel said you wouldn't be back tomorrow, but just in case you decide not to listen, I've gone ahead and prepared this." He hands me a form that says I'm dropping his class. "Sign it and take it to the front office and they'll assign you to another class."

"I'm not dropping your class." I stop walking and stare at him. "And you guys are not running me out of here. I didn't want to move here, but my aunt did, and you are not going to ruin this for her. She deserves some happiness."

"Spare me the dramatics, Lennon. What are you hoping to get out of this?" He turns and looks around, making sure no one hears us. "Did you come back to retaliate, is that it?"

"What? No. I didn't even know this was where you guys were. It might be hard for any of you to believe, but the four of you have nothing to do with any decision I make. And that's not going to change now, just because we're all at the same school. Stay out of my way and I'll stay out of yours."

"You really expect us to believe that shit?" He's speaking between clenched teeth, and I'm reminded again of how he was always the one keeping the peace, watching out for the others, being the spokesperson for the group, even though Abel was the one who really called the shots.

"Go tell him he's not scaring me," I say. "Go to hell, Bishop."

I hear him muttering about already being there as I walk away. I get to my Jeep and turn toward them, giving them the bird before I get in and drive away. They're still standing watching me when I look in the rearview mirror.

CHAPTER SIX

I start laughing as I drive around the beautiful lake with all the mansions surrounding it. I survived my first day at Loxley Prep. It was a doozie, but I'm still standing. I take a deep, cleansing breath as I keep driving to the far end of the lake, where the trees cover the view, and the houses switch from being mansions to being more of the falling apart cottage variety. I see Valley Haven Trailer Park and smile at how close Ever lives to me.

Our little yellow cottage isn't on the lake, but I can see the lake in the distance. It's about as far from the ten thousand-square-foot house I grew up in as you can get. Three of these cottages would fit in the house I ended up in with my dad after the mansion, and that felt like a drastic change. But I've never been as happy as when I walk through the door and Aunt Darby has Justin Bieber blaring. She calls Justin her cleaning music.

I go through the tiny living room to the kitchen and she's shaking her booty while she takes cookies out of the oven.

"Welcome home!" she yells, hurrying over to turn down the music. "How was it?"

"About like I expected." I drop my bag on the floor and take a few cookies. "Mmm," I say after one bite. "I love it when you make these."

Everything she bakes is incredible, but her peanut butter cookies with chocolate chips are in my top five favorites.

"They weren't happy to see you?" she asks.

"Nope." I let the P pop and we clink the glasses of milk that she pours for us.

"Were they surprised you were there though?"

"Not surprised enough," I admit. "The only real surprise of the day

seemed to be that Abel didn't know Dad died."

She frowns. "That doesn't add up."

"I know. But it seemed to knock him sideways a bit."

"Do you have homework?"

"Yep." I make a face. "And apparently, if I go back tomorrow, I'm toast. They don't want me here."

"I'm sure a few days looking at your beautiful face will soften them up," she says, smiling.

She's got blue paint on her face, and I smile back at her. Aunt Darby always has my back. She's inching toward forty but doesn't look much over twenty-five with her curly hair that's always a mess and her playful personality. When she's not painting, she's baking or going on a date with some hot, wealthy man. Men can't get enough of her doe-eyed sweetness. The double Ds are also a hit from what I can tell when we walk in somewhere and the men stop what they're doing to stare at her. And Aunt Darby cannot get enough of love.

"Are you sure it was a good idea to come here?" I ask.

"I think we need to face our memories head-on. You need to face the bad and get the answers you're after, and I need to reexamine the good that happened here, see if it was real or all in my head."

"Well, as soon as you figure it out, can we go somewhere else?"

"Give it a try, okay, lovey? For me? I'm sorry to bring you back here, but I really think it can be different this time."

I know it's not right, but I haven't exactly told Aunt Darby everything... about a lot of things. She knows that I was at camp with boys that I got really close to and we had a falling out, but she doesn't know everything else. It's best she doesn't.

I take another cookie and stare out the back window. There's an ugly fence out there and houses that are claustrophobic-close.

I came back to confront them but for entirely different reasons than she imagines.

I thought they were my friends. I thought we had a bond that couldn't be broken after the things we'd survived together. I've had a hard time healing. It's almost impossible for me to trust anyone. Half of the time I don't know whether to blame them for that or my parents. That's why *I'm* here.

I don't need to face my past and come out victorious on the other side of it like Aunt Darby wants for me. I want to know *why*. I want to know exactly

what made them turn on me.

They owe me that.

I understand them hating my dad. I don't understand why they hate me.

We're in a larger group again tonight, about ten of us instead of four or five. My full-time group of Jordan, Mason, and Katie are assigned to build the fire and gather enough wood to last us all night during one of the coldest nights I've ever experienced. Two girls around fifteen, Sarah and Mandi, are assigned to do the cooking, and Abel, Bishop, Ronan, and Wells are assigned to make a structure out of whatever they can find to protect us while we sleep.

Wilderness therapy.

Not a new idea but one that you don't hear about much in the colder states.

"I hate the cold, I hate the cold, I hate the cold," I chant as I pick up an armful of logs. Ronan is telling the guys to get more branches and Abel is arguing that it would work to just use the snow.

"It's the right consistency. It's crunchy and if we get it thick enough and the right shape, it will work."

Ronan rolls his eyes and flings an arm out. "Okay, just do it then. Show me."

Bishop puts his hand on Ronan's shoulder and holds up a granola bar. "Want it?"

Ronan snatches it out of Bishop's hand and all the guys laugh.

"Hangry?" I ask.

I set the wood down and watch as Abel starts forming a big block of snow. Wells gets to work next to him and then the others join in too. I get distracted from what I'm supposed to be doing, watching how quickly a structure begins to form when they're working together.

Jordan yells at me to get to work and I go in the opposite direction of him so I can gather wood in peace. I bend down to pick up a large log and hands grip my backside. I yelp and turn, holding the log in front of me.

Jordan moves toward me anyway and I stumble back, falling. His hands are on my breasts, and he tries to kiss me.

"Stop. What are you doing?" I hit him with my fists, and he leans back and slaps me. His hands are everywhere then, up my shirt, pulling down my

pants, and I can't get him off of me.

"I said stop!" I yell. I feel around until I reach the log and hit it over Jordan's head, causing him to yelp and pull back.

We're surrounded in the next minute. Jordan is pulled off of me and I hurry to get my clothes back in place as Wells holds his hand out for me to take and the other three pummel Jordan. He's yelling and crying, and they hit him until he's quiet.

A guard never comes.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Abel

The days are endless. I hate this godforsaken place. At first, it was a relief to be away from home. My parents never wanted a kid and with their money, they didn't have to keep one around. I cut class a few times, and they got called in to answer for me, and that was that. I had pushed them to the brink, my mother said. And my dad just didn't think he was capable of disciplining me the way I needed...with a firm hand and consistency. I'd like to think they believed they were sending me to a great place, somewhere out of their hair that would make a man out of me.

They couldn't be more wrong.

Selfish cowards.

This place is a child labor facility dressed up as help for troubled kids. And that is only scratching the surface of this hellhole.

As soon as I'm fourteen, I will make my escape from here and start my own life. That's how old I have to be to emancipate from my parents. If I could do it today, I would.

I lose time here, but I know we're going into fall when the guys come. I think I've been here a few weeks or a month when they get here. M-482, M-490, and M-501. M-482 arrives first and then the other two within a week or so of each other, but we aren't grouped together right away.

One of the guards points at me and tells me to go show the new guys how to lay cement and I do, muttering low under my breath when I reach them.

“These numbers are shit, designed to make us feel like cattle. They call me M-470, but I’m Abel. Don’t let them hear you call me that, but don’t let me hear you call me by the number when we’re alone. Got it?”

They all look at me and nod. The little one, M-490, blond and his hair a wild mess, grins and points to the taller boy to his left. “Got it. I’m Wells and this is my brother, Bishop.”

I nod and look at the other boy standing there. He’s slower to speak and seems painfully shy as his eyes dart around, taking note of where the guards are at all times. “Ronan,” he finally says.

“Nice to meet you guys. I’ll tell you a few things while I show you how to do the cement, so you don’t have to learn the hard way.” I haul a bag over my shoulder and motion for them to do the same. When they have their bags, I walk to the farthest edge of where we have to start to gain a little more time. “Never act like you’re having fun. Don’t let them see you smile or laugh too often. Don’t speak too loud.” I point at the taller guard quickly. “He’s not too bad if you follow the rules. The other three aren’t as lenient. The tatted one is quick with his fists. And whatever you do, when the owner rolls in, stay the hell away from him no matter what.”

They all stare at me like they’re terrified, and I can’t even try to soften it for them. It’s best they know what they’re dealing with.

I open a bag of cement and show them the process and they’re quick. We work well together and when we’re put in a tent together that night, even Ronan starts talking every now and then.

But when she comes, I think that’s what makes our bond even tighter. I see her first. At least I think I do. She comes with the first snow, and I worry that she’s too fragile to survive out here, but she constantly surprises me. She’s beautiful, and I’m on instant alert because she’s in a group with that bastard Jordan, who is trouble. She stands out with her long braid down her back and her huge dark brown eyes. I get the feeling she doesn’t miss anything, the way she’s so watchful, and I can’t seem to stop watching her, wondering what brought her to this place.

It takes a while before we interact because she’s on high alert with Jordan and that requires her focus. But one day when the guard gives her a job that is too much to handle alone, I step in.

I can’t begin to explain how it feels when you have been ignored your whole life and you are suddenly seen. It’s like the sun deciding to shine after the longest season of rain. Like a snake shedding its skin and getting a whole

new skin that is magnificent and worthy and beautiful.

That's how she looks at me. Like she can see all of my dark parts and only sees the light.

And when I tell the guys to look out for her, they fill in when I can't. At first, I don't know if it's just because they trust me now or if it's because they see how special she is too. But it doesn't take long to know that our lives were meaningless before she arrived, and that we will do whatever it takes to watch over her forever.

The guys become my brothers as time passes at Camp Capitree, and Lennon becomes the planet we each orbit around.

One night by the fire, we have a rare moment, just the two of us.

"I don't know how I would survive without you guys," she whispers. "Promise me that no matter when we get out of this place, we'll find each other and always stay close."

"I promise." I hold my pinkie out and she wraps hers around mine. I want to kiss her, but this pinkie hold wreaks havoc on my heart as it is—I don't think it could handle a kiss.

It feels like forever.

CHAPTER EIGHT

When I step outside the next morning, it's grey and rainy and I run in to get a jacket. I step back out and see the black SUV idling on the street across from my house. They're watching me. They must be scared. Or just want to scare me.

I figure I'll make it worth their while and take the long way to school, stopping by a coffee shop I saw a few days ago and wanted to try. I get out and run, the rain having picked up, and I wave at them when I pass. Abel is in the driver's seat, and he looks mad. I grin.

I push my hood back when I get inside and get in line. Abel steps in line behind me a minute later and leans toward my ear.

"Waste of a uniform when you're not coming to school today," he says.

"Oh, I'll be there." I point to the clock behind the counter. "We've got time."

"Lennon," he sighs. "Just cut the shit."

I look at him with wide, innocent eyes. "What?"

"At least tell the truth about knowing we were here. Why would you want to come back?" It's the most like the old Abel he's looked, his expression more earnest. I'd almost believe he cared if I didn't know better.

"I couldn't refuse the scholarship." I move up in the line and turn back to look at him. "Is that how you got in there too?"

His cheeks flush and he looks like he wants to throw something. Instead, he motions for me to move up, and after I've ordered my chai latte and am waiting for it, I watch him at the counter. I knew he'd be beautiful. The others too, but they were more of a surprise. Wells, especially, was in an awkward phase when we knew each other. Ronan too. Bishop was hot, and has only

improved with time, but Abel...he's always been dangerously beautiful.

The barista calls my name and I grab my chai and see Abel's drink next to mine. His name is called next, and I get out of the way before we can have another confrontation. I'm almost to the door when I trip over something on the floor and my drink goes flying. Not only does my drink spill down the front of me, but something hits me from behind and my whole back is drenched.

A hand grips my arm to keep me from going down and Abel says softly, "Easy. We don't want you falling in all this."

"How did you pull that off?" I ask, my skin burning from my chai. Whatever landed on my back wasn't as hot, so it's doesn't hurt as bad, but the places the chai touched my skin are already red.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he says, face void of emotion. "Looks like you'll have to go home and clean up."

"Good thing there's time." I paste a phony smile on my face and thank the barista when she says she'll prepare another for me. It doesn't take long and I'm out the door, covered in chai and what smells like hot chocolate or a mocha of some sort.

I get in my Jeep and put it in reverse and it weeble-wobbles about a foot before sputtering. I get out and look at it and all four tires are flat. I'll have to pay better attention than this if I'm going to hold my own with them.

I turn and they're watching me. Wells salutes me before Abel pulls out of the parking lot.

I call Aunt Darby and she's there within ten minutes.

"What happened to you?" she asks.

"I must've run over some nails in the parking lot and then spilled my drink everywhere," I tell her. "I'm just worried about how I'm going to pay for four tires."

"We'll figure it out. I've got an interview at the school on Thursday and another at Vandenberg International on Friday."

"You're covering all your bases, aren't you?" Vandenberg International and Loxley Prep are owned by the same man, Brewster Vandenberg. "Are you sure you shouldn't throw in someplace that has nothing to do with Brewster?"

"That wouldn't be nearly as much fun," she says, grinning. "Brewster Vandenberg needs a little reminder that he once told me I was the prettiest girl he'd ever seen. You have to have a little faith, darlin', and it will all

happen organically.”

“I’m still not sure what you expect to happen, but I just hope Brewster doesn’t have a no-dating policy among his employees. And I’m not sure how organic it is to show up where you know he can’t avoid you.”

“You’re not trying to spoil all my plans, are you?” she teases. “We were voted couple *most likely to get married*...I think it’s only normal that I revisit those feelings.”

She says it lightly, but I know she truly wants this with Brewster, which is troubling. It’s been nineteen years since they’ve seen each other, and Aunt Darby has not had the best luck with relationships. He’s the *one that got away*. Maybe it does all go back to Brewster. I just don’t want her to pin all her hopes on this guy that she hasn’t seen in a lifetime.

We pull into the driveway, and I wash off quickly, wincing when I see the burns on the front of my chest. Hopefully tea burns heal quickly because I have a plan for wearing a low-cut blouse on Friday night and I hope I don’t have to rethink that plan. I throw on a clean uniform and run outside where Aunt Darby’s waiting.

On the way to school, she talks nonstop about seeing Brewster again. He’s the reason she wanted to come back. His wife passed away a couple of years ago and she thinks she’s what he needs to heal.

I walk into the school with five minutes to spare and the looks of surprise and fury on the guys’ faces are worth the disaster of this morning. I pass by, my arm brushing against Ronan’s and wave, smiling wide.

“Morning,” I say.

I feel their eyes on me as I walk away, taking my time even though I do *not* want to be late to class. I may look the part of a “Kendall Jenner wannabe” but once a nerd, always a nerd. I skip my locker again, deciding to wait until lunch to put my things away. Wells shuffles in, his swagger on full display, and he sits behind me. The air is charged when I’m around him. When I’m around all of them. I’m not sure what that means or if it’s just the adrenaline rush of being around them after all these years.

“Is it my imagination or are your tits happy to see me?” he says.

I flush and pull my books against my chest, turning to glare at him, which just makes his dimples pop out. Obnoxious bastard.

Bishop is not happy when I show up at his class. His cheeks are ruddy, and he swallows hard, while carefully trying to structure his face into friendly teacher guy. This is his first year of teaching and he’s taking it seriously. I

knew he'd make a great teacher and when he forgets about me for just a few minutes, I see what makes him shine. He's always been so passionate about books and it's hard not to get swept away in his excitement.

The minute he remembers I'm there, his voice dulls and he's back to being like every other Lit teacher out there. I glance around the class and the girls are staring at him in awe. They don't seem to mind if he doesn't maintain a high level of excellence. Even at Loxley Prep. I chuckle under my breath and that catches his attention.

“Something you'd like to share with the class, Ms. Gentry?”

“I liked the sound of excitement in your voice when you spoke of the revenge elements of *Wuthering Heights*. And then it went back to a monotone when you mentioned *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. I'm guessing you have a preference?”

His mouth opens and closes as he tries to come up with an answer, and I just sit there smiling and waiting patiently.

“Sounds like I need to work on my tone so I don't bore you all to sleep. Thank you, Lennon, for your astute observation. I do prefer *Wuthering Heights* over *A Portrait*, but only because I love a crazy demise. Just when you think it can't get much bleaker, it does.” His lip twitches as he tries not to laugh and I feel a flicker of dread, wondering what he's fully capable of.

CHAPTER NINE

In phys ed, before we start class, Cassie is already arguing with the teacher about why she shouldn't have to play volleyball today. She finally resorts to the cramps defense—a seemingly surefire way for a teenage girl to get out of anything with a man—and sure enough, Mr. Barnaby allows her to sit this one out. It seems like she spends a lot of her time around here trying to get out of work.

“She’s so embarrassing,” the guy next to me says. He’s blond and good-looking and when I chuckle under my breath, he turns and looks at me. “Oh, did I say that out loud?”

“You did.”

He grins and checks me out, grinning wider. “Hey, new girl. Didn’t get to meet you yesterday.”

I’m surprised I didn’t notice him yesterday, but I was so distracted by Abel leaving the gym, I guess I didn’t notice anyone else.

“I’m Cade,” he adds. He motions toward Cassie. “Her twin. Please don’t hold it against me.”

“I’ll try not to,” I say, laughing harder, and his eyes twinkle at me. He’s *really* cute. “I’m Lennon.”

“Nice.”

I hear a growl behind me, and Abel is standing there with his arms folded, glaring at Cade. Cade glances at me and back at Abel, a smirk on his face.

“Something you’d like to say, Wright?” Cade asks, folding his arms over his chest.

Abel just stares at him like he’s an idiot, and I have to say I appreciate the way Cade doesn’t back down. It’s inspiring. By the look on Abel’s face, he’s

not happy. Mr. Barnaby blows his whistle, and we all move toward the volleyball court. I'm on a team with Cade and he winks as he gets into place next to me. Abel is also on our team, and I can feel his fury from the next row over.

"Looks like someone is already territorial over you," Cade says loud enough for Abel to hear.

"That would mean I'm someone's property, and that will never be the case." I bat my eyelashes at Cade and then glance at Abel whose usually pale cheeks are flushed with two red spots on either side.

Cade leans in and whispers, "Wow, he didn't like that. What's going on there?"

"Something too complicated for me to figure out," I whisper back.

The teacher yells something and Cade moves back in place, saying a little louder. "Cassie and I are having a party Friday night. You should come."

The game starts then, and I don't answer. I'd thought I'd be figuring out where the guys live and paying a visit to them on Friday night, but judging by the rage on Abel's face, going to the party seems like a better idea. As long as I don't have to be anywhere near Cassie.

It's interesting how different Cade is from Cassie. Just then the ball comes toward me, and I send it sailing back to the other side. The girl on that side misses and we get a point. Cade high-fives me, and I glance over at Abel. Even succeeding at volleyball seems to bug him. I throw my hands up like *what?* And he turns, staring straight ahead. When the ball comes toward him, he hits it over the net every time, but toward the end of the game, he somehow manages to send the ball straight into Cade's head.

I shoot daggers at him, and he lifts both hands up, giving a phony smile to Cade. "Sorry, man."

I roll my eyes and make sure Cade's okay. His head is fine, but he seems annoyed with Abel. I wonder if the bad vibes bouncing between them have always been there, or if it's something I'm doing that's stirring the pot.

I try to focus on the game for the rest of the class and when it's over, I'm ready for a shower.

"You'll come to my party?" Cade asks before I turn toward the showers.

"Sure."

He asks for my phone, and I hand it to him, waiting while he puts his number in my phone.

He texts right away, and I look down, surprise hitting me when I see what

he said.

Sexiest Guy Alive: Looking forward to getting to know you, beautiful. We're at 64 Vandenberg Waterfront.

Does that mean—is he a neighbor to Brewster Vandenberg? Holy shit. I mean, I'm making an assumption here that Brewster lives on Vandenberg Waterfront, but I'd say it's a pretty good guess. My aunt is going to be all over this. Maybe I'll just keep it to myself and not tell Aunt Darby where I'm going on Friday night. If she thinks it's anywhere near Brewster's house, she'll be getting an invite to a high school party just so she can roam the exclusive neighborhood until she finds Brewster's house.

I can't tell if accepting this invite is the best plan anyway. Especially with the way Cade's looking at me like he wants to yank me in the next room and hike up this short skirt to see what underwear I'm wearing.

But I've already said yes.

I swallow hard and smile. I don't need a boyfriend on the second day of the school year. Not what I set out to do by coming to Loxley Prep. Cade seems nice and he's one of the cutest guys in the school, aside from *The Valiant*. I want to snort just thinking about that name. The hockey players are pretty cute too though. Actually, now that I think of it, I might've seen Cade sitting with the hockey team. Even if he seems too nice for hockey. What do I know about hockey players though? I didn't personally know any in Texas.

“What's going on in that head of yours? Am I making you nervous?” Cade steps closer, his flirty grin confident that I'm into him.

I take a step back and bump into someone behind me. I look over my shoulder and it's Abel, facing off with Cade.

“What's the problem now, Wright? Disappointed you didn't hurt me more?” Cade says, his tone entirely different than it was with me.

“If I'd wanted to hurt you more, I would have,” Abel says, as if it's as simple as that. “We'll be coming to the party with Lennon on Friday.”

CHAPTER TEN

Cade's face falls and he looks at me with disappointment before turning back to Abel. "It'd be the first time you've ever come to one of my parties," he says quietly.

Abel lifts an eyebrow. "You said our invitation is always open. Did you not mean it?"

"No—I mean, yes. Of course. Come on." He looks at me and swallows hard. I almost feel bad for the guy...if I wasn't so annoyed with Abel. Cade acts like he doesn't know if he should keep flirting or what he's walked into with Abel and me. And his bravado from just seconds ago with Abel is completely gone. It's all confusing and I don't have time to figure it out between classes.

"Well, I'll see you there. I won't be with this guy though." I point to Abel and walk off before either of them can stop me.

I look for Ever when I walk into the lunchroom, but I don't spot her right away. I grab a quick sandwich instead of the hot lunch because I don't want to be too sleepy this afternoon. The chicken fettuccine looks delicious, but I think it would send me into a carb coma right now. I'd prefer one of those later when I can let down my guard at home. I grab a Coke and since I don't see Ever, I take my lunch outside. The afternoon is warmer than when I left the house this morning, and I take my sweater off, sitting in the sunshine. The green is so vivid here and the leaves on the trees plush, making it impossible to imagine a few months' time when the branches will be bare. I sit down on a bench under a tree, bypassing the tables that are already filled with students.

I open the kindle app on my phone and am soon engrossed in *Legendborn* by Tracy Deonn.

“Are you avoiding us?”

I jump when I hear the voice and look up, seeing Abel, Wells, and Ronan all looking down at me. Wells sits down next to me, not leaving any space between us, and Ronan sits down on the other side. Abel stands there looking at me as if he’s the king of Loxley and I am his lowly subject.

“To avoid you would mean I’m thinking about you, and I am not,” I lie, looking down at my phone again. It’s knocked out of my hand. I glare at them all, not sure who did that. “Hey, back off.” I pick up my phone and am relieved that the screen isn’t cracked. I can’t afford a new screen or phone right now. I stand up and gather my things and they all stand, crowding me in.

“We told you not to come back,” Ronan says.

“Yeah, well, I don’t make my decisions based on you.”

“We think you must since you’re here in the first place,” Wells says. His tone softens when he adds, “Just tell us why you’re here, Lennon. Please.”

I pause, my heart feeling the tug toward him when he looks at me like this, but then I think I’ve imagined it when he folds his arms across his chest. I push past him, and Abel’s hand reaches out and grips my arm.

“We’ll pick you up at nine on Friday night,” he says.

I shake my head. “Oh no, I won’t be going anywhere with you.”

“Since your tires are flat, it seems you could use a ride. And since you insist on staying, we’ll be keeping a close eye on you.” His hair covers his eye as he leans toward me. “You can thank us later.”

“I’ll figure out my own ride, so *no*, thank you.” I pry his fingers off of my arm and walk away. Wells falls into step next to me a few moments later. I groan. “I walked away for a reason. Leave me alone.”

“Can’t do that,” he says. “And why would you want me to? Look at this face and this body,” he says, grinning.

I let my eyes roam over him and pretend it does nothing to accelerate my heart rate.

“If you’re into that sort of thing,” I mutter, acting like he’s the last guy on earth I’d ever look at twice.

He snorts. “Yeah, okay. You’d be the only girl around here who isn’t.”

I roll my eyes and he laughs.

“So, what was life like in Texas?” he asks.

I open the door to the hallway and head toward my locker, acting like I haven’t heard him.

“Hey, you’re just going to ignore me?”

I get to my locker and open it, putting my things inside and taking out what I need for chemistry next hour. I’m about to shut my locker when he clutches my wrist, stopping me in the process. Hanging on the door of my locker is a picture of me when I’m twelve. A picture of me the day I left for Camp Capitree, my long hair down my back in a single braid. I didn’t want to go, and it shows in the picture. It’s a strange memento, one that I should probably tuck away in a box and never bring out again.

But I have this picture here to remember.

It reminds me of who I was before I met them, what I lost at Camp Capitree, and how I’ll never be the same. I want to honor her innocence and protect the person I became in that girl’s place.

Wells stares at the picture and takes a step back, dropping my wrist. His Adam’s apple bobs as he struggles to deal with whatever emotions this raises in him. He appears to be angry, and I suppose that would be fitting, but I can’t pretend to know how any of them feel anymore.

I slam my locker shut and walk past him, leaving him and our past there where it belongs. For the moment. I have to handle this in increments; otherwise, I’ll never survive it.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

When I get home, Aunt Darby tosses her keys toward me, and I catch them in mid-air.

“Let’s go get your baby.”

“What? How did you get it fixed so fast?”

I was so deep in my head when Ever’s sister, Sadie, dropped me off at the house that I hadn’t noticed my Jeep was missing.

“I managed to find a place that could do it quickly and I charged it to my Visa. I’m manifesting that I’ll have the money by the time the bill comes next month.”

“Manifesting, huh.” I can’t help laughing at her. “If it was that easy, why aren’t we living in one of those mansions along the water?”

“I’m working on that,” she says, flinging her arm around my shoulder before we part to get in her car. “You need to change your mindset, lovey. We need things to start going our way.”

That’s an understatement. The past three years have been challenging, to put it mildly. Everything we’ve owned has been systematically taken from us, almost like a puppeteer is pulling the strings...or four puppeteers would be more exact. What I don’t understand is why or how they’ve managed to pull off taking every cent from my father and leaving his entire estate with nothing.

I’m not sad that Camp Capitree is no more. I have hated that place since the moment I set foot there—before that even because it took all of my dad’s time. It was his obsession, and I knew when I was sent to the camp for troubled kids that he was inflicting on me the worst kind of punishment. There’s a lot I won’t forgive him for, even in his death, but I can’t hate him

for sending me there. Not once, but twice. I might have conflicting thoughts about the boys who were once my friends, who I once considered my soul mates, but I will never regret meeting them.

If I hadn't, I wouldn't know the meaning of survival now.

When we lost everything, my dad lost his mind. He stopped functioning and caved like a pathetic child who didn't get his way. I worked two jobs while maintaining a 4.0 GPA and managed to land the scholarship at Loxley Prep by myself. I made sure there was food in the house even though he stopped eating during his round-the-clock benders. Aunt Darby knew things were bad, but she didn't know the extent of it until the last year of my dad's life, when she insisted on coming to visit us despite us both avoiding her. When she saw the sad state of our house and the circles around my eyes from trying to do it all, she dropped everything, moved in with us, and tried to get my dad's life back in order.

I couldn't care less about the luxuries that fell by the wayside. The friends I lost because I no longer had the status they required. Even in the public school I attended after years of private schools, they didn't warm up to me because I wore clothes that were too small for me and didn't have time for anything or anyone but studying and work. Everything Darby tried with our finances was met with one roadblock after the other. And the digging I did without her revealed something that I've kept a secret, something that broke the rest of me.

Our demise kept coming back around to a shell company called Lionheart. The word itself was a revelation and drove the knife further into what was left of my heart.

They huddle around me, hands rubbing my arms and hands, trying to get me warm. I can't stop shaking. They're bloody from beating up Jordan, but I don't care. I sink into their warmth and give in to the tears that threatened to fall when Jordan was trying to force himself on me.

"Are you okay?" I cry, examining their faces and the wounds around their eyes and the bloody knuckles. "I'll never forgive myself if you get in trouble for this."

"You know who you are?" Abel whispers, brushing my hair back. "You're a fierce lion who is all heart. Courageous and brave, never backing down. Our Lionheart. Do you hear me? Never let him smell your fear. Show

him your defiance. You fought him off and are worried about us now, when all we want to do is make sure you're okay."

"Were we too late?" Bishop asks, his voice raspy. "Did he hurt you?"

I put my hand on each of their cheeks, one by one, Bishop first. Then Abel, Ronan, and last, Wells, who sinks into my hand like it is a healing salve.

"You were right on time. Thank you. I'll never be able to thank you en—"

The night bell rings, and I jump. They take a step back and look around to see if any of the guards are coming yet.

"We'll drag Jordan by the fire and tell the guard in the morning that Jordan fell while gathering wood. We'll take turns watching him through the night so he doesn't get near you alone again," Abel says.

"Thank you," I whisper, nodding.

He reaches out and squeezes my hand one more time before he takes off running toward the fire. Bishop and Wells hug me, and Ronan leans over and kisses my cheek.

From that day on, they call me Lionheart.

Aunt Darby thinks it was all her idea to come back here, but once I knew who was behind this, I started dropping hints about coming back to Minnesota. I had scholarship offers for several schools, but when I got into this one after I knew the boys were all enrolled here, it was a no-brainer. We were going to leave my dad in Texas, but he took care of that detail for us.

On the closing day of our house selling, my father shot himself.

I haven't been sad for a single day that he's gone. Does that make me a bad daughter?

No, he was just that awful of a father.

And something tells me I don't even know the half of it.

"You sure are quiet," Aunt Darby says as we pull into the parking lot of the mechanic. I haven't paid attention to how long we've been driving, but one look at Jesse's Garage tells me we're well outside the suburbs of Sikoma and Lake Gitchi.

I'm not here for revenge. I don't blame them for wanting to bring my father down. I'm here for answers. I want to know why they turned on *me*.

"Thinking about Dad."

She stares out the windshield for a few long seconds before looking at

me. “I’m sorry, sweetie. I think it’s going to take a while for it to sink in for both of us that he’s gone. He might’ve not been the best dad, but he was my brother, and I don’t know—I feel a little closer to him being here where we grew up.”

I do too, but it doesn’t fill me with the same nostalgia that it seems to give her.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

Aunt Darby and I sort of retreat from one another over the next day and a half or so, something that we realized early on in living together that we needed to do. I've been grateful that she seems to understand my need for space, and if she doesn't submerge herself into painting on a somewhat regular basis, she starts to get melancholy. I remind myself that she *is* grieving her brother. Despite the fact that they didn't have a close relationship, I think she's grieving for a relationship that she now knows will never be.

And sometimes I just need a break from hearing about whatever man is the latest soon-to-be love interest. There's never a shortage of options, but for a while now, she's narrowed her attention on this farfetched hope that Brewster Vandenberg will want to pick up where they left off. I was tired of hearing about him before we moved here and now I really am.

I've also been simultaneously avoiding The Valiant and berating myself that I'm no closer to knowing anything. I've been hearing the guys called The Valiant more often over the past few days and decide that will be the first thing I ask them Friday night—what does it mean to them?

I'm driving my Jeep home and happy to have her in one piece again, and I decide on Thursday afternoon to take the scenic view, enjoying the perfect day. The way the sun is glinting off the water, sending dazzling sparks across the lake, is a thing of true beauty. I'm relieved to see this side of Minnesota. I think my brain has latched onto those brutal winter months at Camp Capitree and timestamped that into my memory. It's not the full picture.

Sometimes I wonder how many other memories might be jarred into something that isn't quite true. I've often felt like other memories hover just near the surface, trying to lure me back to remembering something that nearly

fully forms. I usually reject them, too afraid to go there or too weary to put in the work it would take to see everything.

A high whine in the Jeep startles me. She's never made this sound before and I groan.

"Come on, please don't do this to me. I need you to hold on a lot longer." I try to coax her, but it's no good. I pull off to the side of the road, across from one of the quieter parts of the lake, and sputter to a stop. I lean my head on the steering wheel, cussing and praying at the same time. "You are a beautiful, well-working machine," I whisper, trying the manifesting shit Aunt Darby keeps going on about. "You have many awesome years ahead of you. Please work."

There's a tap on my window and I look out. Bishop stands there, sweating. He's in a tank top and shorts and I guess he must have been running, the way he bends over and catches his breath. It's all I can do to not let my mouth hang open, as I stare at the tattoos on his upper shoulders. He taps on the window again, looking agitated, and I open the car door and step out.

"What's the problem?" he asks. There's a crease between his brows and his hands are on his hips, his tone gruff.

"Why would *this* make you mad at me?" I ask, dumbfounded.

"Because I'm having to look at you. Because you didn't leave when we told you to. Because you're here in the first place," he snaps. He looks around again, waving at someone who drives past.

"Ah, that." I grin and it makes his cheeks that ruddy stain that I find so endearing.

He pops the hood and if I thought he was hot before, seeing him under the hood of my beloved is even hotter. I press my lips together to keep from laughing at my wayward thoughts, but one sneaks out anyway.

"Start up your car again," he says.

"Yes, sir." I salute him and his eyes lift to meet mine.

His eyes take a full sweep of my hair piled on top of my head, the two buttons undone and loosened tie from my uniform since I'm hot, and meander down the rest of my body in slow motion. Now I'm the one with the heated cheeks. I feel a sudden chill despite the heat, and I hurry back to the car to start the ignition. It sputters and doesn't turn over and I want to cry. I try a few more times and nothing changes.

He closes the hood and comes back, looking at me through the window.

“It’s not sounding good,” he says.

I’m still staring ahead, not wanting to lose it right now. I nod. “Thanks for checking.”

“Are you okay?” he asks.

I turn to look at him, my eyes blurry with tears. “You almost sounded like you cared just then.”

He lifts his head to the sky like he’s asking for help from heaven. “I’m not a monster, Lennon. Seeing you cry is not my favorite thing in the world.”

“That surprises me,” I say, shrugging.

He shakes his head, his jaw clenching as he looks down the street. “Can your Aunt Darby pick you up?”

“She’s at an interview right now.”

“Give me a minute and I’ll call a tow truck.”

“No—” It’s on the tip of my tongue to say I can’t afford a tow truck, but he must know that, and I don’t want to give him the satisfaction. “I’ll take care of it.” I get out of the car and try to assess how long it’ll take me to get home. “Thanks for stopping and making sure I’m okay.”

“Yeah. I wouldn’t want any of my students stranded by the side of the road,” he says.

I swallow the lump in my throat. Of course, it’s all about how his teacher persona is perceived.

“Right.” I start walking away from him and he falls into place beside me. “What are you doing?”

“I’ll walk you part of the way home.”

“No, don’t. Don’t pretend like you care about what happens to me, okay? You did your good deed for the day, and now your conscience can be free and clear.” I lift my hand and walk away faster, trying to put as much distance between us as I can.

I breathe easier when I don’t feel him near me anymore. My cardigan is tied around my waist and my shirttails are out by the time I get home, sweating and thirsty. Aunt Darby comes in right behind me, and her smile drops when she sees me.

“You okay?” she asks.

“My Jeep died.”

“Oh honey, no.”

I nod.

“Where is it?”

I tell her the location and she calls a tow truck to bring it here.

“When money is flowing again, we’ll take it back in. Just can’t do it yet after the tires,” she says.

“Yeah, I understand. I need to start looking for a job ASAP.”

“You’ve worked too hard, Lennon. Let’s see how my interviews go. Let me help you for a while, okay? If you get settled here and the workload isn’t too crazy at school, we can talk about a job then, but I’d like to give you a chance to coast for a while. You deserve that much.”

“Thank you,” I whisper.

“Of course,” she says, pulling me in for a hug.

When I get a grip again, I remember her interview. “How did it go today?”

“I think I stand a good chance of getting the job,” she says. “If I can’t sell enough paintings to get by, I’m holding out hope for Vandenberg International. Ms. Birdie was sweet and all, but I’d like a *little* more excitement than the school office.”

I laugh, imagining her in close quarters with Ms. Birdie all day.

“Then let’s hope you nail that interview at Vandenberg International tomorrow,” I say.

“Or just nail Brewster Vandenberg,” she says, winking. “What? Did I say that?” She laughs. “Pardon my dirty thoughts.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I take my time getting ready before the party Friday night. Ever is meeting me there since she had something going on with her sister first. The guys didn't say anything else about picking me up, so I doubt they'll show up. I think that was just Abel's way of trying to stick it to Cade, and since nothing else was said, I'm breathing easier that I can just take an Uber over.

The black blouse I'm wearing is one of the few items of clothing in my arsenal that I feel sexy in, the lowcut V showcasing the girls in the perfect, not-too-slutty-but-a-little-bit way. My jeans are the other stellar fashion choice, along with my black ankle boots, so I'm wearing all of it. I have another nice blouse and a dress, and the rest of my wardrobe is shit, so I'm pulling out the big dogs with this outfit.

Three years ago, I had designer brands lining my closet. It was important to my parents that I look the part, and I did whatever they asked. My, how the mighty fall. My black hair falls down my back in loose waves and my smoky eye is looking good. I haven't worn anything but mascara and lip gloss all week, and it feels good to put a little more effort into looking nice. I press my lips together, Too-Faced matte lipstick in Cool Girl making my lips pop and not going anywhere in the foreseeable future.

I spritz on the generic version of Clinique Happy. It's old and it's Aunt Darby's, but I'm still trying to go along with her and the manifesting, and Happy feels like a good word/fragrance to put out into the universe.

Aunt Darby gets home and comes back to my room, sniffing the air around me and laughs.

"Ahh, that's good memories right there. That was my high school signature scent," she says, twirling around the room.

“Someone’s flying high. Did you get a drink on the way home or what?”

“As a matter of fact, I did not. I’m late because I did a little celebratory grocery shopping. I got those oatmeal creme pies you love and a supersized package of Twizzlers for me...and fresh vegetables and fruit.” She sighs dreamily and then laughs, tweaking my nose. “I’m hungry. And I’m flying high because I saw him, Lennon. I saw Brewster, and it went even better than I imagined.”

“Really? What happened?”

“When he saw that I was coming in for an interview, he made sure he was there. He said he’s usually not there until the final rounds, but he wanted to see me.” She clasps her hands to her neck and she’s a little too starry-eyed for my liking.

“Did you get the job?”

She starts nodding and I squeal, and we start jumping around the room, dancing and jumping and hollering.

“I told you good things were coming,” she says, grinning from ear to ear. “I start work on Monday, and from the way he looked at me, I don’t think he has a no-dating policy among employees. He kept saying over and over how good it was to see me again.” She leans in and whispers, “And he got my number.”

“Wow. I can’t believe it. It’s happening!” We do another few leaps around the room and I have to bend over, fanning myself. The doorbell rings and I stand up, my head snapping toward her. “You didn’t invite him over tonight, did you?”

She giggles and bites down on her bottom lip, still all smiles. “How did you know I wanted to? I heard your voice on my shoulder telling me I shouldn’t be *that* obvious.”

“Good work,” I say, one ear toward the front door. I check myself in the mirror and glance at the clock. Three minutes until nine. Shit. What if that’s them?

I give my aunt a quick kiss and grab my phone. I hate carrying a purse, but I can’t go without my phone.

“You look pretty,” she calls out behind me. “What time will you be home?”

“I doubt I’ll be very late. Don’t wait up for me.”

“You know I will want to, but I won’t be able to,” she says. “Feel free to wake me up to tell me all about it though.”

I tease her about keeping grandma hours. This is late for her to be so perky, but she'll be ready for anything by six in the morning.

I don't ask her to define reasonable. I don't plan on being out past midnight.

I open the door and it's Wells. I swallow back my surprise that it's him and he grins, his dimples coming out in full force. Those things are his secret weapon, I swear.

Aunt Darby clears her throat and I turn toward Wells. It was hard to find pictures of them online while we were looking them up, so I know she's not sure who it is.

"I'm Wells Ellison. You must be Lennon's aunt." His charm is off the charts as he holds his hand out and grins at Aunt Darby.

Aunt Darby assesses him and gives him her version of a chilled reception. It doesn't affect Wells in the slightest because Aunt Darby wouldn't know how to be rude if her life depended on it.

"I'll have her home by midnight," he says.

"You didn't tell me you were going with someone," she says.

"Yes," I say simply. I never want to make her worry, and I'd hoped they weren't serious about taking me. Seeing them everywhere I turn for the past five days has me off my game.

She kisses my cheek and whispers in my ear, "I hope this goes how you want it to, Lennon. I'll keep my phone on and you call me if you need me."

I nod. I can tell she's wanting to ask a million questions as I walk out the door.

As soon as the door closes, Wells puts his arm around my shoulder. "Just like old times, Lionheart having our back." We get to the SUV where Abel and Ronan are waiting and his arm drops. "Shame it's only ever been a façade."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The ride to Cade's is tense and silent. And fortunately, brief. I'm in the backseat with Ronan and he's staring out his window as Wells flips through the radio, not stopping on a song long enough to tell what it is.

Abel is in his own little cold world. I force myself to not stare at the back of his head and turn toward my window. We're in the mansions now and driving toward the water. Abel turns left and the houses on the lakefront make the mansions look small. We're on Vandenberg Waterfront and I bet the Vandenberg family named this street thinking they'd be the only house here. There are three houses spaced several acres apart and the view of the water is unparalleled. The yards and houses are lit to showcase their beauty even at night and my favorite of the three is white with tall columns and a ton of windows. Abel turns in the last driveway, and it's the largest house of the three.

The party is already underway, and kids have spilled out onto the grass. Some are on the beach by the bonfire and the music is going in the house and outside. I wonder how the neighbors feel about this party and if the pretty white house could be Brewster's. I may have to tell Aunt Darby to go for it if that's his house.

We get out and Wells studies me. "What are you smirking about?"

"Inside joke."

He gives me a funny look and we walk toward the house. We're about a yard from the door when Abel takes my arm and leans in my ear.

"One of us will be with you at all times. If anyone so much as tries to dance with you, they'll have to go through us first. Got it?"

I turn and get in his face, my finger on his chest. "Why do you care what I

do? I thought you didn't want me here and now you don't want me out of your sight?"

He grabs my finger and pulls my waist against his, our chests pressing together and his breath hot on my face. "You wanted to be here so badly? Invade our school and town and lives now, when we finally have something good for ourselves? We'll be so far up your ass, you won't even be able to blink without asking us for permission."

I shove him away from me, unable to think straight with him so close. "You've clearly lost your mind."

He grins and I want to smack it off his face. He looks like a fallen angel, all dark, perfect edges.

I rush to the door, and he motions toward Wells and Wells jumps into action, next to me in seconds with his arm around my waist. I glare at both of them and Wells just grins.

"I guess you're not here to get laid if you're okay pretending to be with me."

"No, I can still get laid with people thinking we're together. The girls around here would do anything to be with one of us. Haven't you noticed that by now?"

I *have* noticed the way girls never stop watching them, how a few are always hovering around them like hummingbirds, fluttering and giggling and just waiting to land. I haven't talked to enough people to know what everyone thinks about them, but I've already heard whispers about them. He smiles at me smugly, like he knows the conclusions I'm drawing.

Cade opens the door and lights up when he sees me. It dims somewhat when he sees that I'm surrounded by Abel, Ronan, and Wells, but he turns his focus on me.

"You look beautiful," he says. "Want a drink?"

"I'd love one."

"I'll be getting her drinks," Abel says.

Cade looks annoyed but schools his features quickly. "Perfect, that will give me a chance to dance with you."

I grin, thrilled that he's sticking it to Abel. "Perfect," I repeat back to him, my smile wide. "How about we go do that right now? These guys are clinging to me, and I did not ask for that."

They each look taken aback by that, and my smile grows as I walk through the foyer with Cade. He holds his arm out and I loop my hand

through.

“That was awesome,” he says, laughing.

A man walks down the stairs and Cade pauses when he stops in front of us.

“I thought you left already,” Cade says.

The man looks like an older version of Cade, and he grins, his eyes twinkling when he looks at me. “Sorry to embarrass you, son. I had to come back and grab my phone. On my way to a lounge chair on the beach...out of the way,” he adds.

Cade rolls his eyes, laughing. “You know you don’t have to hide. Lennon, this is my dad, Brewster Vandenberg.”

My mouth drops open. “You’re Brewster?”

I feel the guys around me before I see them and the annoyance creeps back in. Brewster glances over my shoulder and nods at them before turning back to me. “I am.”

“My aunt said she used to...know you,” I finish like the awkward person I am.

“Who is your aunt?” he asks, his face open and friendly. The men in this family seem nothing like Cassie. Just then she walks by and rolls her eyes when she sees me. Guess I’m not her favorite person either. I turn back to Brewster.

“Darby Gentry.”

His head tilts as he studies me, his expression one of delight. There might be hope for her yet. “I can’t believe it. She mentioned being here with her niece, but I didn’t know you were Cade and Cassie’s age. That’s excellent. We should have you over for dinner, sometime next week maybe. I’ll call Darby and see when would be a good time.”

He looks at Cade, whose gaze is ping-ponging back and forth. Brewster puts his hand on Cade’s shoulder and squeezes. “I’m a phone call away,” he says. He lifts his hand in a wave and moves past us.

“He seems great,” I say.

Cade nods and smiles at me. He glances behind us, and I don’t miss the way his expression darkens.

I turn around and face Wells, who folds his arms across his chest, and Ronan, whose expression is somewhere between murderous and a wet dream. I can’t tell if he wants to kill me or rip this shirt off of me right here. And Abel, beautiful, icy Abel. He stares at Cade as if daring him to just try and

push him.

Cade points over his shoulder. “Drinks are through that hall and to the right. And there’s a nice selection of food. Help yourselves.” He turns back toward me, his arm going around my shoulder. “How did you manage to get these guys breathing down your neck so fast?” he whispers, eyes wide. “It’s impressive and...a little daunting, I’m not gonna lie.”

“I don’t know what their deal is, I think they’re just trying to be annoying,” I whisper back.

I feel a hand on my back and Ronan towers over Cade, making his arm fall off of my shoulder. “Lennon promised me her first dance on the way over here.”

I feel Cade’s eyes on me while I stare at Ronan. “Really? You’re—”

“Really,” Ronan says. He slides his hand around my waist and before I know it, we’re moving farther away from Cade. Wells and Abel are smirking behind Cade and Cade just looks confused.

“That was unnecessary,” I say. “And rude.”

“Yeah? Well, if neither of us is gonna get laid tonight, I should at least get to enjoy having your body pressed against mine instead of letting that grimy bastard put his hands all over you.”

I turn and face him, having to look way up even with my ankle booties on. I’m used to being as tall as the guys around me. At 5’10” I’ll never feel petite, but it’s nice to not be the tallest. As much as I hate to admit it, I like how I have to look up at all of them. It’s deceiving. I feel protected even though they can’t wait to find more ways to ruin me. “Pretty sure I get a say in that.”

He shakes his head. “Nope. You don’t. You were warned and you chose to ignore us, so here we are.”

The music is pounding, the bass vibrating through the house until I can feel it everywhere. He tugs my hand and a bunch of girls from school shove past me, making me lurch toward Ronan. His arms go around me and I feel the shock of it instantly. It’s like being enveloped by a warm, all-encompassing tree. Sturdy and unyielding. He smells like cinnamon and cloves. He leads me into the next room, high ceilings and seductive lighting, and a ton of dancing bodies.

And when we begin to move, our eyes lock and the tension goes to the next level. I feel hot all over, and even though I try to keep distance between us, we’re unable to avoid gravitating toward one another. His hands find my

waist and he tugs me until I'm tight against him, and it feels so good, my eyes nearly roll back in my head. I try to keep my features nonchalant, but inside, my body is primed like a bomb ready to detonate.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The beat of the bass and the heat from Ronan is sending a pulse straight between my legs.

He knows how to move.

We're chest to chest, letting the music move us without too much thought anymore to maintaining distance. A warm body comes behind me and when his body curves around the back of mine, I turn to see who it is. Wells lifts his eyebrows and starts dancing with us, daring me to stop him.

It feels too good to stop.

We dance as if we are one sleek unit, completely in sync. Wells' hands wander down my waist, getting lower and lower. My stomach lurches in anticipation to see how far they're going to take this little sexy dance exhibition and my panties are drenched. It could be a few things causing these reactions with the two of them acting like I'm their newest obsession. My mind knows it's just that—all an act—but try telling that to my body.

I lose track of time, and the escape is exactly what I needed, however misguided it may be. It feels freeing to get lost in the music.

We're bumped into from the side, and Ronan clutches me to his chest to keep me from falling. I turn to see what happened and Cade is there in my space. I try to take a step back, but he moves in, his face clammy.

"I'm ready for that dance," he says, his words slurring together.

Ronan pulls me back and Wells steps in front of me, leaning down so his face is in Cade's. "Someone's hit the bottle a little hard," Wells says. "We're actually heading out. Thanks for a great party."

"What? You can't go." Cade shifts around Wells to look at me and it takes effort for him not to stumble. "You didn't even get a drink yet."

“Her aunt wants her home sober,” Wells says, grinning at me.

I clench my teeth together and focus on Cade. We must have been dancing longer than I thought because he looks close to blackout drunk. I wouldn't have thought he was the type to go that hard.

“Good night, Cade,” Ronan says, his hands still on my waist as he guides me past Cade and through the crowded room.

“I'm not ready to go,” I say over my shoulder.

“All the more reason to leave,” he says, the coldness back in his voice like we haven't just been bumping bodies.

Wells leads the way and pauses just long enough for me to pay attention. Abel walks toward us from a side hallway I didn't notice earlier.

“Where have you been?” comes out before I can stop myself.

“He had to find the restroom,” Wells answers for him.

Abel smirks and I don't miss the silent exchange between the two of them.

“Time to go,” Wells says, taking my hand and pulling me away from Ronan. I look back at Ronan and his eyes are on my ass, so his reaction time is delayed. When he sees my hand in Wells' and meets my gaze again, he's chilled back to arctic temps and the unreadable guy I've seen at school. I don't know why it surprises me and hurts, when the episode out on the dance floor is what should've been the unexpected, not this.

We walk out the front door, the guys like a shield around me, and get in the SUV.

“Well, that was fun. I thought you guys were making sure I was miserable, but I enjoyed that,” I say, grinning.

No one says a word as they drive me back to my house.

When we pull into my driveway, Abel turns and faces me. “That little display was to announce to everyone at Loxley Prep that you belong to us.” His smile is deadly and sends a chill down my spine. “They'll leave you alone, unknowingly handing you to your demise. No one will be the wiser. Everyone knows The Valiant are kind and generous. But I prefer to keep things real between us, don't you?”

He turns to stare straight ahead, motioning for me to get out with his hand.

I ignore that, my anger overriding the fear he's trying to stir up. “What is The Valiant about anyway? Some gang you've created to make yourselves feel better about the shit you're pulling?”

“What shit?” he asks coolly.

“Trying to bully me into submission for who knows why, while trying to act like you’re decent...for starters.”

He laughs, but it only serves to make the hair on my neck stand on end.

“I can’t stand the sight of you,” he says. “And your self-righteous condescension. You’re such a piece of work.” He looks at me and his eyes are so full of hate, I back into the seat. “Get out!” he yells.

“Abel—” Wells says.

I jump and get out of the car, hurrying to the front door. When I turn before opening the door, they’ve already backed out of the driveway and are speeding down the street. I stare after them, more confused than ever.

It’s later than I thought, after midnight. So I did lose track of time dancing with Wells and Ronan. My body heats remembering how it felt to be sandwiched between the two of them. I shiver and as much as I don’t want to think about what used to be, my brain goes there without me.

I can’t get warm. They left us out here again. We’re known as numbers by the camp counselors, not by our names, even though we shared our names with each other early on. Maybe as a way of holding onto the shreds of dignity left, I don’t know, but even Jordan was quick to tell me his name within the first week of being here.

I’m in a snow house with my group and they’re sleeping. Jordan has kept his space since my friends beat him to a pulp. I’m certain he’ll retaliate, but he seems to be biding his time.

I feel an unreasonable urge to move. It’s too brutally cold to be still. I get up quietly, my shoes squelching through the snow as I make my way to the opening. The larger fire is outside our group of snowhouses, and I see Abel out there, his hands over the fire.

“Couldn’t sleep?” he asks.

“Too cold,” I whisper.

He holds his arms out and I step into them, feeling the first moment of warmth in I don’t know how long. I close my eyes and take a deep breath.

“Thank you,” I say, my voice shaky. “Why are you out here?”

“One of us wanted to be within hearing distance if Jordan tries anything else.”

I pull away, looking into his eyes as I clutch his arms. “You’re out here

for me? What did I do to deserve you guys?"

"Just get out of here in one piece," he says. "That will make all of this worth it."

"Has anyone ever...died out here?" My heart gallops uncontrollably as I think about what I'm asking. I don't really want to know the answer.

He nods. "There's a rumor that those who go into solitary don't often come back."

I put my fist over my mouth to cover my sob, and his arms wrap around me again.

"I won't let anything happen to you, Lennon," he promises. "For as long as I live, I swear I will be watching over you."

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Wells

Shit. Detention again. My parents are going to kill me this time. It's the third time since school started and it's only October.

Bishop is waiting on me when I get out. He's in high school and gets out earlier than I do, so he's usually here to walk home with me. I feel bad for making him wait. I'm more concerned about disappointing him than my parents.

"Hey," he says.

I shake my head. "Sorry to make you wait."

"It's okay. What happened?"

"It was sort of a combination of Kai giving me shit and me ignoring Mr. Provost when he told me to stop talking. He said after I pulled that last prank, he wasn't messing around with me, and I guess he meant it."

I'd thought the chair collapsing underneath him was hilarious and so had the rest of the class, but Mr. Provost hurt his back and I still feel bad about that.

"Okay, here's what we're gonna do. If the school hasn't called Mom, we'll say we're late because I had to stay for chess club. If they have, we play up the Kai angle. He's had it out for you since school started, that much is true," Bishop says.

"I can handle Kai," I say, smirking.

Bishop laughs and I'm glad he's not pissed at me. Except his tone

changes in the next sentence and I'm back to being worried. "Would it hurt you to tone down the attitude long enough to get Mom and Dad off your back? I can't handle it if you get sent to that camp they're talking about."

"They're just threats—they won't really do it."

"I don't know. Dad's all about this raise at work and how this looks for him on the school board. You need to lay low."

"Okay, man. I'll try."

Detention is forgotten by the time we walk in the front door. We took the long walk home and Bishop is telling me about this girl in his class who offered to give him a blow job.

"Like at school? Are you serious?" I ask incredulously. "I can't wait for high school. Tell me you said fuck yeah," I whisper.

"Wells," my dad's voice thunders from his office. "Get in here. Now."

"Shit," I say under my breath.

"I'm going with you," Bishop says. "Come on. Be ready to beg if you have to."

We get to the doorway of my dad's office. It's always intimidated me—all the dark wood and scholarly books and...the fact that it's my dad's favorite place to pour out his wrath on me and my brother.

My dad is seated behind the desk and my mom is standing next to him. Both are livid.

"I can't begin to tell you what a disappointment you are to me and your mother," he starts. "I should've done something about this sooner, but I'm doing it now. You'll be going to Camp Capintree. Maybe they can build the character in you that you're so obviously lacking."

"Dad, please don't send me there. I'll do better, I swear it."

He shakes his head. "You think I believe that song and dance after all this time? You spent more time in detention last year than you did in class and you're off to that same start this year." He holds up his hand when I start protesting, his voice raising over mine. "I will not have this behavior in my home. Go to your room and stay out of my sight."

"But what—you're not really sending me to that camp, right? I'll stay out of your sight. I'll be good, I swear it. Mom, I promise I will—"

She does what she always does and stares at my father, waiting for his orders.

"Out," he yells.

I run upstairs and hear Bishop arguing with him for a few minutes before

he's kicked out of the office too.

"They told me I can't talk to you," Bishop says outside my door.

I crack it open.

"I'll keep trying to talk them out of this," he says.

I'm hungry and tired and since my dad hasn't come to take me yet, I hope he's just trying to scare me. I finally fall asleep after pacing the floor for a few hours. But a nightmare starts, and I can't breathe. I try to sit up and am held down. My mouth is covered with something sticky, and I blink through sleepy eyes, thinking this dream is too real. Cuffs are on my hands, and I yell, but it's muffled. Two huge men drag me out of bed and down the stairs. Bishop stands in the hall and cries, trying to hit the men taking me while my dad holds him back.

The dew on the grass chills my bare feet as I'm hauled outside and shoved into a van. We ride for hours before we reach the camp and the handcuffs don't come off until I'm dragged into a tent and told that if I try to leave, the electrical fence will zap me.

I think I'm in a state of shock, even when Bishop shows up about a week later. I cry when I see him, but I haven't snapped out of the horror yet. He sees me and grins, his eyes changing when I try but can't respond. He gives me a good shake and it seems to jar me out of it.

"I'm so glad you're here," I repeat over and over, hugging him and bawling like a baby.

"What have they done to you?" he asks. "I can't believe they kidnapped you in the middle of the night."

"They put me right to work. How did you get here so fast?"

"Pulled the fire alarm at school," Bishop says proudly. "And then wrecked Mom and Dad's car...on purpose."

When we meet Abel and Ronan, everything starts to align. We're in this shithole together, but it feels like we have a purpose now. We work together and become a brotherhood. And when Abel tells us about Lennon and I see

her for the first time, talk to her...when I see her smile and the way her eyes light up when she talks...it's like I instantly know that she is someone worth fighting for. She is pure-hearted, kind, beautiful, strong, and smart.

She's always trying to make things easier for all of us. We aren't in the same group, so it's difficult, but she goes out of her way to give me extra food or to warn me when the mean guards are on duty. She's even taken the blame for a job I botched with cement and went without dinner for three nights. Every chance I get, I give her my food and she refuses it every time, wanting me to have it.

I didn't know I'd find the girl I love at Camp Capitree.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

My sleep is fitful, dreaming about the past and present interchangeably. When six rolls around, I get up instead of trying to get any more sleep. I cover my hair with a beanie and throw on running clothes, sneaking out before Aunt Darby has even managed to get up.

I move toward Lake Gitchi, thinking I'll run around the lake and maybe try to find the Vandenberg house in the daylight. The air is brisk, fall feeling like it's coming sooner rather than later. I'm deep in thought, thinking about what Abel said last night and wondering how they could turn on me so much.

"Are you following me now?"

I turn and Bishop is running alongside me. He glares at me, and I glare right back.

"No, I'm not following you. I live here, remember?"

"As if I could forget," he snaps.

"I would think you, of all of them, would be more adult about all of this...since you *are an adult*." I turn my attention to the path in front of me because he looks too good for this early in the morning.

"I don't want you messing with my brothers," he says. "We look out for each other, and the day Wells and I met Ronan and Abel at Camp Capitree, we found our true brotherhood. You can't come here and screw everything up."

"And how would I do that exactly?" I turn and stop, facing him. He stops too, and his eyes roam down my body, pausing briefly on my chest before coming back up to glare at me even more fiercely. "Does my very existence ruin your precious life here in Sikoma? I'm sorry, I won't leave just so you don't have to look at me anymore. There's room for all of us here."

He gets in my face. “You made your choice,” he spits out. “And your existence ruined our lives back at Camp Capitree. You being here is just a constant reminder of something we’re trying to forget. There will never be room for all of us together again.”

“You guys act like I wasn’t going through shit there too. We were in it together.” My eyes blur as I try not to cry.

He shakes his head, the fury radiating off of him. “Get out of my sight, little rich girl. You make me physically ill.”

Two of them asking me to get out of their sight in less than twenty-four hours is more than I can take. I turn and run in the other direction but stop before I’ve gotten very far.

“You know I’m not rich anymore—why call me that?”

“Oh, get real. You’re here, aren’t you? You’re at Loxley Prep. You can’t expect me to believe that you don’t have access to money somewhere.”

This isn’t a confession, but it’s the closest any of them have come to admitting they had something to do with draining all of our money.

“Wrong,” I snap. “Maybe it’s time you realize you don’t know everything about me.”

His hands are on his hip, his biceps bulging, and I get too sidetracked by that. He’s always fascinated me—his love for books, his loyalty to Wells, the way he was always ready to defend them...and me, no matter what. I turn before I make a fool of myself ogling him and run home.

When I get in the door, I lean against it, panting to catch my breath.

“You okay? You act like you’ve been running for your life,” Aunt Darby says. She’s on the couch, sipping a cup of coffee. Her eyes narrow on me when she sees my expression. She stands up and sets her coffee down, moving toward me. “What’s wrong?”

“It was a mistake to come here. I don’t think I’m up for it.” I move her hair out of my face as she hugs me, and I sniffle into it.

“Of course, you’re up for it. You can do anything,” she says. “Think about everything you’ve been through already.”

“Why would you want me to go through even one more difficult thing?” I ask, taking a step back.

She looks hurt, but I don’t hurry to take it back.

“I would never want you to go through pain. Ever. I hope you know that.”

“I do. I’m sorry I said that.”

“I thought you wanted to do this with me,” she says. “You’re eighteen,

Lennon, and could've stayed in Texas if you'd really wanted, but it seemed like you were ready for this move."

I cover my face with my hands. "I was."

She rubs my arm and hurries to add, "I'm so glad you're here. I think it will get better, but I understand if you don't want to stay. I just...I think I have a good opportunity here, and I thought you wanted to get to the bottom of things and restore your relationships. Has that changed?"

"No," I say, swallowing the huge lump in my throat. "It's just going to be a lot harder than I expected."

I wipe my face and she reaches for a tissue, handing it to me. I blow and glance at her out of the corner of my eye.

"I met Brewster last night."

"What? Why didn't you wake me up and tell me?"

"I got home late. You were knocked out. He's very nice and his home," my eyes widen as I nod, "it's something all right."

She laughs, clapping her hands together giddily. "I'm so jealous you got to see his house...and him! Did you tell him you're my niece?"

"Yes, and he said he's going to call you and invite us to dinner."

Her head tilts as she thinks about it. "I was hoping for a candlelit dinner for two at a fancy restaurant, but I wouldn't mind seeing his house."

"Trust me, you will love it."

"Thank you, Lennon," she says softly. "I hate that you're miserable. If this job doesn't work out, you get to decide where we go next, okay? Deal?"

"Deal."

She puts her arm around my shoulder and leads me to the kitchen. "How about pancakes? Would that help?"

"Definitely."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

After breakfast, I get a shower and decide to go out for a bit to check out some of the cute shops that are nearby. I can't buy anything, but I need to get out of my head and maybe I can find a job possibility.

I'm heading to Aunt Darby's room to see if she wants to go, when I remember my Jeep is dead.

"Gahh," I moan into the doorjamb, hitting my head lightly against it.

"What?"

"I wanted to see if you want to go out for a while and totally forgot I don't have a working car."

She makes a face. "Dang it. I wish. I need to clean a little bit, but you can take my car."

"You sure?"

"Of course."

I kiss her cheek and grab her keys. "Thank you. I won't be too long."

I walk outside, the air considerably warmer now, and hop in Aunt Darby's Subaru. I go a few blocks, heading toward the shops near the coffee place I like. Abel's SUV is pulling out of the parking lot, and it looks like the whole group is together, even Bishop.

On a whim, I idle and when it's time to turn, I do a U-turn and follow them instead. We drive out of the quaint town of Sikoma and head toward downtown Minneapolis. I glance at Aunt Darby's gas gauge to make sure there's enough and hope she won't kill me for using up her gas.

I need a job and going on a wild goose chase after *The Valiant* isn't going to make that happen, but I can't help myself. We get off the highway and wind through the streets, the area getting rougher with each mile. Abel's

blinker lights up and he turns into a bakery.

They came all this way for a bakery? The donuts must be out of this world.

I park across the street and watch the four of them get out. Instead of going inside, a girl comes out. She's a little older, maybe Bishop's age or older, and she gives each of them a hug, lingering longer when she gets to Abel. My eyes narrow on them, the feelings this kicks up in my chest not making sense at all. He hands her a ring of keys, and she hugs him again, her head falling back as she laughs. I scowl. Her long honey hair is in perfect waves, and she has a curvy body, and she cannot seem to stop touching Abel. His hands are on her waist and it's obvious they've slept together. This must be one of the older women he's interested in...maybe the only one. She motions behind her and gets in a car, and they pull out, one behind the other. I follow a few car lengths back and am surprised that we head straight to Sikoma.

Near the place I saw Abel pulling out of earlier, they pull into the parking lot and park outside a cute commercial space. Everything in Sikoma is cute with unique woodwork and brick, the signs for businesses whimsical and charming.

Wells tugs on her arm and points at the sign and when she sees it, she starts crying. What is this about? *Second Chance Bakery*. She hugs each of them again and Abel leads her to the door. She pulls out her keys and unlocks it, laughing again when it opens, and they file inside.

Confused, I leave while they're in there, my earlier plans of finding a job forgotten as I go home and try to figure out what that was all about. When I walk inside, Aunt Darby dances toward me.

"Uh-oh, she's dancing. What's happening now?" I ask, laughing.

"Brewster just called and invited us over for dinner. Tomorrow night!" she squeals. "Of course, I said yes. What should I wear? I don't think I have anything."

I shake my head. She doesn't have much. We had a garage sale and sold most of our things to make the move, so she brought only slightly more than I did.

"Your purple wraparound dress?"

She makes a face. "I'm so tired of that dress, but yeah, I guess it's the best option. I can't wait until there's money for more than food and gas and bills." She plops down on the couch and sighs. "I can't wait to go shopping."

I'm not much of a clothes horse, but Aunt Darby is. I know it's been hard on her to go from wealthy to barely making ends meet.

"I'll never take money for granted again," she says. "Ever."

"I'm just glad I can wear uniforms. Yes, I need to wash them a ton and that's going to get old, but at least I don't have to come up with something cute every day. You're going to need a few things for work."

"If Brewster doesn't work out, I'm going on a dating app," she teases. At least I think she's joking. "My only requirement will be that he's a wealthy man...or woman." She laughs, but her face twists into anguished lines when she talks about money. I think about how different the two of us are about some things. I grew up rich too, but it was never something I was proud of. My aunt relied on her parents' money and I didn't know until my dad had lost everything that she'd already spent her inheritance from her parents' death a long time ago and had been living off of what my dad gave her. While she's an artist, she's never had huge success with that. I'm not sure she realized how little she actually makes from her artwork until the family money was gone. For me, it's been challenging to survive without money, but it's still so much better than my life at home ever was.

Thoughts of my mom crowd in and I shove them away. I can't think of her, at least not if I don't want to spiral into the dark abyss and not come out for a few days. Nope, I don't have time for a downward spiral.

My aunt and I sit there, each deep in our own thoughts, letting our broken pieces fray a little more in the silence.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Aunt Darby is in her purple wraparound dress and looks lovely. Her dark curls are shiny and she's so excited, she's practically bouncing. You'd never know she hates this dress or anything about her life, the way she walks up the brick steps of the Vandenberg house, her head held high. I'm wearing the jeans I wore Friday night and the only other nice blouse I own.

Cassie answers the door and looks right through Aunt Darby and me like we're the scum on the bottom of her shoe. Brewster hurries behind her, greeting us warmly and making up for some of Cassie's rudeness.

"Your house is beautiful," my aunt says. "It reminds me of the house I grew up in."

Cassie scoffs behind us and I turn to look at her. She rolls her eyes and mouths, *gold digger*. I glare at her, wishing I could set her straight about my aunt, but what good would it do? Fortunately, I'm distracted by the elaborate table.

"I thought we could get started eating right away. My son has somewhere to be in a little while, and I wanted you to meet him."

"Wonderful," Aunt Darby says, smiling at him. She looks at Cassie and smiles and when it's not returned, she looks to Brewster again. "It's so fun to see you with kids, Brewster. The resemblance is uncanny," she says.

"I look just like my mother," Cassie growls.

"It's strange. One person thinks the twins look just like me and the next thinks they look like their mother." He tries to make up for his daughter's tone, but it's obvious she isn't going to make this dinner easy. "I think they have the best parts of their mother in them, for sure." He smiles at Cassie, and I see her soften a fraction.

I look like my mom too, but it's not a happy thought for me the way it seems to be for Cassie.

Cade walks in then, and his face lights up when he sees me. "Hey, Lennon. How are you?" He holds a hand out to Aunt Darby and they shake. "I'm Cade."

"Nice to meet you," she says. She lifts her eyebrows at me when he's not looking. I know that look. She'll want me to seal the deal with a Vandenberg if she's not able. I almost get the giggles again. Aunt Darby would kill me if she could hear my thoughts. Or it's probably more accurate to say she'd be the one cheering me on the loudest. Good-looking, wealthy men have always been drawn to her. She claims the money isn't the most important thing, but a little never hurt anybody.

"What brought you back to Minnesota?" Brewster asks. "I wasn't sure you'd ever be back..."

"Oh, I missed it here. Not the cold. Never have I ever missed the cold." Darby laughs. "But I missed the people here. Never really felt like I belonged in Texas."

"Not hard to believe," Cassie says under her breath.

I glare at her. "Have you ever lived anywhere but here, Cassie?"

She acts surprised that I'm speaking to her. "No, I've lived right here my whole life. Well, almost. We lived in another house when I was born."

"Texas would eat you alive," I say, smiling.

She frowns, the space between her eyebrows creasing into dozens of lines. "What do you mean by that?"

I shrug. "Just an observation." I leave it at that. She might think she's the queen bee at Loxley Prep since she lives in this house and her dad practically runs Sikoma from what I can tell, but take away her money and her family name, and she'd be nothing more than a scared, wet cat.

"You left before we could really hang out on Friday," Cade says softly. Brewster and Darby are talking to the side and Cassie is trying to listen in on both conversations.

"Thanks for inviting me. I had a nice time."

"It looked like you were going to dry hump those guys right in my living room," Cassie says.

"Cassie!" Brewster says, his attention diverted by her words. "Apologize."

She stares at him and back at me, swallowing hard. There is not an ounce

of her that means it when she says in monotone, “Sorry.”

Cade shifts uncomfortably and leans in so only I can hear. “Is something going on with you and The Valiant? I wasn’t aware you guys were so... tight.”

“Nothing is going on with us,” I say, looking at him and Cassie both. “I just enjoy dancing and don’t get the chance to do it very often.”

“Do you have any interest in the dance team? You’d be great,” Cade says. “Or you could be a cheerleader...for the hockey team. Our football team *sucks*.”

“Are you on the hockey team?” I ask, thinking about all those hot guys that sit at the same table. There’s one in particular who’s always staring at Ever.

“Yeah,” he says.

“He rarely gets played,” Cassie says.

“Shut up, Cassie,” he says.

She shrugs, smirking. “Just tellin’ it like it is.”

Several of the Vandenberg’s waitstaff come out with serving dishes of steaming food. There’s a pork roast and mashed potatoes, a massive salad, macaroni and cheese that looks divine, and the most beautiful dinner rolls I’ve ever seen. My mouth waters at the sight of all this food. I look at Aunt Darby and she looks as elated as I do. It’s been a long time since we’ve eaten this well.

Dishes are passed and I dig into my food, not bothering to hide my excitement.

“Starving much?” Cassie digs.

I ignore her and moan when I taste the macaroni and cheese. It’s absolutely decadent.

Cade laughs next to me, and I crinkle up my nose when he adjusts himself. Awkward.

Brewster and Darby are chatting away, and I wish Cade would quit trying to make conversation when I just want to focus on this meal.

“These rolls—” I say, grabbing another.

“Are so many carbs,” Cassie says, shaking her head. “Guess that’s where your layer of hips comes from.”

Her dad didn’t hear that one, or if he did, he’s choosing to ignore it. And my hips are just fine.

“Must be why you’re so angry,” I say, smiling sweetly. “You need some

carbs in your life.” I wave my roll in front of her face. “And these are amazing. You’re really missing out.”

I stuff it in my face, and she looks like she’s going to be sick.

It’s going to be a long night.

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CHAPTER TWENTY

It's late when we leave the Vandenberg mansion, and Aunt Darby floats all the way to the car. She turns to wave at Brewster, who is standing in the doorway, watching us leave with a nice smile on his face and a friendly wave.

I'm about to say something about him looking as smitten as she does when movement a few houses down catches my eye. It's an SUV pulling into the white house I loved the other night and I squint to see if Abel is driving. It looks like their SUV, but it's dark. I wonder what they're doing over here and how many ways I can run into them on any given day.

The community of Sikoma is tiny compared to where we lived in Dallas and when we lived in Minneapolis before. I don't know how I feel about running into people I know every time I leave the house...even when I did move here to do just that. The actual reality of it is daunting. I don't have any downtime between our jarring interactions.

I hustle into the car, hoping none of them will see me if it is them.

Darby slides into the car and beams at Brewster, waving one more time.

"That was amazing," she says. "Isn't he sweet?"

"He does seem nice."

"His daughter had some attitude, didn't she? But I'm sure she's just not fully there yet with the thought of her dad dating. I hope she'll come around."

"Give it some time," I say. I want her to put the brakes on big-time, but I know better than to say too much to my aunt. She falls hard and fast and it's one of the things I love about her—that she can love so easily—and one of the things that drives me crazy—that she isn't more careful with her heart.

"Cade is adorable," she says, backing out of the driveway.

I duck as we drive past the white house and then peek to see if I spot one of them. Whoever it is still hasn't gotten out of the car and I just can't be sure.

"Are you okay?" Aunt Darby asks.

"Yeah."

"You're not saying much. Did you think he liked me? Or was it more nostalgia kindness?"

"Nostalgia kindness? What is that?"

"You know...he's just being nice because we were once important to each other. Or maybe he wants to relive that part of his life a little bit, nothing more."

"I really don't know. It's hard to tell after one dinner. Maybe you'll know more after you work together."

"Yeah."

I can tell she's disappointed I'm not gushing more, but honestly, the whole thing makes me nervous. I'm torn with wanting to leave Sikoma and wanting her to do great at her job. I want her to find love and yet falling for an ex-boyfriend whose daughter has issues seems somewhat high-risk.

"Are you excited for your first day at work?" I ask, hoping it will get her off of Brewster for a while.

"Very. So...Cade and Cassie. Maybe you could befriend the two of them. Get to know them better. The more friends you make around here, the more you'll feel like staying."

"Cassie and I didn't get off to a good start. And I'm not sure how I feel about Cade yet. I'm trying not to judge Brewster based on how his daughter has treated me since the first day of school, so how about we just take our time here?"

"She does seem like a hard case. You know what I always say—kill her with kindness. Or just put all your focus on that hot twin of hers." She giggles.

It's moments like this when Aunt Darby feels more like my sister than my aunt, despite being old enough to be my mother. But being an only child with a mother who came up short in parenting, I don't have a good example of what to expect in a parental relationship...or a sibling one, for that matter.

"I think I'll leave the Vandenberg men to you. Just please be careful. I feel like you're determined to be with him before you even know who he is now."

Her expression is slightly wounded when she glances at me. “I was in love with him before!” she says softly. “And I don’t think he’s going to be a completely different person.”

“A lot can change in almost two decades. He’s lived a lot of life and so have you. And why did the two of you break up?”

She sighs and is quiet for a long time. I feel bad for being so harsh, so I jump in.

“I hope if he’s the right one for you, it will all fall together easily. But I just want you to be cautious. You’re a wonderful person and you deserve someone just as wonderful as you are.”

“He’s pretty wonderful. And it feels like no time has passed at all. Almost like it’s meant to be.” She taps on the steering wheel and laughs.

I stare out the window as we pass the lake. When it comes to Aunt Darby and men and *wisdom*, I’m not sure why I bother. It will just have to all play out and I will be here to pick up the pieces if it doesn’t.

When we pull into our driveway, Aunt Darby looks at me. “I hear you, okay? I’ll be careful. He broke up with me because he didn’t want to be serious when we went off to college, so that should be reason enough for huge red flags. He was married not that many years later, so...apparently it was just *me* that he didn’t want to marry.”

She puts her hand on my shoulder and squeezes, and I reach over and hug her.

“He was a fool to let you go,” I whisper.

“I know, right?” She laughs but also wipes a tear from her cheek. “I don’t know why I’m crying. I guess I’m just excited to have another chance with him. But I’ll be careful!” She raises her hand, and we loop our fingers together. “I promise I’ll be careful if you promise you’ll be careful with those boys.”

“I’ll be careful,” I promise. “The difference is, I don’t want to date them.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“What?”

We get out of the car, and I follow her inside.

“What?” I repeat.

“You know that whole ‘fine line between love and hate’ business. I wouldn’t disregard that.”

“Okay, I hear you. And I can promise you that there won’t be any dating going on there. They can barely tolerate me being in the same room with

them.”

“The way Wells’ eyes ate you up when he came to pick you up—that was not the eyes of someone detesting being near you. Quite the contrary. And what was Cassie talking about with the dry humping?” She covers her mouth and does a shimmy.

My face instantly goes hot. “Just trust me when I say, there’s more hate than lust going on, and we were just dancing.”

I escape to my bedroom and immediately feel guilty. Because I’m not being completely honest with Aunt Darby. I don’t hate the guys at all, and I’d say the lust factor is something worth noting. I get dizzy whenever I’m near one of them, so that’s not solidifying my argument in the slightest.

What I *am* certain about is that they don’t feel anything but hatred toward me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The new guy doesn't speak. At all. I've seen everyone from Jordan to the counselors and guards to my friends trying to get him to talk. When our groups are together, he stays close to Abel and Bishop. I've tried talking to him too and he just smiles, but he doesn't say a word. I don't like thinking of people as the numbers they're assigned in this place, but with him, it's all I know. I don't know if M-497 is small for his age or younger than all of us, but he's pale and frail, and I have no idea why he'd ever be sent here. It's hard to imagine him doing anything bad enough. He seems like a sweetheart and that's saying something around here. Even my friends aren't people I'd necessarily consider sweet...maybe Ronan and Wells, but they're more mischievous than sweet. M-497 has kind eyes and a kind smile, and he looks like he'd rather melt into the ground than for anyone to pay too much attention to him.

One night when we've been challenged to move all the lumber from one side of the camp to the shed on the opposite end of the property to start building a marina by the water, even though the lake is frozen solid, we start talking about what put us in here.

It comes in stops and starts because we have to move a certain amount of wood in a short amount of time. But once the guards let up and go stand by the fire instead of watching us like hawks, we have a little more freedom.

Wells started the conversation by telling me and M-497 how he pulled a prank at school and got in a fight and wouldn't apologize when he was asked to. His parents had been threatening to send him here, but he was still shocked when they did.

As the night trickles by and my muscles are screaming out, I need the

distraction of hearing everyone's stories. Bishop pulled the fire alarm at school and then drove his parents' car and purposely wrecked it after Wells was sent away so he would be too. He met Wells here less than two weeks later, and it was fortunate that they were put in a group together.

"What about you?" I ask Ronan as he organizes the lumber in the shed. He holds his arms out and I fit the end in his arms so he can position it on the pile.

"Beat up a kid at school."

"Really?" I ask in surprise. He doesn't seem violent at all. In fact, I've only ever seen his temper when Jordan has mistreated me.

"Kid called me the n-word and I asked him not to. When he continued, I hit him."

"Sounds like he deserved it."

"I thought so. What did you do?"

"I-I got a D on a test."

"That's why you're here? What the fuck?"

I glance around to make sure no guards are nearby. There are repercussions to cussing around here.

"My parents are all about image." I shrug. "It would look bad for them if I failed a class."

"Why? Are they important?"

I think about that for a few seconds before answering. "I guess to some they are."

Ronan nods. "That sucks. I'm sorry you're here."

"I'm not anymore. Not since I met you guys."

He smiles at me, and we freeze when we hear a scream.

We both run out of the shed and toward where we think the scream came from. It's dark out, but there are torches lighting the path. I don't hear the scream again, but I hear a whimper and I follow that sound. I pick up one of the torches and carry it toward the sound.

"Hello? Are you okay? Who's there?" I call out. "Hello?"

One of the guards comes out of the trees and stalks toward me. "Get to work," he yells. "You're not supposed to be over here."

"I heard something. It sounded like someone was hurt—"

M-497 stumbles out from the trees and runs past the guard and me. I turn to follow him, and the guard grabs my arm.

"One hundred push-ups, now."

“Right here?”

He takes the torch from me and yanks my arm until I’m on my knees.

“Right here, right now.”

I get into position and force my already exhausted body to do push-ups. When he walks away with the torch and the area around me goes dark, he yells, “If you get up before you’ve done a hundred, you’ll be on toilet duty for a month.”

I shudder. Toilet duty is rough. I never ever want to be on toilet duty again.

I do the push-ups, taking a moment to throw up before I’m done.

“You okay?” Abel asks, leaning down on his haunches next to me.

“Check on M-497,” I whisper. “I don’t know what happened, but I think I heard him scream.”

Abel curses and jumps up, running back toward the camp.

When we stop for the night, too bleary-eyed to think straight, I look around for Abel and M-497 but don’t see them.

The next day, both of them are gone.

I wake up, troubled by my dreams and from revisiting the past. I lie in bed for an hour at least, thinking about M-497. I think about him often and wonder where he is now. Maybe the guys know, and I can ask them sometime. I scoff at myself and that’s when I decide to get up and go running, despite it still being dark outside. It’s best I don’t imagine getting buddy-buddy with the guys and thinking they’ll open up to me about the past. I don’t see that happening anytime soon.

I throw on clothes and grab a sweatshirt. When I step outside, I nearly turn around and go back to bed. The temperature has dropped drastically.

But I start running toward the lake and get warmed up. It’s peaceful out here with no one around. The streetlamps and stars are twinkling across the water.

“It’s like you’re everywhere I turn now. I can’t fucking breathe without you being there,” Bishop says, running next to me.

“I guess I could say the same thing.”

“How about you tell me the time of day you’re going to run, and I’ll make sure to avoid the lake around that time?” he says.

“Aw, you’d do that for me? So sweet,” I snap. “I run when I feel like it. I

can't help if it's when you feel like it too."

"Why do you have to be so difficult?" he asks. "You've wormed your way into this town and act like you own the place. I guess that's fitting, given your last name."

"Please don't hold my name against me. That's one thing I had no say in...the family I was born into."

He's quiet for a moment, and our feet padding against the pavement and the lapping water as we get closer to the beach are the only sounds.

"What were you doing at the Vandenberg's last night?" he asks.

So that was them. "What were you doing at the white mansion?" I ask.

"I asked you first."

"My aunt knew Mr. Vandenberg. They dated in high school, and they reconnected when she interviewed at Vandenberg International."

"Let me guess—she got the job."

"Yeah, she did. She starts today. Why? Is it not a good company to work for?" I look over at him and he's glaring straight ahead, his go-to expression when he's talking to me.

"She'll have to decide that for herself," he says.

"Well, I'd hope you'd tell me if there were something she should watch out for—I don't want to see her get involved in anything difficult or that wastes her time."

He shrugs. "Can't help you there."

I swallow the lump that forms every time I talk to one of them...except for when I danced with Ronan and Wells the other night. Maybe we should only dance and not talk, I think. Or run and not talk, in this case.

"I sometimes forget that you want to see us fall," I whisper.

"What?" he says sharply, turning toward me.

I don't answer, and we run around the lake twice more before I veer off and run toward my house, leaving Bishop still running by the water.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

I'm ready for a nap by the time I get to school, my early morning run coming back to bite me. So, I'm a little distracted walking down the hallway and to my locker. I stop when I see them standing there, leaning against my locker.

Abel is the first to speak. "What were you doing at Cade Vandenberg's house last night?"

I look at the three of them, their arms crossed and faces like granite. I look over my shoulder for Bishop. "The fourth guard didn't tell you?" I cross my arms over my chest and stare back at them.

"Well?" Abel waves for me to start talking.

I motion for them to move so I can get to my locker. They don't budge.

"I don't want to be late," I say, frowning.

"Better start talking then."

"It's none of your business."

"When we said you belong to us, you became our business. If you want to sidestep that, we'll have to get more stringent with our level of control."

"No one controls me," I say, getting in Abel's face.

He puts his hand on my neck, his face an inch from mine and his eyes blazing with fire. His lips get closer, so close, I think he's going to kiss me. When he speaks, they brush against my lips, and I resist the urge to shiver. "We are no longer under your spell, Lionheart. So, I will ask once more, and you will answer...what were you doing at the Vandenberg's last night?"

"I will answer because I already told Bishop—you guys should really compare bullying notes. And I need to get to class. My aunt is into Mr. Vandenberg. They dated each other a long time ago and she got a job at his company."

“And that’s it?”

“Isn’t that enough?”

He takes a step back and stalks past me. I’m left staring at Wells and Ronan. Wells grimaces until his dimples pop out and he leans toward my ear, his breath making chill bumps skate across my skin.

“Watch your step, pretty girl,” he whispers.

“Aw, you think I’m pretty?” I attempt sarcasm, but it comes out breathy instead. Dammit.

Wells walks away and it’s just Ronan and me.

“Are you going to get in my face and say something obnoxious?” I ask.

He smirks and stays put. “It’s a good thing you dance so well. Feeling you move against me keeps coming to mind when all I’d normally want to do to you is ruin you.”

He brushes against me as he walks away, and I’m left staring with my mouth open. My heart gallops in my chest, the rage of feeling misunderstood more than I can take.

“Hey, are you okay?” Ever moves in front of me and puts her hand on my shoulder. It jars me out of some of my stupor and I nod as I force a smile.

“I will be. I don’t know why I’m letting them get to me.”

She frowns. “What’s their problem anyway?”

“That’s what I want to find out. I’m tired of these riddles.”

She leans in. “You guys were sizzling on the dance floor Friday night. They can’t hate you that much if they’re doing all that.”

“You’d think, but I’m pretty sure it’s just a trick to get me all twisted up in the head.”

She sighs. “I hate boys.”

“Me too.”

The first bell rings and I jump, moving in the direction of class.

“See you later?”

“Yeah, and hey, don’t let them win,” she says.

I nod and turn, bolting down the hall. I feel better for about a second. Until I feel Bishop’s glare on me, and I just want to get out of here and go back home.

He drops a book on the desk and writes on the board. *The Count of Monte Cristo* by Alexander Dumas. Great. Just what I want to think about right now. A revenge book. A thrilling revenge book, but not what I want a former friend who now hates me and is teaching my class to talk about today.

I open the period app on my phone to see if I'm about to start my period because tears are so close to the edge right now and I'm not typically a weeper. I could go for a good cry right now. Three days until I'm supposed to start. That holds.

"Ms. Gentry, perhaps you have not heard my class rules, but I don't allow phones to be used in my classroom." He walks over and holds out his hand and I stare up at him incredulously. He motions for me to give him my phone and I make a point of looking at the others in class who have their phones out. When he keeps standing there, I grit my teeth and drop my phone in his hand. I can tell when he sees what is on my screen by the way his skin slightly flushes. I grin. Okay, that might have been worth it to see his embarrassment.

Just a sign that Mr. Ellison is not so mature that a little period talk doesn't fluster him. I cover my mouth as a hysterical laugh threatens to pop out. He pockets my phone, the jerk.

"Raise your hand if you've read this book." Bishop holds up *The Count of Monte Cristo* and waves it.

I raise my hand and look around to see the only other person who has read it...Wells. He lifts an eyebrow at me, and I do the same.

"I've decided this will be the book we'll discuss most over the next two weeks. I've selected passages for you to study at home and then we'll talk about it in class. It's a long book, but for those of you who love to read, this one is worth your time."

Some of the class groans and he laughs, looking like the teacher hottie he is. I glance around and see the girls in the class melting every time his teeth show, which is often. I personally find myself distracted by the way his arms fill out his button-up shirt. He has a tie on to match our uniforms, but it's loose around his neck, almost like he can't be bothered to wear it properly. The whole effect is incredibly sexy, especially with his dark wavy hair and his stunning eyes.

I shake my head, willing myself back to disliking him. He just took my phone, for crying out loud.

I lose minutes of what he says, glad that I already know this book well. The bell rings and I'm still lost in thought, watching him explain his passion for this story. He stops with the bell and waves his device.

"Everyone check your iPads for the reading tonight. There are five selections. Tomorrow be prepared to talk about them extensively." He looks

at me. “Ms. Gentry, a word with you.”

I let everyone file out and then walk to his desk. He drops my phone in my hand, not looking at me.

I groan, clutching my stomach. “So crampy,” I say.

His eyes cut to mine, his face flushed. “A little blood never bothered me.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

My nerve endings feel fried by the time I get home. A day of weighted stares and the few words they each said to me plays on a loop in my head. I'm relieved that Aunt Darby should be gone for a couple of hours yet, the tiny cottage just shy of crowding me even when I'm alone. It reminds me of how I felt at Camp Capitree. Like my skin is crawling and there's not enough space in the world to free me of it.

I crawl across my bed and fall asleep, thoughts of camp coming back to life in my dreams, as if it was just yesterday.

"But where is he?" I ask the guys days later when Abel is still gone.

"None of us have ever been sent away, but we've heard of this happening before. It's usually a few weeks. Either in solitary or..." Ronan looks back at Bishop and he shakes his head.

"What? Solitary or where?"

Bishop steps closer and whispers, "I'll try to find out where he is. One of the group leaders talks more than he's supposed to..."

"What about M-497?" I whisper, as a guard starts walking toward us. We're not supposed to be talking to each other right now. My group is hauling bags of cement to the outbuilding and Bishop's group is handling creosote. I haven't had to work with the chemical yet and I don't want to. One guy got severe burns and ended up in the infirmary for weeks.

"No word about him either," Bishop whispers. "Gotta go. Keep your head down, Lionheart. Stay out of trouble."

My heart warms, as it always does when one of them calls me that. “You too,” I whisper back. I see Wells behind Bishop and smile at him too before turning away with the cement.

I wake up to Aunt Darby leaning over me, her hand on my shoulder.

“Are you okay? You were whimpering,” she says.

I sit up and try to focus on her. My dream is like a cloak around my neck, stifling and weighty. I swallow hard and reach for the water bottle next to my bed, taking a long drink.

“How was your day?” I finally ask.

She beams and does a twirl around the room.

I groan and lean back on my pillows.

“That great, huh?”

She laughs and falls next to me on the bed. “Yes. I am going to fit in just fine at Vandenberg International.”

“It wasn’t weird because you know the boss?”

“If it was, I didn’t notice because Brewster doted on me. I didn’t realize I’d be working so closely with him, but I spent the whole day with him!” Her voice is bubbly, and I wish I could be excited for her, but I’ve gone through these early stages of romance with her multiple times and it’s hard to maintain the same level of enthusiasm each time. Especially when they quickly go bust.

“Hopefully it doesn’t get weird if things don’t work out with you two,” I say.

She gives my shoulder a slight shake. “Do not put that into the universe,” she says, laughing. “He asked me out to dinner tomorrow night, just the two of us.”

“Great.” I try, I really do, to muster up a little bit of lightness in my tone.

“You need to get a boyfriend. Then you’ll understand how *great* all of this really is,” she says, mimicking my tone. “I fully expect you to be like, ‘Yep, Auntie Darb, you were so right.’”

“I’ve never called you Auntie Darb in my life.”

“First time for everything. When you fall in love, it’ll be like a lightning bolt, and you’ll sing your words and call me Auntie Darb.”

I laugh and she gets up, tossing the pillow into my side.

“How about we take dinner to the lake? It’s a beautiful day,” she says.

“Is everyone and their brother out there?” I ask.

“Probably. You know that’s how Minnesota is. We wring out the good of all the nice days. Or have you forgotten?”

“I remember so few of the nice days,” I admit.

When I think of Minnesota, I think of Camp Captree and the brutal cold. I felt like I would never be warm again. And even though I lived through the summers here too, those memories aren’t at the surface.

“All the more reason we should get you outside today. It’s spectacular out there.”

I get up and grab a sweatshirt.

“You’re not even going to need that, but bring it just in case it gets chilly by the water later.”

I nod and put my shoes on. “Peanut butter and banana sandwiches?”

“How about we drive through Taco Bell, my treat?”

I grin. Taco Bell is my obsession, and I can’t remember the last time I had it. “Do you even have to ask?”

She twirls out of the room, and I roll my eyes, but her infectious mood is wearing off on me. We’re in the car within ten minutes. Taco Bell is near the coffee shop and bakery, and I look in the parking lot to see if I spot the guys, but I don’t see their black SUV. It looks like someone is in the bakery though and I wonder how long before it opens.

I might get a little carried away with my order at Taco Bell. Nachos BellGrande, burrito supreme, hard shell taco supreme, Cinnabon delights, and a gigantic Pepsi.

“Good lord, I wish I had your metabolism,” Aunt Darby says, ordering a bean burrito and hard shell taco with a Diet Pepsi.

I eye her bean burrito when I see it, and she snatches it out of my hand.

“Nuh-uh, you ordered the whole menu, gimme my bean burrito.”

I giggle and we pull into the lake parking lot. “I notice you chose the closest section of lake to the Vandenberg estate,” I sing as we get out of the car.

She crinkles her nose. “It’s still too far, if you ask me.”

There’s quite a bit of beach between us and the house, and we put a blanket on the sand. I pull all of the food from the bag and stretch out next to it, facing the water.

“You’re right, this was a great idea.” I take a few bites and throw my head back. “Aw, my lover, my friend, it has been too long.”

“We definitely need to get you laid.”

“Aunt Darby!” I act mortified, but images of Ronan, Wells, Bishop, and Abel force their way into my mind. It’s sad that she’s so right. If I’m this horny thinking of my *bullies*, I am in a bad way.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

I'm still in my food haze when a ball rolls onto our blanket. I glance up and Wells and Ronan are running toward me. I toss the ball and Wells catches it. He lifts his head and jogs back toward Ronan, but Ronan keeps walking toward me.

"Play with us?" he asks.

Again, with those mental images. I slip my shoes back on and try to hide my pink cheeks, standing up before he says anything else.

He looks surprised when I move next to him. He grins and motions over his shoulder. "We're over here."

I glance toward the volleyball net and Wells is the only one there.

"I'll make it lopsided," I say.

He takes my hand and leads me to the other side. "Are you any good?"

"I'm decent."

"Wow, that's high praise," he teases. "Come on, I'll do the hard part. It'll be fun to see Wells hustle."

I grin, uncertain why we seem to be in a truce-territory, but happy to go with it.

And then they both pull off their shirts in that one-handed completely male way and I turn away from both of them. I glance back at Aunt Darby, and she fans herself, shaking her head in an exaggerated way and I know I can't look at her either. I choose to look at the lake instead, until I feel Ronan's lips on my ear.

"Are you ready to sweat?" he asks.

"I think I already am," I admit.

His eyes are dancing when I look at him and he holds the ball. He serves

and then for the next half hour or so, I get lost in the game. Ronan and I are a good team, and Wells is an excellent player, but we manage to make him work for every point he gets.

I send the ball flying over the net and on the opposite side of where Wells is playing. He leaps into the air and sends the ball flying, but it hits the net and Ronan and I win. I dance around in the sand and Ronan comes over and holds his hands up to give me five. I slap his hands and he holds onto them. His eyes fall to my lips and our hands drag against his chest. A bead of sweat trails down the side of his head and I watch it, mesmerized. He takes a step closer and my breath catches.

He smells like man and outside and something citrusy. I want to lean in and inhale.

His chest bumps against mine and again with the quick intake of air and the rush that makes me feel like I might pass out.

“It’s not so bad when we’re on the same side,” he whispers.

Why does everything that comes out of his mouth seem so weighted with double meaning? My lips part and I watch as he backs away and the two of them walk toward each other, grabbing their shirts and sadly, putting them back on. Ronan lifts a hand to wave and Wells has an expression I can’t read, especially on him. He’s not smiling or smirking. If anything, he looks confused.

Join the club, man.

I join Aunt Darby back on the blanket, and she whistles. “Holy hot hormones,” she says. “What are you going to do with all that testosterone? I know you’re saying they’re not into you, but uh, yeah, they are.”

I watch them walk down the beach until I can’t see them anymore. “*They* are not. Ronan is sending confusing signals, but he’s not into me any more than the rest.”

“Okay. If you say so. But are you into him?”

I’m into all of them. That’s the first thing that comes to mind. And I quickly edge that out faster than I can blink.

It’s not true.

It’s not going to happen.

And I probably need to order a vibrator online or something to get my head out of smutville.

I remember the Cinnabon delights and dig in the bag for them, only to find Aunt Darby grinning guiltily.

“You ate them, didn’t you?”

“We’ll get more on the way home. I had to do something to keep busy with all that tension going on between you and those boys. If this doesn’t work out with Brewster, I need to get on Tinder, STAT.”

“Let’s get out of here. Next thing we know, you’ll be hooking up with any old man you see and that is just not acceptable.”

She laughs and we stand up and fold the blanket. “I’m not that bad,” she says, winking.

“Uh-huh.”

“Darby?” We turn around and Brewster is walking toward us. “I thought that was you.”

“Hey! We thought we’d come enjoy dinner by the water,” she says.

He makes a face when he sees the bags from Taco Bell in my hands. “Wish I’d seen you out here sooner, before you ingested that gut ache waiting to happen.”

“Best gut ache ever,” I say, grinning.

He laughs. “Come over for a glass of wine?” he asks my aunt.

She looks at me and I nod. “I can walk home from here. Go ahead.”

“I’d be happy to drive you home, Darby,” Brewster offers. “That way Lennon wouldn’t have to walk...”

“That sounds lovely,” she says.

She turns and gives me a crazy excited face, and I have to restrain myself from telling her to play it a bit cooler. What do I know about getting a boyfriend? I had a relationship last year that lasted all of three months...and ended as soon as we’d had sex exactly five times. I was the one to end it, but still. It’s not exactly like it was the end of the world for either one of us. Aunt Darby just seems so *eager*.

Instead, I turn and walk toward her car and drive the short distance home. When I pull in the driveway, I notice Abel sitting in his SUV and watching the house. What the hell? I get out of the car and head straight for him. He stares at me through the window and when I get close, he opens the door and steps out, looking down at me.

“What are you doing here?”

“Did you see your father die, Lennon?” His hands clasp in front of him and he looks like an imposing pillar standing over me.

“Why would you ask me that?” My voice shakes, which makes me so angry, but I cross my arms over my chest to hide the shiver that goes down

my spine.

“Answer me, please.”

“When did you turn into such a bastard?” I snap.

“I’d think you’d remember the approximate time.”

I gulp hard and try to calm my racing heart and shaky hands. “I have an idea of when, but it doesn’t add up. It doesn’t feel like enough for all of this—not after what we went through. Do you remember how hard you’d laugh at me at—” I stumble past the word *camp* and decide to skip over it entirely, shaking my head. “That one night when I fell and couldn’t stand up because the snow was so deep, and then you took my hand to help me, and you got stuck and then fell on top of me. I’ve never laughed so hard in my life, before or since.”

“I don’t want to go down memory lane with you, Lennon.”

Even more than his hurtful words, the way he looks at me is a dagger in my side. Like he’d love nothing more than to make me bleed.

“Just answer the question, please.”

“No,” I whisper quietly.

“Why can’t you just answer me? Stop being so difficult.” His jaw is clenched, and he runs his hand through his long hair. I stare at the silky strands and take a step back.

“That’s my answer. I didn’t find him. My aunt did and she made sure I didn’t have to see what he’d done to himself.”

“What do you mean? He killed himself?” He closes the space between us, and I don’t flinch, even though my heart does.

“Why does it matter?”

“Why wasn’t it in the news? A man like your father—it seems like they’d still be talking about it.”

“I think it’s the only way his connections helped him in the end. It seemed like he’d lost them all, but Aunt Darby asked that it stay private, and it did.”

He puzzles over this, turning toward his car and leaning against it.

“What is this about, Abel?”

He’s quiet for a long moment and when he looks at me, his eyes are chilling. “If I find out you are lying, I will make you suffer more than you could ever imagine.”

I swallow hard, the tears coming to my eyes despite how hard I’m fighting to not show him.

“Why would I lie about this? Stay out of my way, Abel,” I say. “I don’t know who you are anymore, and I don’t like who I’m seeing, but I’m not the same sweet, pliant girl you knew before either...”

He stalks over so fast, his chest against mine in seconds. “I know you’re a Gentry and I will show you no mercy. The past is just that...in the past.”

I’m shaking as we stand there and stare at each other, our chests rising and falling and colliding. His eyes fall to my lips, and he shakes his head in disgust.

He turns and walks to his car, and when he’s in his seat, I yell, “You’re the one living in the past from where I’m standing. If you want to live in the present, it shouldn’t matter who the hell I am. Stay. Out. Of. My. Way.”

He slams the door shut and speeds off into the night, while I stare after him wondering what the fuck happened to Abel Wright.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The snow is melting, and the nights have been more bearable as far as the cold goes, but Jordan has gotten more aggressive again since Abel has been gone. We haven't worked with other groups much lately, staying on the far side of the property so we can be closer to the school. I don't know how we managed to get back to the classroom—once you're doing the heavy labor, it seems you're always destined to do the heavy labor.

Each day I can't believe this hellhole exists. I hate my parents with more of a passion than I knew possible. And yet, the thought of going home is not an option. I don't know whether staying under the radar is the best approach or doing just enough to be problematic...so I live in a constant state of uncertainty.

I miss the guys. I worry constantly about Abel, terrified that he won't come back, or worse, that something could have happened to him. I can't let my mind go to that dark place, but in the night, when I'm sleeping, that's where it goes.

I wake up screaming, the images of him lying bloody still fresh in my mind, and I feel the slap on my face without seeing it coming.

"Shut up, bitch," Jordan stands over me and then leans in my face, his hands reaching out to squeeze my throat.

I kick and yell and he clamps one hand over my mouth, as he straddles me...

I sit up, sweat pouring out of me. I can't breathe and my heart feels like it's

going to break out of my chest. I turn on the light and get up, throwing one of my blankets around me.

My feet pad softly across the floor as I head to the kitchen, putting hot water on to boil. While I'm waiting, I go back to the hall and frown when I see Aunt Darby's door open and the light on next to her bed.

I walk toward the bedroom and her bed is still made.

"Aunt Darby?" I call, in case she's in the bathroom.

No answer.

I go back to the kitchen and look at the clock on the stove. *3:43 a.m.*

Shit.

The teapot screams and I jump. I rush through the steps of making a cup of tea and take it to my room, checking my phone for messages.

Looks like I missed one from her around midnight.

I'm going to stay the night. EEP. LENNON!!!! I'll see you in the morning. Love you.

Great. She's not rushing things at all.

I fluff my pillows up behind me and sit back, sipping on my tea and trying to think of something besides an empty house, another Aunt Darby relationship, or my dream.

When I finish my tea and feel a little calmer, I try to go back to sleep. I hear every sound in the house and the creaks of the house shifting. Right before my alarm is supposed to go off, I drift into sleep, only to be jolted awake and more exhausted than before.

It's gonna be a long day.

As usual, I feel their eyes on me, but none of them speak to me all morning, which is fine by me. It's less stressful that way. But at lunch, Cade walks toward me, his smile breaking across his whole face, and the guys intercept before he reaches the table, moving into place where he'd planned on sitting. The disappointment on his face is obvious and Wells laughs at him, saying, "Next time, try to save our seat a little sooner, thanks."

Cade's cheeks turn splotchy, and he glares at Wells before moving toward the hockey table. Abel sits directly across from me, and Wells and Ronan flank me on either side.

"Is Darby not taking care of you?" Abel asks.

"What?" I put my fork down—sadly, because the pasta around here is delicious. I frown at him. "Can you please stop talking in riddles and just get to the point?"

“I feel I’ve been very *to the point*,” he says. “Is your aunt a good guardian?”

“Why are you asking this?”

“You’re not the one asking questions, Lennon,” he says under his breath in that way that makes me squeeze my legs together and also go hot with fury. “Answer the question.”

“None of your business.” I pick up my fork and continue eating, while I feel his anger level rising. I smile at my food and act like they’re not there.

“Seems like you’re alone a lot,” Wells says. I turn to look at him and he’s leveling Abel with a look that says *I’ve got this*.

“You guys are spying on me?” Damn them for forcing my food to get cold. I set the fork down again and look at each one of them. Wells looks his usual amount of amused and nonchalant, although the dimples are fighting for dominance. Ronan is avoiding eye contact altogether. And Abel looks like he wants to eat me for lunch just so he can spew me out in disgust.

“Don’t act surprised—you’re up to something and we’ve made no secret that as long as you’re here, you’re ours. That includes knowing about Darby.” Abel clasps his hands in front of him, his hair falling into one eye and casting a shadow across his face.

I rub my hand over my arm, trying to ignore the chill in the air.

“I’m eighteen. My aunt and I are close. We take care of each other. It’s been hard, but things will be better now that she has a job.”

Abel’s jaw clenches and his eyes darken into a mossy green. It’s hard to not appreciate his beauty even when he’s become such a bastard.

“Tell us...what kind of *hardships* have you had to endure, Lennon Mae Gentry?” Now I do shiver because the contempt in his voice is impossible to ignore.

“Abel,” Wells warns, looking around, smiling at the girls who are walking toward the table. One I haven’t met yet sits on the other side of him and starts chatting happily about seeing him at the lake the day before. I get a twinge in my gut and decide to keep eating to tame the hunger or rage or... jealousy.

Ever sits down next to Abel and looks at me. “Are you okay, Lennon?”

“She’s fine. She was just going to tell us how hard her life has been. What’s it like to lose a multimillion-dollar empire?” he says, his voice low and seductive, like a snake.

“You’d have to ask my father that, and as you know, you’re too late to do

that. The empire was never mine.”

He scoffs, his full red lips pouty. “Please. Don’t expect me to believe you don’t have a stash of it hidden somewhere.”

“Is that what this is about? You want more of my money?”

He leans in, his eyes flashing. “I want *everything* you took from me.”

I look at my plate, the pasta no longer appetizing. I stand up and grab my things, and I only look at Abel when I say, “I could say the same to you.”

I can tell it’s not what he expected to hear from me, but that’s not much comfort as I walk away.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

When Aunt Darby gets home from work, she leans against my doorjamb and waits for me to notice her, sighing loudly when I don't immediately.

I glance over, startled, and quickly close the tab on my laptop.

Aunt Darby flings her arms up to the ceiling and beams at me. "It is a glorious day to be alive," she sings.

"You're awfully...happy," I mutter.

"Someone has to be around here," she says. She straightens and tones down her megawatt smile. "Okay, let's start over. How was your day? Is it going better at school?"

I put my head in my hands and groan. "Just tell me what you're so happy about and let's get it over with. Spare me the minute details."

"Last night was amazing," she starts.

"Okay, that's enough." I get up as she protests and walk over to her, my hands on her arms. "I love you, but I do not want to hear about sex with Brewster. I'm happy if you're happy, just please do not get your heart broken."

"He wants to see me again tonight," she says, her voice breathy. Her hands clasp across her chest and it's a good thing I love her, because I really cannot take it when she goes swoony damsel on me. It's happened more times than I can count, although this has been a record in the speed department. High school boyfriend must hold more power over her than it ever will on me.

I think about my conversation with Abel today. The truth of it is Aunt Darby and I have always lived separate lives, even in Texas. Even when my dad was wasting away in front of us, drinking the days into oblivion, Aunt

Darby did her thing, and I did mine. We look out for one another, but we don't suffocate each other.

I wouldn't want it any other way.

When I was a kid, it might have been nice to have a parental figure in my life who acted like they cared, and when Aunt Darby came in and out of the picture, she filled that role more than my parents ever had.

"I just never dreamed it could be like this. All the feelings rushed right back, as if they'd never left. Better even, if that's possible."

I should probably keep my mouth shut, but I just can't. "This is just even more rushed than usual for you. Are you sure you can't play hard to get a little bit? Keep him thinking about you tonight...make him wonder if you had *that* great of a time last night. Because he broke up with you once upon a time, right? And he married someone else. Doesn't that *sting* a little bit? Shouldn't he have to work harder to get you back than this?"

She looks at me, eyes wide and a bit crestfallen. Shit.

"Can you please just be happy for me?" she finally says. "I worry about you too, you know. The closest relationships you've ever had are with those boys and I worry if that doesn't go the way you're hoping, you will close your heart to love. You deserve love, Lennon."

Now I'm the one staring at her. "I guess we both have a lot of unresolved feelings to work through with our past relationships," I finally say.

"I think you're right." She sighs, and I feel bad for dragging her mood down to mine. "I'll watch my back if you promise to watch yours. Brewster might have broken my heart, but I hope I am forgiving enough to give someone a second chance when they want one. I believe you want that too—otherwise, you wouldn't be back in Minnesota."

She leaves my room and goes to hers, shutting the door. I hear the shower running a little bit later and when I come back out to see what she'd like for dinner, there's a note on the counter with a twenty-dollar bill.

Went out. Love you.

I hate having words with Aunt Darby, and I know I won't be able to think about anything else if I stay in this house. I don't think she's mad at me—she never is—but I'd be sick of my downer shit too if I were her. I swipe the twenty and head out of the house, wishing my car was fixed. I head toward the trailer park where Ever lives and text her first to see which one is hers.

She answers back in less than a minute.

Ever~ I'm so sorry I'm not home! My sister and I are at the grocery

store. Give me a half hour and I'll be there.

I text her back. **No worries. I'm grabbing food and will probably go to bed early. We can plan something another day.**

Ever~ Aw. :(Okay. Promise?

I promise.

I'm almost to the main drag that has all the cute shops and restaurants overlooking the water, when an SUV pulls up next to me. I groan.

When the window rolls down, Wells grins at me. Abel is driving and Ronan and Bishop are in the backseat.

"Hop in," Wells says.

I shake my head and keep walking. The SUV rolls along next to me and I turn to see if they're holding up traffic. No, it seems everyone is either walking around the lake or at one of the restaurants...or at home with their family. I picture Aunt Darby at the table with Brewster, Cade, and Cassie in the background, and walk faster.

The car stops and Ronan hops out of the car, falling easily into step next to me as the car waits.

"Are you guys following me? This is getting creepy."

"No. We saw you walking, and we have room. We're going to Maverick's—wanna come?"

"So, you're being nice to me now?" I frown.

"Wasn't I nice the last time we saw each other?"

"Yes, but Abel and Bishop still hate me."

"Forget them. Just act like you're with me and ignore them."

I roll my eyes and he reaches out, touching my arm. "Have you eaten?"

"No."

"Okay, then come eat with us."

I don't know what possesses me to say yes, but I turn and walk back with Ronan, climbing in when he opens the door. It's spacious in this vehicle, but Bishop and Ronan are so tall, their legs take up most of the space. They've got the man sprawl going on too, so when my thigh brushes against Bishop's, I stiffen and overcompensate too far toward Ronan, causing the same thing to happen. My cheeks heat, and the car is silent as we drive toward the restaurant.

"Well, this is awkward," Bishop says. "Can you just drop me off at Julio's? I need a drink."

"You can get a drink at Maverick's. You're going," Wells says, pointing

at Bishop.

“You can drop me off at Taco Bell,” I say. “That sounds way more fun than this.”

Wells turns around to look at me and pretends to be wounded. “And I thought we were getting along so well.”

Abel looks at him and Wells looks out the front, his ears turning red. I can’t even pretend to guess what’s going on between them, but it seems like Abel’s not happy with Wells. I’d wonder if it had anything to do with me, but I doubt I’ll ever know.

When we pull into the parking lot of Maverick’s, Abel turns off the vehicle and turns to look at me. “Do you want to fuck Ronan?” he asks.

The sun is glinting through the windshield and making his eyes look even lighter than usual. He looks angry. Typical.

I look at Ronan and his expression is unreadable. His mouth parts, and for a second, I think he might kiss me. But then his eyes close back up, that wall comes back between us, and I turn to Abel, shaking my head.

“What’s your deal with asking questions that are none of your business?”

“When will you understand that you are our business?”

“It’s me you want, right?” Wells says, laughing. “We’ve had this weird banter since you got in town, and we had that sexy vibe on the beach.”

“If you call being an asshole *weird banter*, and me beating you in volleyball sexy, then yes, I guess that much is true.”

He holds his heart like he’s been shot. “You wound me.”

“Enough of this shit. The three of you are circling Lennon like she’s a dog in heat,” Bishop says, and Abel’s face goes stony.

“You think you’re not, *Mr. Ellison*?” Abel says.

Bishop groans and my cheeks are now on fire.

“Are we going to eat or not?” I ask.

“For the record,” Abel says, “I will never touch you, but I am curious about which one of us does it for you.”

I motion for Ronan to open the door and to my surprise he listens and gets out, holding his hand out to help me out.

“Manners go a long way,” I tell Abel. “But I don’t need a fucktoy, thank you.”

Ronan snorts and puts his hand on my back as we walk inside the restaurant. The rest of them file in a few minutes later and when we’re seated, we all stare at each other in the half-circle booth.

This was a mistake.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

I sit between Wells and Ronan and the night does get better. Students and parents keep saying hi to *Mr. Ellison* and Abel sits on the other corner acting like he's too good to be at our table.

Bishop has a beer that the waitress is staying on top of, and I notice that Wells keeps taking sips of it and Bishop never complains about it. He's not as all *rules and propriety* twenty-four seven as he seems.

From the way the town of Sikoma is so in awe of *The Valiant*, treating them like the local celebrities, they'd probably give Wells his own beer if he asked, underage or not.

Wells turns to me, and his dimples pop out. Damn. It's jarring how well those things work.

"I'm hurt that you didn't feel that moment between us," he says.

I laugh. "When? Where?"

"Every time we talk." He reaches out and runs his fingers across my arm, leaving a slew of chills dancing across my skin.

My eyes narrow at him, and I stop his hand from moving. "You have sent such conflicting messages since the first day I saw you. You act like you don't know me, you act like you hate me, you act like you like me...what's real with you, Wells?"

"Wells likes to play hard to get, but he's been panting after you since he saw you in the school office," Ronan says, laughing when Wells glares at him. "What, like you're gonna deny that?" Ronan puts his arm around me, sliding me closer to him. "And I have to say, dancing with you the other night was—" He nods and doesn't finish that sentence.

"Are you being serious right now?" I look at both of them, ignoring the

other two altogether because the level of confusion they'd add to this conversation would be combustion-level. "You're messing with me, right? This is some sort of prank-Lennon-time or something?"

Wells leans in and I shiver when he whispers in my ear. "Abel keeps saying you're ours, and the more I think about that idea, the more I like it. Of course, Bishop will be hard to win over, but—"

I think Bishop heard that part because I can hear his scoff from here even though I haven't taken my eyes off of Wells.

"You guys are so hot and cold. I don't know what to make of any of this. Pretty sure I shouldn't believe a word coming out of your mouth."

Wells nods like I've just said the most serious thing, and yet his eyes are twinkling. Pretty much his standard look since I've known him. "I can see why you'd think that, but then we danced. You felt that heat, I know you did."

"Let me out."

"What?" He frowns.

"Let me out of the booth."

"But you haven't eaten."

"I've lost my appetite."

"Come on," he argues. "Hear me out."

"I've heard enough."

"Please. Eat something. We don't have to talk more about it tonight."

I stop trying to scoot out and stare at him. "Promise?"

"Jeez, if I'd known the thought of being with me disgusted you so much, I would've never brought it up," he says it as if he's teasing, but it's tinged with hurt.

Which just makes me more confused.

When my French dip comes, my appetite returns. I take a few bites and it's delicious. The fries are too.

"Are you glad you stayed?" Ronan asks.

"I am," I say. I smile and even feel somewhat happy.

"Our girl just needed a little food in her," Wells says.

"Not your girl," I mutter.

Ronan laughs. "Back off, Wells."

Wells takes a huge bite of his burger and scowls at both of us. I laugh then and the whole table seems to lighten up when I do. Even Bishop and Abel. They don't talk to us or act like we're even there except the occasional

hard glance, but they seem more comfortable than when we first sat down.

I eat everything on my plate and when our waitress comes around asking if anyone wants dessert, I say yes.

The four guys turn and look at me as if surprised, and I shrug. “What? I like to eat.”

“You never eat this much at school,” Wells says. “It’s awesome. You’re just so tiny, I worried you weren’t getting enough to eat at home.”

Abel looks at Wells like he wants to kill him, and I swallow hard, pulling the twenty out of my pocket.

“I don’t think my scholarship includes the ala carte options, so I stick to the basics, which are pretty good...just smaller portions. But not tonight! Aunt Darby is out, and her guilt is paying for this dinner.”

“Why is she guilty?” Abel asks.

I glance at him, surprised. I wouldn’t have thought he was even listening to the conversation with the way he’s been focused on his salmon.

“She’s out with Brewster Vandenberg again tonight.”

The guys exchange looks and I’m about to ask what that’s about when my chocolate brownie with ice cream and syrup comes out and I’m too invested in its deliciousness.

I lose track of time and everything around me as I eat the best thing I’ve had in a long time. Neither Aunt Darby or I are great cooks and besides dinner at the Vandenberg’s the other night, I can’t say I’ve had excellent food in years. I mean, unless you count Taco Bell. Before we lost everything, my parents had a chef and there was never a time that I went hungry...until Camp Capitree. And this restaurant isn’t even what most would call fine dining, but wow. I must have been hungry.

“You ate that whole thing,” Wells says in awe.

“Sorry, did you want a bite?”

“I am hard as a fucking rock right now just watching you eat. Nah, I’m good.” Wells shakes his head, his mouth pulling down on the sides.

My face flushes and I look around the table. Bishop’s cheeks are pink in the center and when I catch his eye, he hurriedly looks away. Ronan’s eyes burn into mine and he licks his lips, almost as if he’s tasting the chocolate from my mouth. Wells shifts in his seat, and I try not to imagine what he has going on down below at the moment. And Abel. His pouty lips are wet like he’s just licked them, and his hands are clenched into fists so tight that his knuckles are white.

I swallow hard and wipe my mouth with the napkin.

Abel stands and throws his napkin on the table. "Let's get out of here."

I look around for the waitress and she's at a table across the room.

"I already paid...while you were in your foodgasm over there," he says.

I hold out the twenty-dollar bill and he stares at it a few long moments before looking up at me and shaking his head.

"It's on us," he says. But those words sound like he's practically choking on them.

I laugh. "No, really. I don't need you to buy my dinner."

He turns and walks away, leaving me standing there with my mouth open. What was that? Wells and Ronan flank me on either side and we walk out of the restaurant. Bishop gets in the front seat this time, leaving me between Wells and Ronan. I don't know how they would've had a chance to plan that, but Bishop must've been listening in more than I thought too. Either that or he just can't stand the thought of sitting next to me in such close space again.

The lights are off when Abel pulls into my driveway.

"When does your aunt usually get home?" Ronan asks.

"Uh, she didn't come home last night, so...your guess is as good as mine."

"How about we come in for a few minutes, just make sure you're comfortable?" Wells says, grinning. "I'd like to see what your room looks like."

I roll my eyes and lift a shoulder. "Sure. It's not much, but sure."

Abel turns off the car and I'm shocked when all of them step out of the car.

"Oh, okay, so we're all doing this? Okay," I say under my breath.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

You would think my tiny house was the most fascinating thing they've ever seen, the way they are taking everything in. Bishop stares out the windows... each window, as if the perimeter of my small yard is going to expose him for being in my house. Or maybe he's just interested in our landscaping or the lack thereof?

Abel is studying the few pictures Aunt Darby set out when we got here. They wouldn't have been my first choice or really a choice at all. There's a family picture of a time when she visited. It was before my mom left, and it was one of the happier times I can remember. It was before I was sent to Camp Capitree and it's one of the few family pictures where I'm smiling. The other picture is of Aunt Darby and me at Galveston. We'd gone for the weekend before all the money disappeared, just the two of us. It was a fun trip. We laid out on the beach all day, shopped the touristy shops, and ate at the seafood and Tex-Mex places. I hadn't wanted to go home, and in the picture of us, we're both in our bikinis and smiling bigger than I can remember ever smiling.

Abel stares at both pictures for a long time, so long it's unsettling.

Ronan sticks close, watching them and watching me. Wells is in my room when I walk in there, sitting on my bed and looking around.

"This is not the kind of room I imagined you in," he says.

"What did you expect?"

He throws his arm out and I glance at the bed without a headboard, the lack of pictures, the nightstand with a phone charger and nothing else.

"There's nothing that shows your personality anywhere. At camp, I imagined your room at home with stuffed animals and trophies and pictures

with all your friends and family.”

“I didn’t have many friends and didn’t do anything that would warrant a trophy. I did like stuffed animals though.” I grin and glance around my sad room. My comforter is a grey one we found at the thrift store. It looked brand new, so it’s not ratty or anything, but it’s not what I would’ve picked out if I could’ve gotten something I liked.

“Where are they now?” he asks.

“Where are what now?” I ask, distracted.

“The stuffed animals. The colorful...anything.”

I remember the way they smelled, burning, and I wrap my arms around myself. I don’t want to talk about my father with them, but I know I’ll have to eventually if I’m going to learn anything. “My father burned them.”

His eyes narrow on me, and Ronan stiffens next to me. “Why would he do that?” Wells asks.

I shrugged. “Because he knew I loved them.”

I see a flash of pity across Wells’ face, which is the last thing I want, but it’s gone in the next moment. He jumps up, his expression unreadable, and leaves the room. I hear the bathroom door shut and Ronan touches my elbow, turning me toward him.

“There’s so much we don’t know about you, isn’t there, Lennon?” he says. His hand clasps my cheek and I lean into it, closing my eyes for a second. When I open them, he’s standing closer, and I take a step closer too, unable to deny the pull between us. “I want to know everything,” he whispers.

His head lowers and when his full lips touch mine, my knees buckle and he grabs my waist, steadying me. It’s dizzying and grounding at once, the sensation of his mouth as he deepens the kiss, and the way he’s pulling me against him, as if nothing can come between us. I lose myself in the kiss, my hands loving the feel of his fade and the longer curls on top between my fingers. He groans into my mouth, and I can’t get close enough. I wish I could crawl into him and never lose this feeling. He backs us into the wall, gripping my thigh and wrapping it around his, thrusting just enough to make me feel the pressure against my heat. I moan and then jump when Wells speaks.

“I leave the room for three minutes and this is what happens?” He sounds hurt and I stare at Ronan for a second before looking at Wells. Ronan takes a step back and my leg drops to the floor.

“I’d hoped I’d get to kiss you first,” Wells says, grinning and stepping closer. He reaches out, his thumb gliding over my bottom lip. “So beautiful,” he whispers.

“I thought you’d seen better,” I remind him of what he said to me on the first day of school.

He laughs. “So that did bother you. I would’ve never known.”

Ronan puts his hand on my chin and turns it from Wells’. “Say the word and I’ll get this bastard to leave.”

Wells gasps like he’s offended. “At least let me watch.”

I swallow hard, unsure of how to process any of this. “It’s probably best you both leave. All leave,” I add.

Abel walks in then. The anger surrounds him like lightning ready to strike. Great. Just what I need.

“You lied to us.”

Not what I expected him to say. I don’t know why I thought he might be jealous about the kiss too, but it’s obvious he’d give me a thorough shaking or worse right now if he could.

I step closer to Ronan, who puts his arm around my waist.

“What are you talking about, man?” Ronan asks.

He holds up one of Aunt Darby’s red folders. “This house is a cover. I’ve been racking my brain trying to figure out why you wouldn’t be using your trust fund money.” He throws the file, and the papers go flying out. “You don’t need to—this house is paid for by Vandenberg. He’s paying for your education too, isn’t he?”

I’m shaking my head before he stops talking. “No, that’s not true.”

But I bend down and pick up the first paper I can reach. It’s the deed to this house and it does in fact have Brewster’s signature. My aunt’s name isn’t mentioned once, and I look through the other papers, wondering if Abel’s right about my so-called scholarship as well. I get on my knees to reach all the papers, scooping them up as fast as I can.

“Get out,” I tell them.

“We’re not getting out until you tell us the truth,” Abel says.

Bishop speaks up then and I didn’t even realize he’d be so close. “We should go. It’s not the right time for this, Abel. Not yet.”

Abel asks as if Bishop hasn’t spoken. “How long have you been working with Vandenberg?”

I keep looking through the paperwork, and I can’t find anything about

Loxley Prep. I'm surprised my aunt even left the deed where it could be found. She's obviously worked hard to keep me from knowing she was already with Brewster.

Finally, I look up. "Where did you find this? Show me."

Abel crosses his arms, not budging. I get up and walk past him and into Darby's room. I go through her dresser, her nightstand, nothing like this anywhere. And then I go to her closet and when after one quick sweep, I still don't see anything, I pull back her clothes and that's when I see the slight change in the wall behind her suitcase. I move that and move the loose board, finding a small space holding a gun, a jewelry box that has a massive engagement ring in it, and apparently this file.

My hands are shaking as I stare at the ring, thinking of how much it's worth and how many times we've gone hungry. How often the power went off when we lived in Texas. The times I couldn't get what I needed for school because there was no money. Why would she do this to me?

I get up and turn around, startled to see all four of the guys staring at me. Ronan looks sympathetic, Wells looks leery, Bishop seems like this is the last place he wants to be, and Abel looks like a stone wall. Ronan steps forward and puts his hand on my shoulder.

"What's going on?" I ask.

"That's what I'm waiting for you to tell us," Abel says.

"I didn't know," I whisper. "I didn't know about any of this."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Abel stalks toward me, his eyes blazing. “Enough of your innocent act,” he seethes. He puts his hand on my neck and advances us backward until I’m hitting the clothes. His mouth brushes against my ear and I shiver, hating that my body is reacting to this as strongly as it did to Ronan’s kiss. “I’m so fucking sick of you acting like you’re struggling. You don’t know the meaning of the word struggle. You’re a liar. Just like your fucking father.”

“Abel, back the fuck off,” Ronan says. “Let her go or I’ll hand you your ass on a fucking platter.”

Abel doesn’t move for what feels like an eternity, but then his hand drops and he steps back, chest heaving. He runs his hand through his hair and looks at me with such venom, I can’t think straight. I try to take a deep breath and get my thoughts together before speaking.

“I had no idea my aunt was in touch with Brewster before we moved here. I’m so *furious* she lied to me,” my voice cracks, “but I don’t see why any of this should matter to you. What do you care whether we’re here on someone else’s dime or not?”

“You’re playing a part, and I want to know why,” he says.

I fling my arms to the side. “I’m not. This is me. I am still the girl you knew at camp.” I flinch when he takes a step toward me, and Ronan holds him back. “Why does that make you so angry? It’s the truth. You’re the one who doesn’t want to remember that!”

“I remember everything,” he says, and it’s there, a small fracture of control, a crevice widening to expose the pain. It’s gone in his next sentence. “Here’s what I think. I think you’re pretending to be poor in hopes of softening us. And you and your aunt came to expose us for whatever part you

think we played in bringing your father down.”

“I admit to wanting to know why you went so far in taking everything we had, but only because I want answers, not because I want to ruin you!”

Abel turns and looks at the others and his voice is deadly. “I told you she came for vengeance.”

Wells scoffs. “If she wanted vengeance, she wouldn’t have had her tongue down Ronan’s throat.”

Abel looks surprised by that and even angrier, if that’s possible.

“What happened to you, Abel?” I ask quietly. “That’s why I’m here. Yes, my aunt forced the issue, but I agreed to it when I knew you guys were here because I wanted to understand. That’s all. I don’t want vengeance.” I wish my damn voice would stop cracking. “I swear to you I don’t.”

“I believe her,” Ronan says.

Abel shakes his head. “Your dick believes her.”

“I believe her too,” Wells says. “We were still kids when we left camp—we should’ve found a way to talk to her then instead of assuming the worst.”

The hurt of how they’d turned on me feels like it’s happening all over again, and I just need them to leave. Now.

“I need you to go,” I say. “I’ll talk about this with you more, but I need you to go *now*.”

Bishop is the last one I expect to take my side. He puts his hand on Abel’s shoulder. “Let’s go, Abel. Listen to her.”

“You’re taking her side too? What the fuck has she done to you?” Abel spits out, turning incredulously to Bishop.

“I don’t know if I believe her or not, but look at her. We’re not gonna get any further with this tonight.”

Abel seems to hear that. I’m surprised when he turns and walks out of the room. It’s the last thing I expected him to do. I don’t know when it’ll get through my head that I don’t know them anymore either. I can’t predict anything about any of them. Bishop follows him, and Wells and Ronan both hesitate, looking at me with varying levels of confusion and regret.

“We’ll talk about all of this later,” Wells says. “Abel will come around.”

I shake my head. “I don’t see that happening.”

Ronan leans down and kisses my cheek. “Whether he does or not, I believe you. Abel just has more shit from his past to deal with than the rest of us. But we’ll help him see.”

“You don’t need to do anything on my behalf. I don’t want to get between

you guys.”

Wells grins, his dimples a shot of sunshine. “You’re already between us, Lionheart. You always have been.”

With that, they leave, and I hear the front door click. I look at the papers in the folder, none of it telling me all I want to know. I vacillate on how to approach this with Aunt Darby, and around midnight when she still isn’t home, I put the folder back in the wall behind her suitcase and hope that it’s laying the way she had it. I think I’ll keep my knowledge to myself for a little longer and see if I can figure out why she’d go to such lengths to lie to me.

The fact that she spent another night with him after seemingly only a few days of them dating again—it doesn’t seem like she’s trying too hard to hide that they could’ve been dating before. Maybe she thinks I’m too distracted by the guys to notice, but my conversations with her have been all about trying to get her to slow down. Joke’s on me, I guess, that she’s apparently had an ongoing relationship with Brewster for who knows how long...

It’s another short night of too little sleep. I throw on my running clothes when I see that I have time before school, and head toward the lake.

This time I see him before he sees me, running just ahead. As I get closer, I can tell when he knows I’m close. His shoulders tighten and he throws a look over his shoulder, one that says go to hell.

Right back at you, Mr. Ellison.

Every time I think a hateful thought toward Bishop, I’m sent flailing into the past, the tall boy with dark wavy hair and the kind grey-blue eyes.

“I haven’t seen you for weeks.”

I turn and see Bishop, a bag of cement on his back. I’m impressed he can lift it, the ninety-plus pound bags taking two of us to carry in my group.

I set down the wood I was about to put in place on the dock and rush to him.

“Any word?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “I’m getting scared,” he whispers. “What if he doesn’t come back?”

“We’ll go find him. We should leave and start looking now.”

“I can’t risk something happening to you if we get caught,” he says.

One of the guards starts walking toward us, so he moves away quickly, but not before he says, “Miss you, Lionheart.”

My eyes fill with tears, but it's the good kind. And I need that sweetness to get me through the day, because within the hour, everything turns upside down.

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CHAPTER THIRTY

Bishop

I was five when my little brother was born, and it was the best day of my life. Even at that age, I remember the loneliness in our house. When he came, that changed for me. I took care of him every chance I was allowed to, a nanny usually the only one getting in my way. I lugged him on my hip, or he crawled after me, always moving in super speed, even as a baby. He always had way more energy than I'd ever had, and it became a challenge to keep him busy and out of trouble.

When he started getting in trouble at school, I didn't take it too seriously at first, but my dad's temper was short and with his aspirations to be school superintendent, he became even more agitated over every little thing Wells got into.

Now that we're at Camp Capitree, I've never been prouder of my little brother. He hasn't hit his growth spurt yet, but he's keeping up with all of us and with the biggest smile on his face.

I have Abel and Ronan to thank for that...and Lennon.

I never thought Wells and I needed anyone besides each other, but the things we've gone through at camp together have solidified us for life.

"What are you thinking about?" Lennon asks.

We're rushing to cover the wood before it snows. Even when Lennon is moving quickly, she's taking the time to check on someone else. It's a gift she has.

“I was trying to remember the name of this book that had a snake that was so funny.”

She shivers. “I hate snakes.”

“Have you ever held one?”

“No, and I would never.”

I laugh. “Well, now I really need to remember the name of that book so you can be won over to snakes. They’re not all bad, you know.”

“I will leave that knowing to you,” she says, and I tweak the end of her nose.

She flushes and it sends a jolt straight to my heart. Okay, my dick. It’s hard to tell the fucking difference. She looks older than she is and it’s about to kill me. At sixteen, I know it’s wrong to be so crazy about a twelve-year-old, but isn’t everything fucked up about this situation? I should be having sex in the back of my car, sneaking alcohol or a vape pen past my parents, and I never even got to enjoy a goddamn blowjob from Kelsey at school. I’ve wasted so much time trying to do the right thing and here I am freezing my balls off, the highlight of my life making Lennon blush.

Besides the guilt I feel over my thoughts about her, I’m just relieved she’s here. She makes everything better. Not just for me, but for all of us. She has a way of calming Wells down without even realizing it. If it weren’t for her, I’m sure he would’ve been sent to solitary at least a dozen times by now. He loves everything about her. And that makes me love her all the more. She’s a topic when the four of us are in our tent more often than not, and sometimes I think she’s the glue keeping us together.

Because this place is not a place any kid deserves to be, “troubled” or not. No one deserves this.

My parents haven’t visited once. Abel talks about emancipating from his parents. When I’m eighteen, it won’t matter what they enforce on me, I won’t have to listen, but I need to play everything by the book so I can take Wells with me when we leave our parents’ house...if we ever get out of here.

Some days it feels like that will never happen.

“What do you miss most about being out?” Lennon asks.

“Books.”

“Me too,” she cries. “Well, that’s just one of the things I miss, but I really miss them. And cupcakes. French fries.”

“Steak,” I throw out.

My stomach growls and she looks at me apologetically.

“Sorry for bringing up food,” she whispers. Her face flushes and she looks away. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“Did you have a girlfriend?”

God, she’s so pretty. She’s tall for twelve and her breasts are so goddamn distracting. Twelve, twelve, twelve, I remind myself.

“No,” I say, not looking at her. “There was this girl at school, Kelsey, that I was talking to when I left, but there’s no way I’d date her now.”

“Why not?”

“After this, it’s hard to imagine anyone understanding what we’ve been through. I mean, except us, you know? Can you imagine trying to explain what this has really been like? No one would believe us.”

“I know. It’s only been a couple of months, but I’m a different person than I was when I came.”

“Do you ever feel ancient sometimes? All the things I cared about before seem meaningless now.” Although I wouldn’t mind a long drag of a vape when my muscles are screaming.

“Yeah, I hate it here, but you guys make it bearable. More than bearable,” she adds. “I never want to go back,” she whispers.

“Me either.”

I reach out and grab her hand and her eyes fly to mine. It’s not a kiss, but it feels almost as good as what I’d imagine a kiss being like. I glance around and see a guard coming in the distance. I drop her hand and whisper a gruff good night before I lose my mind and kiss her right here.

When I turn to look back, she’s still standing where I left her, her fingers touching her lips.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

After a painful day with longing stares from Wells and Ronan and pointed glares from Bishop and Abel, I'm exhausted when I get home. By the time Aunt Darby gets home, I've rethought my whole *keeping it to myself* plan and have the engagement ring sitting on the counter.

I'm eating a grilled cheese sandwich and carrot sticks when she walks in, and she's chatting nonstop about her day and stops in mid-sentence.

I turn and she's staring at the ring box.

I lift a brow and take a huge bite of my sandwich.

"Care to explain that and the deed to this house belonging to Brewster Vandenberg?"

Her face flushes from her neck to her roots and she opens her mouth and closes it several times before speaking. "I am so sorry, Lennon!" is what finally comes out of her mouth.

"I don't need apologies, just the truth," I say, mouth full. "How long have you been seeing him?"

She looks so worried as she sits down beside me. "We've been talking online for six months. He came to see me twice in Texas, and I came to visit here once."

"So, you had this plan in place before Dad died."

"There's no *plan*, per se. We're in love," she says. She stands up and goes to the fridge to grab a Diet Coke. "Need anything?"

I ignore her question. "There must have been some plan to keep me in the dark and I want to know why."

Her eyes well with tears and she shakes her head. "I didn't want you to worry that I was moving too fast...or for you to talk me out of coming."

“You lied to me.”

She looks crushed. “It’s been so hard to not tell you everything. He wanted to keep it from his kids for a while, but we were missing each other so much. I should’ve never kept it from you—I have *hated* keeping it from you.”

“It would have made the relationship seem a lot more realistic than it has the past few days. Talk about speed-dating. You were setting your own record.”

She sighs. “Yes, I knew we were due a long talk after spending the night with him already. I was afraid of what you’d think if we moved here for a man. But you knew I was interested in him—I never tried to hide that fact. I just failed to mention how serious we already were.” She brightens. “But since you know, we can move out of this cracker box and move in with him.”

“Hell no, I’m not moving in with him.”

Her smile drops and the mood in the room drops right along with it. “You saw what a good man he is. And that ring is not a sign of someone who’s not in it—he loves me, Lennon.” Her lips tremble. “He really loves me. And it’s time we live the way we deserve. We won’t have to worry about money or food or paying the rent on time. You won’t have to work if you don’t want to—you can focus on your grades and boys and living a normal senior life!” She reaches out and takes my hand and squeezes it.

I refuse to yell at her, but my heart is screaming. “I love you and I don’t understand why you’d lie to me about something so important. I’m not comfortable living with him and his kids. I’m sorry, but I just can’t. I’m happy for you if this is as incredible as you say it is, but this is a lot at once.”

She wraps her arms around me. “I’m so sorry, Lennon. I should’ve told you. I hope you’ll come around to the idea of me with Brewster. And help me plan this wedding.” She squeals. “Almost forty and never married—I have to make up for that by having a spectacular wedding.”

I roll my eyes but keep hugging her. My emotions feel like they’re still in whiplash mode.

When we pull away, she’s beaming through her tears. I get up and lean on the counter, needing some distance.

“It’ll be for the best, moving in with Brewster,” she says. “You’ll see. It’s the life you deserve, Lennon. The life we both deserve.”

“Please, can’t I just stay here? I’ll get a job and pay rent.”

She shakes her head. “Oh, lovey, the rent in Sikoma? Even this barely-a-

house is pricier than you'd think. We have a beautiful view of the lake. People pay for that."

I'm embarrassed that I didn't wonder how we were affording this to begin with. I have no idea about real estate here or anywhere. But why didn't I question it more? It seems so obvious now.

"We can move in there, and you can still get a job if you really want to but save it for college. Right? You don't want to spend everything you make on rent if you don't have to."

"Is he paying for my schooling or is the scholarship legit?"

She flushes again and I throw my hands up, glaring up at the ceiling.

"No, no, hear me out. He's not paying for your schooling...*but* he's on the school board and is the reason why you were given a scholarship in the first place. We really have a lot to thank him for, Lennon. And you met him—he's such a great guy. This is a good thing, I promise you." She beams, and I brace myself for whatever is coming next. "I love him. And I'm really glad I can put this ring on my finger now." She laughs. "Well, his kids still don't know yet either, but once I tell him you know, I'm sure he'll be ready to tell his kids."

She slips the ring on her finger and admires it. The thing is monstrous and gaudy and so over-the-top, she's practically orgasmic just looking at it.

"I'm gonna go call Brewster and tell him our news," she says happily. "It's such a relief to have this out in the open now. You should pack up. I have a feeling he'll want us to move in soon. He was never a big fan of us moving in here."

I don't have the words. I stare at her and watch as she bounces off to her bedroom, already calling Brewster. I go to my room and shut the door and do my homework. No way in hell am I packing tonight.

She knocks lightly about an hour later and is still in her hazy glow. "Brewster is going to tell the kids tonight. We can move in this weekend." She grins and backs out of the room, shutting the door behind her.

I imagine sharing a bathroom with Cassie and put a pillow over my head. Fuck my life.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

The week goes downhill from there. Aunt Darby has the house packed up and is just assuming I'm going with her, and I'm trying to exhaust every possible option before I cave. The truth of the matter is, she's right—it's not like I can afford the rent on my own, and even if I got a job this week, which is not looking great at this point, it wouldn't be enough to cover the rent Brewster wants for this place. My car is still not fixed, so I've put in a lot of walking hours applying everywhere. I've covered all of the boutiques lining Main and Prosper, even branching off to Devyn Street to the few shops there. I've also applied at Walmart, the dentist office, and Taco Bell. Oh, and Maverick's. They seemed most likely to call back from Maverick's, but the base pay isn't great. I'd have to hope I killed it on tips, but since I've never waitressed, I'm not sure what that even looks like.

I liked my job at home. I nannied eight-year-old twins after school, and my responsibility was to feed them, find art projects for them to do, make sure they got their homework done, and occasionally throw in laundry. I did the bedtime routine, including the tucking in, and their parents came in promptly at eight thirty to kiss them good night.

I look online to see if any nannying jobs are available, but I don't see the times I would need. They need more of a time commitment than I could give. Ever tells me I should apply at the Italian ice place she works at—I can't remember the name—and I agree to fill out the application when she brings one to school.

I steer clear of the guys for the most part. Ronan tries to talk more than anyone else, Wells too, but I sort of shut them down, letting them know I'm overwhelmed by everything right now. I don't tell them about my upcoming

move, partly because I still don't know if Cade and Cassie know anything about it. Cade is still hanging around and Cassie is still being a bitch, but neither have said a word about my aunt or the move.

Most days I want to scream with how ambiguous everything feels. I don't know who I can trust, what is really going on...half the time, I wonder if I should just go back to Texas and try to make things work there, if I'm going to try to do things on my own. At least it would be less drama than this has been. But as frustrated as I am with my aunt, I can't leave her. She's the only family I have, and she has been so good to me. However misguided I think she is at times, I know she loves me, and we stick together.

It's Thursday and I'm no closer to any answers or resolution to anything, and at lunchtime when I see the basic lunch is chicken fingers and the ala carte options are a piled-high cheeseburger with jalapenos and bleu cheese crumbles as topping possibilities and fries that look better than any restaurant, I say fuck it and get in line for *that*.

And no one stops me.

Which makes me wonder if the lodging option to Loxley Prep would also be available to me. I don't know which kids stay on campus since the few I talk to do not, and the lodging is astronomical. Maybe Brewster got that little house to be their love nest and thought I'd be staying at school. The thought excites me, and I inhale the cheeseburger.

It's the best burger I've had.

I jump up and rush to the office, smiling at Ms. Birdie widely when she looks up. She looks suspicious and I tone it down, reminding her of my name.

"Ah, that's right. Our new student from Texas. How are you liking it at Loxley?"

"It's great," I say with far more excitement than I feel. "As you might know, I'm a scholarship student, and I don't know why I didn't ask this before, but—did that include lodging as well?"

I'm embarrassed that I can't remember more specifics to the paperwork I got months ago. I haven't been able to find it since it first came and part of me wonders if Aunt Darby was hiding that too, hoping I wouldn't leave her alone and move into the dorms.

Ms. Birdie frowns and tilts her head. "I would have to check your records to be one hundred percent, but yes, it usually does. However, I'm afraid you've passed the timeframe and now we are all full. Our lodging fills up fast for those who live outside of Sikoma."

“Would you mind just doing a check to be certain there’s not room for one more person to board here?”

“Has your living situation changed?” she asks, walking to the filing cabinet.

“Yes,” I say quietly, but she’s engrossed in her task and pulls my file out, waving it.

“Here we go,” she says.

She opens it up and it takes everything in me to not reach out and grab it from her so I can read it for myself. She taps the paper and nods but doesn’t say anything. After what seems like forever, she looks up. “Yes, you were given the full scholarship with room and board.”

I know the form I saw didn’t say those exact words. In fact, I remember it saying something like I’d been given a scholarship to attend Loxley Prep and would need a 3.75 GPA to keep my scholarship.

“Does it say anything about my GPA in that letter?” I lean over to peek at the form, and she shakes her head, sitting down and thus causing the form to be out of my line of sight.

“No. Although most scholarships require you to keep a 3.75 GPA at Loxley, this one stipulates that you’ll have a grace period of a year in which to...you know”—she leans in and whispers—“recover from the recent loss you’ve suffered.”

I take a step back, jolted from all of this. “I don’t suppose I could see that, could I? It sounds a lot different than what I remember.”

“Sure, I don’t see why not,” she says, smiling up at me.

She hands me the form and I study it, taking note of all the differences in the letter I saw and this one. To put it bluntly: I can eat all I want, stay in the dorms, coast through this year academically, get free uniforms and textbooks, do all the extracurriculars time allows, and my scholarship will not be threatened. The question is: Why did the letter I see look so different from this—who doctored it, and why?

Ms. Birdie clicks away on her laptop and shakes her head. “Yeah, I’m afraid I was right. We are completely full. I can put you on the waiting list if anyone leaves, if you’d like.”

“Yes, please.”

“Okay, done,” she says after she types away on her laptop. “Oh, I wanted to ask.” She leans in again and whispers. “Is Mr. Ellison treating you better?”

I see Bishop in my mind’s eye, teaching passionately while either cutting

me with his cruel looks or pretending like I'm not even there and shake my head.

“Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. Wells has always been such a sweet boy around here. I hate to hear that you've seen this side of him.”

I feel bad that I leave her thinking poorly of Wells, but I don't clarify that I meant Bishop. I'll never survive here if people know that I have a thing for my teacher. And his three sidekicks.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

I give Ever my application to Hope's Italian Ice before I leave for the day and start the walk home alone. Aunt Darby couldn't pick me up today, and Ever had to rush to work.

"Lennon!"

I turn toward the sound of my name and Cade jogs up behind me. "Hey, need a ride home?"

I've been so deep in thought that I didn't even make it out of the school parking lot yet. "Sure."

I follow him to his red Dodge Viper, and I can tell he's disappointed that I don't go on about it. I'm just here to see what he knows about his dad and my aunt.

I get in the car and look out the window. Abel, Wells, and Ronan are staring at me like I've just chopped off their feet. Incredulous, wounded, and seething. I lift my fingers in a wave and Ronan lifts a hand and drops it quickly, as if he just realized he was cavorting with the devil.

I sigh and stare straight ahead, as Cade turns down his SiriusXM station and glances over at me.

"How's it going? We haven't really gotten to hang out since you were at my house."

"Yeah. It's going."

"Let's grab some food or a coffee or something," he says.

"I'm not really hungry, but you go ahead."

He doesn't know what to do with that and stops in front of Hope's.

"Do you like this place?" he asks.

"I've never been, but Ever works here."

“I think you’ll like it,” he says.

We walk in, and Ever grins when she sees us. She’s helping a customer and we get in line. When it’s our turn, I order a mango ice and Cade orders the mango gelati. I try to pay, and he shoves his money in Ever’s hands. Her eyes widen at me, and I laugh, trying to just go with the flow, even though something about this guy is starting to bug me. He might be a really incredible person, but I’m just not in the mood for anyone being pushy with me about anything right now. I wave bye to Ever and we take our ices to the car and sit inside as we take sips.

“You’re right. I like it,” I admit. “What’s the difference between mine and yours?”

“Mine has the ice and frozen custard. Here, try it.”

He hands me a spoonful of his and I taste it. “Oh, that’s really good.”

He stares at me for a few long seconds and swallows hard. “You’re really pretty.”

I give him the spoon back and stare at my straw.

“Sorry, I keep messing this up,” he says.

“No, I’m sorry. I just—I don’t want you to get the wrong idea. And uh... do you know your dad and my aunt are dating?”

His jaw clenches and something flashes across his eyes but is gone in the next second. “Yeah. I did know that. I’m sure your aunt is great, but it still feels so weird for him to be with anyone but my mom.”

“That must be hard.”

“What about your family? I heard your dad had passed—I’m sorry to hear that. Is your mom not al—”

I stop him before we can go down this train of thought. “She’s alive and well, last I knew. Just not interested in being a mother.”

“Shit,” he whispers. “That sucks.”

“Was your mom amazing?” I ask.

“Yes. She really was.” He swallows hard and it’s the most genuine I’ve seen Cade be, and the most I’ve liked him since we met. “I miss her every day.”

“I’m so sorry. It makes me angry when I hear about the most amazing people dying young, while the angry, bitter ones live forever.”

He laughs, but it’s hollow and he takes a big bite of his gelati. “I know, right? One of those great injustices.”

He starts up the car and I shouldn’t be surprised that he heads straight for

my house. Nothing seems to stay a secret in Sikoma.

He pulls in my driveway, and I decide to go for it.

“So, you’re probably not excited by the thought of us moving in, are you?” I glance at him and see the shock across his face. *Shit.*

“Yeah, my dad neglected to give me that information.” He swipes a hand across his face and then looks at me like he’d forgotten I was there. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean anything against you...or your aunt. It’s just—” He shakes his head.

“No, I get it. It’s weird for me too and I’m not dealing with all you are.”

“It’ll be great having you, I mean it. Cassie’s going to be *pissed*. My dad has just—he just hasn’t been himself for a while. When is all of this going down?”

“My aunt thinks we’re moving in tomorrow. I’ve been trying to figure out other alternatives all week, but I’m coming up short.”

“Fuck. Sorry.”

“Please don’t apologize. I get it. No offense, but I don’t want to move in either.”

He looks at my house and then at me, smirking. “You sure about that? It will be a step up, I’d say.”

I glare at him, annoyed that I’d felt sorry for him. “I don’t give a shit about your big house. You think that makes you special? I’ve had the ‘dream house’ before. It meant nothing. My dad still killed himself. My mom still ran, and that house felt like a walking death trap. No, thank you. I’ll figure something out. The last place I want to live is with a girl who hates me and a guy who thinks I’m after his money.”

I open the door to get out and he calls my name. I turn and his expression is apologetic.

“I’m sorry. I’m mad at my dad and taking it out on you. It won’t happen again.”

I nod and get out of the car, shutting the door just a few degrees shy of slamming. I spend the rest of the night looking at apartments nearby, but with a car that’s not working, it’s just all too much. I consider asking Ever if I could stay with her, but her space is already cramped with her sister and I don’t want to impose on a new friendship, even though she’d probably say yes because she’s so nice.

Aunt Darby comes in and hauls a few more boxes to her car, frowning when she comes back in and sees that my room is still intact.

“Can I help you get your things together?” she asks. “Brewster already has a new renter for this place,” she says. “Moving in on Saturday. You won’t be able to stay here, lovey.”

“His kids have no clue about us moving in. Are you really okay with that?”

Her face drops, but she schools her features quickly. I can tell it’s news to her. “No, I’m not. But I’m sure he’ll have it worked out by tomorrow.” She turns and leaves the room and I throw a pillow at the door, beyond frustrated with her.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

When I get home from school the next day, there's a small moving truck in our driveway and Aunt Darby already has most of our things inside, with the help of two bulky guys that she's bossing around.

My Jeep is also gone.

"Where's my Jeep?"

"There you are," she says, handing me a handful of boxes that haven't been assembled yet. "You better hustle," she sings. "And Brewster was so sweet to cover a tow for your Jeep."

Great, something else to owe him.

The couch and kitchen table are still set up and I assume we're leaving it since Aunt Darby is just finishing up cleaning and the guys outside are taking a break.

I put the boxes together and throw things in them, trying not to think about how this situation is going to suck. I'm about to take my bed apart, and she calls from the hallway.

"I forgot to tell you. Leave your bed as is. I'm leaving mine here too. The new renter needs them."

I wasn't attached to my mattress or my blankets, so it shouldn't make me mad to leave it, but since everything about this is infuriating to me, I curse a mile-long rant under my breath.

Fuckin' loser renter who fucking needs my shitty comforter can fucking keep the fucking thing and go apeshit crazy with it as well as every other fucking hellhole spot of this tiny fucking house that was supposed to be my fucking new shitty home. Fuck Brewster and fuck everyone in this fucking town.

And I'm still going as I toss my makeup and shampoo in a box and grab my backpack and throw the textbooks I didn't use today in there.

Aunt Darby stays out of my fucking way until I get to the fucking truck with the fucking boxes.

Her smile is elated as she puts her hand on her hips. "Is this it?" she asks.

"Yes, it's fucking it," I snap.

Her eyes widen as she glances at the two guys who are trying not to laugh.

"Fucking great," she says, her shoulders shaking as she laughs. "Come on, let's go. Brewster's waiting for us."

"So thoughtful of him to help us," I snap.

"He sent help, Lennon. Come on. He's doing his best. Try to be a little grateful, okay?"

"You're grateful enough for the two of us," I respond.

Her mouth drops open and she looks like she's about to cry but then remembers Brewster's hired help. She turns and smiles shakily at them. "Thanks so much for your help. I think we're ready to go."

"No problem," one of them says. He winks at me, and I act like I don't see it. I get in Aunt Darby's car and the guy that winked pulls the moving truck out and waits for Aunt Darby to follow him. Like we don't know where we're going.

I have to stop with the anger, or I'll never survive this.

My aunt gets in the car, glancing carefully over at me. "Is this how you're going to be over there? Tell me now so I can brace myself..."

I don't say anything, too afraid of what will come out of my mouth.

We drive to the Vandenberg estate in silence and when we pull to a stop, she looks at me again. I can see the frown marks between her brows from the corner of my eye.

We get out of the car and the guys unlock the front door and help us into the house, each of us carrying two boxes. No one comes to greet us. The house is silent. I guess Brewster couldn't be bothered to leave work to welcome his fiancé into his home. To me this does not bode well for them, but she's unfazed, flitting through the home with giddiness.

We go up the stairs and she knows where she's going with her stuff. The hallway is long, and the huge staircase divides up the two sides of bedrooms. Aunt Darby goes to the left, and the guy who didn't wink at me drops my stuff in the last room on the right.

The bedroom is bright turquoise with a zebra comforter and what appears to actually be a zebra hide on the floor. I cringe at that and then realize there's a bathroom in this room. I sag with relief. I never have to leave this room except to go to school and hopefully work. I rally around that thought and head back downstairs to get the rest of my things. When I step outside, I see Cassie pulling up in her red Mini Cooper. I guess the twins' car color preferences are alike. She gets out of the car and slams the door and walks past without acknowledging me or my aunt.

It's the first time my aunt looks slightly wilted.

Cade pulls in next, and he at least nods at both of us before he goes inside. It's the least he's had to say to me since we met, and that thought almost sends me into hysterical laughter.

"That went well," I say as I pick up the rest of my boxes.

Aunt Darby grabs the rest of hers too and she's not quite as bouncy when we walk in the house this time. Music is blasting from an upstairs bedroom and when I pass the rooms to get to where my things are—I can't call it mine, it's just too soon and too weird—Cade's door is open and he's throwing his backpack on the floor. I keep going and the door that must be Cassie's is shut and she's the one playing metal music. Guess she doesn't have the same taste in music as her brother.

I grin as I set my boxes down and shut my door. I'm definitely not alone in my anger.

I get a text a few minutes later and it's a number I don't recognize. But has a Twin Cities area code.

Did I really just see you moving into Vandenberg's place?

Who's this? I type back.

Wells. Save my number.

How did you get mine?

Which room are you in?

Nice deflecting.

There's nothing for a few seconds and then again. **Which room?**

I walk to the French doors and open one, walking out on the tiny balcony off of my room. I look around the lake and then toward the houses next to me. Near the white one I admire every time I see it, Wells is standing in the street, looking toward me.

I lift my hand and wave and he waves back.

Abel is not going to like this.

You think I care about what Abel thinks right now? I'm the one stuck here!

Most girls would kill to live in a house like that.

I'd hoped by now you'd know I'm not like most girls.

Touché. I'll figure out a way to get in. If not tonight, sometime this weekend.

What? No. Don't do something crazy. I'm sure there are alarms all over this house.

A little alarm or two has never scared me.

I walk inside and shut the doors, locking them and wondering what the hell Wells thinks he can do about this.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Right before I take my shower that night, I get a call from the manager at Maverick's offering me a job as a hostess. I'd applied to be a server, but I accept the job on the spot. It'll take a little longer to get out of this house since I won't be making tips, but I'm just so excited to have a job.

"I don't suppose you could start tomorrow night?" John asks before we hang up.

"Absolutely."

"Excellent. We don't have a firm clothing requirement. Just look your best. No holes in your jeans, nothing revealing, etcetera. A dress wouldn't be frowned upon." He laughs awkwardly and I join in with my own awkward chuckle. "You'll be paid weekly, and make sure you bring a direct deposit slip from your bank with you tomorrow."

First thing I need to do in the morning: go get a bank account. It hasn't exactly been a top priority with no money to put in an account. I remember the twenty-dollar bill and lift a fist in the air while John is still talking. I have another thirty stashed in my phone case and that is it.

Things are looking up.

He tells me to be there at five and I'll be off at ten and he'll give me the upcoming schedule on Sunday. I thank him and hang up, doing a little dance around the zebra room. I even sing in the shower and am still humming when I get out, wrapping a towel around me and moving into the bedroom to put on my oversized sleep shirt.

I squeal and slap a hand over my mouth when I see Wells sitting on the bed, nearly losing my towel in the process. He jumps up and comes close, putting his finger over his lips.

“I can’t believe you did this. They’re gonna know you’re here,” I whisper.

“Don’t worry,” he says. “I’m smarter than I look.” He’s grinning that smile that goes straight between my legs, and I want to curse at my hormones. His eyes track down my body before meeting mine again. His tongue swipes across his lips and my breath catches.

Ridiculous.

I take a step back and secure the towel around my chest.

“What are you doing here, Lennon?”

“It’s not for long. I got a job tonight! Wooohoo,” I add in monotone. “Turns out it’s true—the house is owned by Brewster and he and my aunt are done hiding their relationship. It’s apparently been going on for longer than I thought.”

Wells is quiet and it’s so unlike him, it makes me stop talking.

“What are *you* doing here?”

“I told you I’d get in.” He shrugs.

“Yeah, but why?”

He steps toward me and puts his hand on my waist. My heart picks up and I try to act like this is no big deal. It’s only Wells. Why are all of them affecting me so much? It wasn’t anything like this when I knew them before.

You’ve always loved them.

I want to argue with myself, but I can’t argue that. I just didn’t expect to ever have my heart pitter-patter over any of them—well, maybe Abel...and Bishop—but here we are. It’s inconvenient and weird and not happening.

“Has Cade bothered you?” he asks. His other hand reaches up and moves my wet hair off of my shoulder, his fingers lingering on my neck and tracing over my skin until I shiver. His eyes heat, and he moves his hand to my cheek. I want to grab his wavy hair and climb him, but I take another step back. His hands drop and he levels me with a look. “Has he?”

“Uh, no. No, he’s been nice.”

“Yeah, I bet.” All sarcastic bite.

“It’s not like that. He’s fine.” I wave my hand at him. “And anyway, I’ll be out of here soon.”

“Right, you got a job. Where is it?” His smile is back, and I relax, the relief that it seems like things could be good between us again overwhelming.

“Maverick’s.” My eyes widen and I show all my teeth in exaggerated excitement, but I’m still pumped about this.

He doesn't look as excited. "Did Vandenberg get you the job?"

"What? No. I applied and was offered the job today. I didn't even tell anyone I'd applied."

"Doesn't mean he didn't pull the strings. He owns Maverick's."

I grab my sleep shirt and carefully put it over my head before dropping the towel. Wells stalks toward me and the back of my knees hit the bed.

"Are you taunting me on purpose?" he asks, his forehead against mine and his lips so close that if I move even half an inch, they'll touch.

"I thought this would be safer than the towel dropping," I whisper.

His thumbs glide once over the hard peaks of my nipples, and I gasp.

"Not safer," he says.

"Wells." I don't trust my voice more than a whisper. "I kissed Ronan."

"You think I don't remember? I'm having trouble forgetting it. The only thing better than seeing you kissing him would be to kiss you myself."

"I don't want to come between any of you. This doesn't seem smart. And it seems kind of sudden, this change of heart with both of you—"

"Lennon?"

"Yeah?"

"Kiss me."

I don't hesitate. I step on my tiptoes and wrap my hands through his curls, my shirt rising too high as I kiss the hell out of him. His hands slide around my body, and he curses when he feels my bare ass. His kiss is like him—playful and wholehearted, sexy and intoxicating. And when he squeezes my cheeks and pulls me against his hardness—he's wearing sweats, a gift in itself—I moan into his mouth. He starts a steady rhythm, his kiss matching his thrusts and hitting me just right. It feels so good, it doesn't take long before I'm gasping and shuddering against him. He pulls his mouth away and looks at me, whispering, "Fuck, look at you. God, you're beautiful when you come." He drives into me, his tempo going faster and faster, and he kisses me hard as he jerks against me.

I crush his moan with my mouth and then he goes still. When he pulls his lips from mine, he looks surprised. We both stare at each other for a few long moments before he releases my ass and takes a step back. He adjusts himself and pulls his shirt down, so I don't see the wet spot I know is there, and I'm suddenly embarrassed and confused and guilty.

"We shouldn't have—" I start.

He puts his fingers over my mouth and shakes his head. "Don't. Please,

don't say we shouldn't have. That didn't go as I'd hoped—it was great. Too great." He laughs. "But shit, I'm sorry I didn't last longer. Totally lost my mind there and got a little too excited to be doing this with you. *That's embarrassing,*" he smirks, "but I don't regret it, and neither should you."

"Ronan—"

"Ronan knows I'm here. He's okay."

My face goes hot. "So, you planned to come over here and what—you're just going to toss me around like I'm your shared plaything? Is that where you're thinking this will go?"

"Do you remember at camp when we would finally see each other after weeks of working in our own groups?" he asks.

"Of course, I remember."

"You were the light in all of our lives. You were what kept us going. And you never gave one of us more attention than the other." He laughs and runs his fingers through his hair, a wave falling back over his forehead. "I guess you favored Abel in the beginning because he's the one who first befriended you, but that changed as you got to know the rest of us."

I don't say anything because he knows he's right. I loved all of them. Completely. It's why it shattered me when they suddenly hated me.

"Ronan and I have been talking. We think it can be that way again. Only the adult version."

"We're eighteen—actually, you aren't even yet, right? So, I'd hardly call us adults."

He makes a face, and he moves toward me again, his hands going to my waist. "You and I both know that we had to grow up long before we should have. We are not a typical story. You, me, Ronan, Abel, my brother...we will always be tied together."

"But the four of you snipped our thread and left me hanging." My voice breaks and his hands drop from my waist.

"You broke our hearts first," he says, his eyes haunted. "Just please don't break them again."

The day Abel finally comes back—the very day Bishop and I talk about leaving to look for him—he doesn't look like the same person. His long hair is gone, his shaved scalp showing a perfectly shaped head, but he's thinner, gaunt even. His eyes are tormented, and he doesn't have a ready smile for

me. He doesn't smile at all. He rarely speaks, and I start to believe that even though he's back, my friend may be gone for good.

M-497 never comes back, at least not before I leave.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

I lie awake most of the night thinking about everything Wells said, everything that happened. As always with them, the past is a constant presence. So many memories, good and bad. It was really only bad toward the end, but then it was excruciating. I can't let my mind dwell there if I want to move forward, and the kiss with Ronan and what happened with Wells last night takes over my thoughts. I can't imagine Abel being okay with all of this and Bishop—there's just no way either of them would be okay welcoming me fully back into the fold or...sharing me.

I get hot all over again, despite the chilly room, and get up to take a cool shower, my brain still running a thousand miles an hour.

It's crazy to consider any of this when they have done little to convince me they don't still hate me. One day at a time, eyes wide open, will have to be my approach, or I'm headed for the second heartbreak of a lifetime.

I will not obsess over The Valiant.

I repeat that to myself three times, and I want to mean it so much that it's the first time I don't think the words *The Valiant* with sarcasm.

Progress?

I think not.

I get dressed and manage to sneak out of the house without seeing anyone, which feels like a huge win, but then I look up directions on my phone to the closest bank. I curse under my breath. I'll have to walk it since I don't want to go hunt Aunt Darby down for her keys.

"Going somewhere?" Cade asks. He's in the driveway, standing up from drying off his beloved car.

"My Jeep is in the shop—actually I need to find out where your dad had it

towed—and I'm headed to the bank."

"Joseph's Auto Body is the only place my dad trusts. I can take you to the bank," he offers.

I pause. "Are you sure? I won't make a habit of this, I swear. I start a new job tonight and getting my Jeep repaired is the priority."

"I don't mind. I'm not doing much today. I can take you by Joseph's too, if you'd like. They're usually quick and my guess is that my dad has already put it on his tab."

"Uh, no. Not happening."

Cade opens his car door and motions for me to get in. He's grinning and seems to be in a much better mood than yesterday.

"My dad can be stubborn about things like that, so this should be fun, seeing you taking him on."

I roll my eyes and he laughs. "So, you're fine today? Over the shock of us moving in?"

"Not really, but there's nothing I can do about it, is there? You're here."

"I'm really sorry. I feel terrible for you...and Cassie."

"Don't. I'm angry with my dad, not you. Not even your aunt, although she's going to take time to get used to. She's so...different than my mom."

"What was your mom like?"

"Which bank do you want?" he asks, looking at me.

"Lake Gitchi?"

He nods and pulls out onto Main. "My mom had a calming presence. My dad and Cassie can be hyper and quick with their temper, and she always knew how to calm the situation."

"Yeah, my aunt has a lot of energy," I admit. "But she's loving." Cade can take issue with his dad about being in a relationship, but he doesn't get to say shit about Aunt Darby.

"Mom was wise and kind," he continues, "and she stayed busy with charities and wasn't like all the snotty mothers in town."

I smile. "She sounds amazing."

"She was. Cassie—she changed a lot when my mom died. I hardly recognize her some days."

He pulls into the parking lot, and I see the Second Chance Bakery. I look around for the bank and don't spot it.

"This new bakery is incredible, and I haven't eaten yet," he says. "Is it okay if I run in?"

“Of course. I sabotaged your morning. And I’ve been wanting to try this place.” I wasn’t planning on spending any money today, but a donut and coffee won’t hurt on a day that I’m starting a new job, right? I worry my lip as we walk inside, looking for the beautiful girl I’ve seen talking to the guys.

Instead, Abel is the first person I see. He’s sitting at a table by himself, a coffee mug in front of him and a huge pastry. And he’s staring at me with the daggers of death, per usual.

I flush, thinking about last night with Wells and wondering if Abel knows. Does he hate me more for kissing Wells and Ronan?

But his glare moves behind me and I turn and realize he’s shooting even more venom toward Cade. I turn and look at the counter, hoping Cade won’t notice Abel’s expression. And there she is. She’s even more beautiful up close.

She smiles at me, and I stare at her. I can imagine little Abels and—I glance at the cute button she has with her name on it, Naomi—Naomis running around, and I get a sharp pain in my side. Her smile drops and she frowns.

“Are you okay?” she asks.

My face heats as I clutch my side. “Sorry,” I say, shaking my head. “Everything looks so good.” I look at everything in the glass to see if that’s true and it is. My mouth waters over everything I see. I glance back at Abel and he’s still watching us. “I’ll try what he’s having.”

Her smile is back in an instant as she eyes Abel fondly. “His favorite and mine as well. It’s a cheese strudel and I also have apple.”

“I’ll try the cheese,” I say. “And a light roast with cream.”

She flashes another smile at me, and I glance around, surprised the place is so empty.

“You should see this place before school...it’s packed. I have to leave half an hour early if I want my fix,” Cade says under his breath.

“Oh, good. So, it’s doing well?”

He laughs. “I kind of wish it wasn’t doing quite as well most mornings.”

“Would you like that for here or to go?” Naomi asks as an afterthought.

I glance at Cade, and he looks back at Abel. “To go, please.”

“Great,” she says, smiling.

She seems great and the thought of Abel and Naomi living their perfect life together should not be hurting this much.

I pay for mine and Cade’s since he’s doing me this favor and step to the

side to wait as she puts our things in a bag and gets our drinks. It's hard to ignore Abel, but I study the pastries like it's my job and it helps.

"I'll be right back," Cade says, pointing toward the bathroom.

The moment he's gone, Abel comes over and pulls me back by the elbow. "What are you doing with him?" he spits.

"Is it not obvious? I'm getting breakfast."

"There are two guys who are shit-faced swoony over you, and you want to tell me why you're shacking it up with Cade Vandenberg?"

I pull my elbow away from him and lean on my tiptoes so I can get in his face better. "He's a nice guy and my living situation is temporary. As for the two guys you're talking about, I'm no one's property, and you can tell them both that if they're thinking otherwise."

"You are though. You just can't seem to get it through your head. Ditch the boy and get on the right side here."

I stare at him incredulously. "The right side? You mean with the four of you who have treated me like mood-swinging assholes who I'd rather stab most of the time versus a guy who's been kind to me? Uh, at the moment, the right side is looking like an easy choice."

His hair falls over his green eyes, and it's a good thing because those eyes have always been the death of me, but then, so has the hair. We stare each other down for what feels like an hour when Naomi says, "Abel? Is everything okay?"

"Everything's fine, babe," he says.

I step back as if burned. I bolt out of the shop and hustle to Cade's car, curling up in the seat. Cade comes out a minute later, holding our bag and coffees and getting in the car, oblivious to the fact that he missed a scene.

"Thank you," I say as he holds out the coffee and bag.

"Thank *you*. You didn't need to pay for that—but it seemed better than arguing." He grins and I force a smile back.

"It's the least I can do."

We drive to the bank, and I eat the pastry. It *is* delicious, but it sits in my stomach like a brick after seeing Abel.

Babe.

He called her babe.

I swallow hard and stare out the window, hating myself for the ache that's ripping my heart apart. It feels impossible that this would be hitting me this hard, but it's undeniable. I'm losing him all over again when I didn't even

have him.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Everything is in place for tonight, I'm dressed for work in my nice jeans and blouse and happily climb into my Jeep. Cade was right—his dad had already put it on his account, so they wouldn't even consider taking my money. And Brewster and Aunt Darby were out when I got back, so I left a note on the kitchen island thanking him and telling him I'd pay him back the thousand-dollar tab as soon as I could.

Yeah, ow. A thousand dollars for this thing that I should sell. But since Brewster took that option out of my hands, I figure I should enjoy it for as long as it works and just be glad I have the ability to pay him back soon.

It's a brisk evening, the fall leaves popping out in places. It won't be long before it's a fall wonderland around here, but for now, I'm grateful that it's not too cold yet. I still need to get a coat worthy of Minnesota winters.

I pull into Maverick's fifteen minutes before my shift. The restaurant isn't as full as it was the other night, but it's warming up, and I hope I'm able to keep up once it gets busy. I head back to the bar where John told me he'd be. A good-looking blond guy in his twenties is serving beer to a couple on the far side of the bar, and I wait until he's done.

He glances at me and does a quick sweep over my body, but fortunately his eyes aren't skeezy when they reach mine. Interested maybe, but not skeezy. I wish I could say I'm used to this, but the attention these boobs have gotten me since they came in is something I don't think I'll ever enjoy. A memory of Wells and last night floods back, and maybe there's an exception.

"John?" I say, trying to school my now flushing face.

"That's me," he says.

I hold out my hand. "I'm Lennon. Your new hostess."

“Oh—hey.” He laughs and it’s a little awkward. Maybe because he knows I caught him staring. Maybe because he knows how young I am. Who the hell knows? “Great. I’m glad you’re here early. We can get you set up and I can run through a few things before your shift starts. Samson will be here any minute to tend the bar and we can get more done then.”

“Sounds good.” I hand him my account info for direct deposits, and he motions toward the screen behind the bar.

“Let me get this info into the system really quick and then I’m all yours.”

I nod and perch on a stool at the bar.

He’s only a few minutes and as he’s working, a tall, muscular man with dreadlocks arrives and goes behind the bar, getting right to work. He must be Samson. John introduces us and Samson nods, uttering a quiet hello before getting back to work.

There are a few other employees I’m introduced to when John steps out from behind the bar. Rozlyn, the pretty waitress and single mom that waited on us when I came with the guys, and Lindsey, a gorgeous blonde who’s going to Benedictine University.

“Mel is the only one you haven’t met yet besides the kitchen staff and you won’t be able to miss her when she comes,” John says. “Pink hair and the sass to match. I’ll introduce you to the cooks later. You’re allowed a fifteen-minute break and can get food back there if you want.”

My stomach wants.

He shows me the seating chart and how to work it and tells me Maverick’s doesn’t take reservations, which is what I thought I’d be doing.

“You’ll need to keep this front area clean and answer the phone.” He points at the small cell phone on the little stand that will be my home when I’m at work. “But mostly, you learn how to tell guests an approximate time they can be seated, seat them, and keep the waiting guests happy.” He lifts both shoulders. “Piece of cake, right?”

“Right,” I say, hoping it’s the truth.

He leaves me to it and of course, that’s when the crowd starts arriving. A group of twelve that asks to be in Lindsey’s section comes in and Lindsey rushes over, squealing.

She shows me where to put them, which is good because it takes me a minute to remember where her section is. She rushes off again while I grab twelve menus and lead them to the table that she’s already set up. And then, the rest of the night just doesn’t stop. I get a fly-by introduction to Pierce and

Sami, the two cooks on tonight, and I don't have time to eat anything because on my break, I go to the bathroom and come out, running right into Bishop.

He steadies me and then scowls at me. "Can I not go anywhere without seeing you?" he spits, bending down to say it in my face.

I scowl right back. "Looks like you're stuck seeing me. This is where I work now. Sorry, not sorry." I shrug and step around him.

When I enter the dining area, the others are in the same booth as when I came with them. I glance over, but I'm too nervous to let my eyes linger there. It's strange how drawn to them I am even when we're at odds. I think it will always be that way.

I think they all know about what happened last night with Wells, and I really don't know how to feel about that. I don't know how to feel about any of it. Them. This town. My living situation. Aunt Darby. And I can't allow myself to be overwhelmed by any of it right now. It will all be here, threatening to drag me under another day.

A rush of hockey players comes in and all the fans, and it's so busy the rest of the night, I barely have time to think about their eyes on me.

Lies. All lies. But I *am* busy.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

I like my job. I worked there again last night, and it's a little calmer than it was Saturday night. I'd much rather be at work than at the house. We had a "family brunch" yesterday and it was the most uncomfortable meal I've had...maybe when my parents' fighting was at its all-time high right before my mom left comes close, but this was...right on par with that.

Aunt Darby was overcompensating for the lack of conversation and talking way too much and too fast and too bubbly. And Brewster had a forced smile on his face the entire time as he kept sneaking furtive glances at Cade and Cassie. I tried to give my aunt the wide eyes that on a good day, she'd recognize as my look saying to tone it down, maybe not talk so much, but she railroaded my looks right over with her chatter about everything she's missed about Minnesota.

It will be a miracle if they last a week at the rate she's going.

School is even a welcome relief today. And I need to think of somewhere to be tonight so I can avoid another meal at the Vandenberg's. I don't work again until Thursday night.

Someone slouches against the locker next to me and I turn to see Wells smiling down at me.

"You're not avoiding me, are you?" he asks.

"Why would I do that?"

"Oh, I don't know...we left things on a melancholy note when we last spoke. And seeing you at the restaurant—I didn't get to talk to you. You looked upset. I was going to check on you yesterday, but," he lifts his shoulders, "I don't want to scare you off. It feels like we're on shaky ground."

“Did you tell everyone what happened?” I ask.

“No?”

“Why do you say it as a question?”

“Because I wouldn’t talk about what happened between us in private unless you wanted me to. But do you not want them to know?”

I close my locker and tug my cardigan closer around me. “Abel acted like he knew.”

Wells gets an expression on his face that has me on instant alert.

“What?”

“Nothing, I just—you know what, we better get to class.”

I wait for him to explain himself, but when he doesn’t, I sigh and head to Lit & Comp. Bishop ignores us when we walk in, and I can’t tell which is worst—him ignoring me or him glaring at me. I confess that I make it hard for him to ignore me. I raise my hand every time he asks us a question, and I can tell he doesn’t want to pick me, but to avoid appearing out of line, he does occasionally. I drop things when he doesn’t. I cough when he doesn’t look my way. By the end of the class, I can tell he’s so agitated, he can barely speak a coherent thought.

Good.

He needs a taste of his own medicine.

I cleaned up his vomit once at Camp Capitree. The guy doesn’t get to treat me like this, teacher or not.

Wells is laughing as we leave class. “Are you trying to torture Bishop or what?”

I laugh. “He needed to squirm a bit. He was a jerk to me Saturday night and he doesn’t get to glare at me or look through me or not look at me at all...unless he wants to pay for it.”

He lifts his eyebrows. “Be careful how far you push him. You might not like the way he makes you pay for it.”

Ronan falls into step next to us as we walk toward trig. He smiles shyly at me and when Wells puts his arm around my shoulder, he lifts an eyebrow at him.

“You look awfully comfortable,” he says to Wells. “Something happen between you two?”

I turn to Wells. “You did tell him.”

He drops his arm and lifts both in the air. “I didn’t. I swear to you.”

I look at Ronan. “We kissed.”

I wait for there to be a spark of anger or jealousy or anything, but he nods like he expected as much. “Was it good?”

“It was explosive, if you know what I mean,” Wells says, grinning.

I jab him in the stomach with my elbow and he yelps.

Ronan grins and I’m surprised by how easy this feels. Maybe they just want to have fun and think I’m up for a good time.

“Do you guys...share girls frequently?” I ask.

“We’ve never shared a girl,” Ronan says.

“But you’re both okay with me kissing both of you...”

We’re standing outside trig and it’s not the best place for this discussion, but I haven’t been able to stand the guilt in my chest.

“Only because it’s you,” Well says.

“What he said,” Ronan says with a single nod.

I rush past them and into class, and they file in seconds later, their expressions amused and smug. This has got to be the craziest thing I’ve considered. Well, besides coming here to begin with.

Abel ignores me throughout gym and so does Cassie. She’s thankfully stayed out of my way at the house too. Hopefully that will hold.

But at lunch, Ever and I are happily chatting when Wells, Ronan, and Abel sit at our table. Wells and Ronan smile and enter our conversation. Abel does not.

Finally, sick of it, I turn to him. “Abel, how long have you been dating Naomi?”

Ronan and Wells stop talking and turn to watch us.

“Not long,” he says, looking at his food.

“Long enough to call her babe.”

“I’ve always called her babe. She calls me dove sometimes. It’s sweet.” He drills a look into me that dares me to say differently and the bravado I had seconds ago dissolves into dust.

My voice is shaky when I speak again. “She seems like a good person.”

“She’s the best,” he says.

Those words hit their intended mark.

I can’t eat the rest of the bowtie chicken pasta. If I could go home right now, I would. If I could get out of this town and get away from everyone in it, I would leave and never come back.

This is too hard.

I don’t know why I thought I could do this.

“Abel!” I run up to him. It’s the first chance I’ve had to speak to him without everyone nearby and I’m so happy to see him, I don’t notice the way he stiffens when I get close. “I’m so glad you’re back. Are you okay?”

He doesn’t say anything.

“Of course, you’re not okay, that was a stupid question.” I put my hand on his back. He flinches and I drop my hand. “Sorry. Abel?” Tears flood my eyes. “What happened? What did they do to you?”

He shakes his head and looks at me then, his eyes lost. He reaches out and takes my hand and squeezes it but shakes his head so hard and repeatedly, I have to reach out and steady him before he falls.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

I coast through the next couple of days. Ronan and Wells are still hanging close, but they can tell I'm preoccupied, and they don't push. It's what I need because I haven't fully processed everything that's happening here. Wednesday morning, I get up and go for an early run and sure enough, Bishop is out there.

His shoulders sag when he sees me, but he doesn't say anything at first. I try to pass him, but he quickly catches up and runs alongside me.

"You can't keep being so distracting in class," he says quietly. His tone is different than usual, less forceful.

"Have the decency to treat me like your other students then."

I feel his eyes on me, but he doesn't say anything for a long time. When he does, I'm surprised.

"You're right. I...apologize. As your teacher, I have the responsibility of making sure you get an excellent education and treating you with respect when you're in my class, regardless of how I feel about you."

"And how do you feel about me, Bishop?"

"I wish I'd never seen you again."

I lean over, my hands on my knees and try to catch a breath. He runs a few paces and turns back, coming to stand over me.

"Go," I say. "I don't want to see you right now either."

He hovers and I wave my arm at him.

"Go! Get out of here!"

He turns and takes off and I eventually stand back up. I turn and walk the opposite way as Bishop, walking into the house and hoping to God I don't run into anyone when I'm such a mess. I'm sure all this keeping to our own

spaces will end at some point because for five people to be living in this house, it's quieter than a library.

I hear something when I pass Cassie's room and I glance at my watch. She's up earlier than usual. I hurry past her room and get in the shower, letting the water wash away the pain.

I won't cry. I won't cry. I won't cry.

I think it so hard that a lump wedges in my throat and is so painful I wish I could cry it away. But I still let the water do the work. It won't heal me, but I can pretend as if it's my tears without letting my heart burst wide open on this floor.

Once I start, I won't be able to stop, and I don't have time for this today.

I get out and dry off, wrapping the towel around me as I go to the closet to grab my uniform. On a good day, my closet looks like I'm on vacation and I've only brought a few things to fill this huge closet.

Today is not a good day.

Everything I own is slashed.

I gasp and go to the uniforms first. Every skirt is now fringed and chopped, the shirts have gaping holes and the sleeves are gone, and the cardigans are barely hanging on the hangers. My good jeans make me sob and the two pretty blouses are on the floor, a mangled heap of scraps. I pull out the dress and the front looks okay, but the back has one big hole that extends from my shoulders to my thighs.

I guess Cassie is done being quiet.

I look at my watch again and try to figure out what to do before school. I rush to my underwear drawer and fuck me, it's all trashed. I guess I'll need to get a lock for the door if I continue staying here. I put my running clothes back on since that's all that's left, and I rush out of my room, backpack and all the books I own inside it.

Cassie opens her door as I pass and looks at me smugly. "Good morning," she says sweetly.

"Fuck off, Cassie," I spit.

Her smile widens and she pulls out the innocent eyes. "What? Why would you say such a thing to me?" She's laughing before she closes her door, especially when I give her the bird.

I won't be able to get a skirt until the store that sells our uniforms opens, but I get underwear and a shirt at Walmart. I'm tempted to get a cardigan that's the same color as our uniform, but I'll wait and get the one I'm

supposed to have. I speed back to the house and go back in, changing as quickly as I can. New underwear, new shirt, the skirt that is the least chopped.

I don't bother with a lock yet because I don't have anything I care about Cassie messing up. My makeup, I guess, but I'll be late if I don't hustle now.

When I walk downstairs, of course it's the morning that everyone is up, and they all turn as one to look at me. Aunt Darby's face drops when she sees my skirt.

"What happened to your uniform?" she asks.

"Ask Cassie."

I slam the door as Cassie is saying she has no idea what I mean by that, blah, blah, blah. I get to school with six minutes to spare and go to my locker, hoping I have an extra pair of gym shorts in there for later. Nope. Out of luck.

I get all the weird stares and snickers as I walk down the hall and Ever's eyes widen when she sees me.

"Fashion statement or something else?" she asks.

"Cassie."

"Shit. You should've messaged me. I have an extra skirt you could've borrowed."

I groan. "Why did that not even once cross my mind?"

"Maybe because you're used to never asking for help?" she says, grinning.

"How do you already know me so well?" I grin back.

She points at my skirt. "Because that's exactly what I would've done." She frowns at my shirt. "Oh, I couldn't tell that your shirt wasn't the uniform right away. You'll definitely get written up."

"Detention?"

"Yep."

I sigh. "At least I don't have to work today."

Ronan and Wells stop in mid-walk when they see me, and I hold up my hand.

"Cassie had fun with everything in my closet today. This was the best I could come up with in a short amount of time."

Wells speaks first. "I was just gonna say, 'This look is working.'" He moves to see the back and nods, his indigo eyes gleaming with lust. "If you bend over just slightly, let me know. I'd like to be there for that."

I hit him with one of my notebooks and they both laugh.

“What should we do about Cassie?” Ronan asks.

“Nothing. I’ll deal with her.” I don’t miss the look Ronan and Wells exchange and I want to reiterate for them to leave her alone, but we walk into Bishop’s class, and everyone stares at me, including Bishop.

I go up to his desk and lean down so only he can hear. “Cassie shredded everything I own this morning. I’ll have a new uniform by tonight hopefully.”

He nods and clears his throat, pulling a small pad out of his drawer. He fills out the slip and hands it to me. “If it wasn’t me, it would be someone else giving you detention today. When each teacher tries to enforce it, just wave this slip.”

“Thank you.”

He glances up, surprised. “You’re welcome.”

“That wasn’t so hard, was it?” I say as I turn around and walk to my desk.

It’s actually really helpful that he covered this during my first class because it saves the conversation happening the rest of the day. My teachers nod when I wave the slip and it’s done.

At lunch, Ronan had suggested I come to their house after detention, and while I’m curious to see where they live, I need to go shopping and put a lock on my door. I told him that and he and Wells offered to come shopping with me and then they’ll help with the lock.

Abel didn’t say a word, and now as the last bell rings and I head to detention, I can’t stop thinking about going to their house. I don’t have to stay long and maybe I’ll see a picture of him and Naomi together or something that will help turn off my weird obsession with him.

CHAPTER FORTY

“Why didn’t you tell me you were in charge of detention?” I ask, sitting down at the desk in front of Bishop’s.

“I’m not always. At lunch, Mrs. Emerett asked if I could switch with her.”

“Is it always this quiet?” I glance around at the empty room. It’s a classroom I’ve never been in before and the walls are bare.

“Usually quieter because students aren’t allowed to talk.” He lifts an eyebrow and I stick my tongue out at him. His ears turn pink, and I pull out my books, thinking I’ll get homework done while I’m here.

But it’s too enticing to talk to Bishop when he’s not responding like I’m a black widow spider attempting to suck him into my web.

“Are you happy, Bishop?”

He startles and looks around. The halls are getting quieter, and the noise sounds far away, but he still looks alarmed.

“You can’t call me Bishop here.”

“Right. Are you happy, Mr. Ellison?”

“I-why are you asking me that?”

“Because I want to know. You’re teaching, which is something I know you wanted to do even back then. Is it as fulfilling as you hoped it would be?”

He looks out the window, and I enjoy the opportunity to watch him. “It’s fulfilling in a lot of ways, yes. But it’s not everything. I need more than teaching to get me up in the morning...like meaning, purpose, justice.” He looks at me when he says the last word and I get a chill.

“And do you feel like you’ve gotten justice?” I whisper.

His eyes gleam. “In some ways, yes.”

“That seems like one of those things where the cup could never be full enough, the hole never filled...how do you know when there’s enough justice?”

He gets up and leans on the front of his desk, his long legs crossing in front of him. Close enough that my foot could reach out and touch his.

“You’ve just zeroed in on the problem,” he says. His voice becomes silky, and I squirm in my seat. “It’s never enough.”

The way he’s looking at me now is hard to explain. He still seems removed, the walls are still firmly in place, but he’s taking me in as if memorizing every feature. I hope he recognizes me in here. I shift and his eyes drop to my legs, showing more than ever in this gnarled skirt. His tongue stretches over his bottom lip so quickly I think I’ve imagined it. And when his eyes meet mine again, I know he sees the desire in my expression because he turns and goes back to sit behind his desk.

I’m trembling as I try to focus on my work, but I just can’t forget that he’s right there. Every time I sneak peeks, he’s glaring at his laptop like it’s possessed.

“Are you dating anyone, Mr. Ellison?”

He looks up at the ceiling, trying to restrain himself from yelling at me, I can tell. He was never a yeller before, I need to find out when that changed or if it’s just me. Maybe I bring out the worst in him now.

“None of your business, Ms. Gentry.”

“So, it’s a yes then. What’s she like?” I smile and twist one of the pieces of hair lying on my desk around my finger. He watches every move, transfixed.

“I’m not dating anyone yet, but I will be by the weekend,” he says.

I frown. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, I am going to go out every night between now and the weekend, go on dating apps if I have to, until I find a pussy to sink into.”

My face flames and I can’t speak for a few seconds. “Well, that just sounds desperate.”

His laugh is hollow. “Yeah, that would be fitting.”

“Someone like you has no reason to be desperate. I bet women are falling all over themselves to get you. Rozlyn thinks you’re so hot.”

“What is she, like 38? And a mom? I’m only 22—I’m not quite ready for all that yet.”

I start laughing and for a second, I think he's going to laugh too. But then he gets that constipated look on his face like he's forcing himself to not breathe.

"Breathe," I whisper.

"What?"

"Breathe. You'll give yourself a heart attack if you keep all that bottled up inside."

"I'm not ancient, Lennon."

"I know. You just reminded me you're still only 22, but you act so old, it's *freaking unreal*."

He does laugh then. He laughs so hard and so loud that I just stare at him in awe for at least a minute before I join in.

When he finally stops and wipes his eyes, he looks embarrassed. He goes over to stand by the window and I stare at him, wishing I could make him laugh again. It made him look like a kid again. Or his age.

"I've missed you so much," I say softly.

He doesn't look at me, but I can tell he heard me by the way his posture shifts. When he goes back to his desk, he looks at his laptop and we don't speak again. Forty-five minutes later, an alarm goes off on his phone, and he keeps staring at his computer when he says, "Time's up, Miss Gentry. Make sure you're in the proper uniform tomorrow."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Ellison."

His head snaps up at that and his expression is agonizing. I want to hug him and kiss him and slap him. He looks like he wants to do the same to me.

Ronan and Wells pull into the parking lot as I get to my Jeep.

"All done?" Wells calls.

"Yeah, perfect timing."

"Uniform place first?"

I nod.

"How about we take one car? We can swing by here on our way back."

I look at my Jeep. Nothing bad has happened to it during detention. Hopefully that luck will hold. "Okay, sure."

Wells hops out and motions for me to take his place in the front seat. I get in the black Lexus and admire the leather interior. "Nice car. Is this yours, Ronan?"

"I bought it, but it's available for all of us to drive. Abel usually has the SUV, Bishop walks or runs most places, and Wells and I share this." He

glances over at me and winks. “I guess we *are* good at sharing some things.”

My mouth twitches as I try to keep a straight face. “Attention on the road,” I tease.

We go to the shop and they’re closing soon, so I scramble to pick out two of everything. I’m glad I’d checked with Ms. Birdie about the fine points of my scholarship because the amount is astronomical...until I give my name and ask that they make sure that’s the right amount. With a few clicks as they check their system and an apology, I have free uniforms.

Next stop is picking out a lock. Actually, Wells and Ronan pick out the lock while I get a pair of jeans and a few shirts for work. Nothing special, but I’ll have something to wear tomorrow night.

They’re telling me how to install the lock as we drive, and I think they’ve forgotten they invited me to their house when they pull onto Vandenberg Waterfront. But instead of going to 64 Vandenberg Waterfront, they pull into 60 Vandenberg Waterfront, the white house that gets me all swoony.

“What are you doing?” I ask. “Whose house is this?” I look around, but no one is outside.

Ronan grins and says, “C’mon. This is our house.”

“You’re kidding,” I squeal. “I’ve been wanting to go in this house since I first saw it.”

“I think you’ll like it,” Wells says, putting his arm around my shoulder.

When Ronan opens the door and I walk inside, my hand goes to my mouth. It’s breathtaking. Way more white than I’d expect for four guys, with white walls and woodwork. A massive navy sectional and a striped chair are in the living room. Of course, there’s the bigger-than-life TV screen that doesn’t surprise me at all, but the decor is understated and tasteful.

“Naomi helped us decorate,” Wells says. “We wanted something we wouldn’t get sick of and something that screams class.”

I nod, wishing I didn’t get a sick feeling every time Naomi’s name is mentioned, but that doesn’t seem to be going away anytime soon. “It’s really beautiful.” And then the truth of it hits me. “So, this is where the Gentry money went.”

Both guys stare at me like it’s a dealbreaker and that I’ll bolt from the room in tears, but I shrug and say, “At least you have good taste.”

“We didn’t know you’d had it as hard as you have, Lennon,” Ronan starts.

I shake my head, not wanting to get into all of it now. I’d rather that be a

conversation with the four of them. At a time when I can get all the answers.

The kitchen is a dream. It makes me want to learn to cook, it's so fabulous. Windows line the back of the house and there's a sunroom with tons of greenery.

"Bishop's in charge of the kitchen. Abel's in charge of the plants. Abel and I make sure we have top-of-the-line electronics, and Ronan keeps the yard looking like a professional landscaper has been here," Wells says proudly.

"I'm so impressed."

They take me upstairs and show me the bedrooms and they look so much like each guy, I am smiling so hard as we take the tour. Abel's room is grey, grey, and more grey, with his only decor besides furniture being plants and multiple screens. Bishop's room has a comfortable king bed with a plush white comforter, a brown leather reading chair, and book piles everywhere. Ronan's room is a pretty shade of green and a white comforter on his king bed. The showstopper is the huge aquarium along one wall. Everything is in place except for his desk, which is covered with papers and multiple screens like Abel's. And Wells' room is white with a blue comforter and black and white photography on one wall. Everything else is screens.

"What's with all the screens? What's the need for multiples?" I laugh.

They're quiet for long enough that I turn around.

"We really should have a room just for that," Wells says, more to Ronan than me.

"I've been telling you, man," Ronan says.

"Next project," Wells says, leading me back downstairs.

Bishop comes in when we're sitting on the couch and pauses when he sees me there but doesn't say anything. I'm surprised he doesn't go into another *can't I go anywhere without seeing you* rant, but he doesn't. He does something in the kitchen while we do homework in the living room. Abel walks in when we're almost done, and he scowls when he sees me.

"What's this?" he asks.

"Be cool," Ronan says.

"Don't get too comfortable," Abel tells me.

"Shut it, dude," Wells says.

I pull out my phone to look up something for homework and see that I've missed a zillion messages from Aunt Darby. The last one says **PLEASE COME HOME.**

I jump up and Bishop walks in, the four of them all watching me like a hawk.

“I still can’t believe you’re here,” Wells says, shaking his head.

“I’ve gotta run,” I say, picking up my things. “Thanks for taking me to the store. Oh shit. We didn’t pick up my Jeep.”

“Wells and I can take care of that. If you trust us with it,” Ronan says.

I look at my keys for a second and then nod. “Don’t let me down,” I say, tossing the keys to Ronan. I point to Abel. “You leave it alone.”

He looks sulky as I walk past him and thank Wells and Ronan again. I close the door and move toward the street, running that way instead of across Ronan’s perfect lawn.

I still can’t believe we’re neighbors.

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CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

“Where have you been?” Aunt Darby says when I rush in. “Are you okay? You weren’t answering my texts!”

“I had detention and then I had to go get new uniforms and a few other things.”

“It’s almost eight o’clock!”

“I went to the guys’ house after.”

“Lennon, talk to me. Just because we’ve had this crazy move and I’m feeling this...distance from you since we moved in...you know you can tell me anything, right?” She leans in and whispers, “And you’re on birth control, aren’t you?”

“You know I am, but I’ll just remind you here that I’m an adult and that you’ve never been the kind of aunt who micromanages me.”

Her head tilts as her full lower lip goes out in a pout. “I’d like to think we micromanage each other when the need arises.” She tries to laugh, but her eyes are too worried to be believable. “I’m just looking out for you. You warn me when I’m taking relationships too fast, and I do my best to listen.” She makes a face at me. “And then I want to know why you’re not home and what you’re getting into. There are times we buck our own system.”

I laugh and she does too, and everything feels a little less tense between us. She gives me a quick hug and then I glance around.

“Where is everyone?”

“Well, you missed a mini-war here at dinnertime, when Brewster confronted Cassie about your wardrobe.” She reaches into her pocket and pulls out a wad of cash. “This is for you, by the way. He said to let him know if that doesn’t cover it.”

I shake my head. “I don’t want his money.”

“His daughter trashed all of your clothes. Let him help you get new ones.” She’s looking over her shoulder to make sure no one is listening.

“He believed it was her?” I don’t know why I assumed he’d take his daughter’s side.

“She didn’t really do anything to deny it. She’s grounded for two weeks and they’re upstairs right now talking about everything.”

I make a face. “Awkward.”

“Yeah, tell me about it. And Cade had a lot to say about this living arrangement while the fight was going on.” She scrunches her face together. “This might’ve been a little soon to pull on them.”

“You think?” I whisper-shout. I start laughing hysterically and so does she.

“I know, I know,” she gasps, still laughing. “You were right, as usual. But I think this all actually helped to get everyone talking. It ended very well.”

“Oh my god, you just never stop, do you, Little Miss Eternal Sunshine.” I shake my head at her, and she puts her hands under her chin in a pose that makes us both laugh. I take the money from her and stuff it in my backpack for now. “I’m going up to install a lock so she can’t do that again.”

“Do we need to talk about boys and sex and all that?”

“Nope, I’m good there, thanks.”

“You’ve been tested, right?” she says louder than I want her to.

“Yes,” I hiss. “I did before and after I broke up with Chance last year. Remember?”

“Well, that’s been a while.”

“I think it still holds if I haven’t had sex since then,” I whisper.

She makes a face. “Okay, excellent. Nice chat,” she sings as I hurry upstairs so I don’t have to talk to her about sex anymore.

I work on putting the lock on my door and then take a shower to wash off all the nervous sweat I accumulated with the Aunt Darby convo and installing the lock. I hang up my new uniforms and the two blouses, folding my jeans and putting them on the shelf. I’ve never been so grateful to have uniforms—it would’ve been hard to come up with a wardrobe for school in such a short amount of time. I’ll just get in the habit of doing laundry every other day and I should be okay with these things. I put on a pair of my new underwear and a sports bra, wishing I’d bought a new shirt to sleep in too, and pull out the cash from Brewster.

I count it out and whistle. *A thousand dollars.* I still don't feel comfortable taking money from him or sleeping under his roof...but I'm grateful he seems generous and decent. All of it just propels me to save everything I can to get out of here.

I hear a noise at my window and turn to see Wells peeking in from the balcony. I open the French doors and he walks in.

"Nice outfit." He grins.

I cross my arms and his eyes fall to my cleavage, so I drop them, and he grins wider. I sigh. "What are you doing here?"

"Aren't you happy to see me?" he pouts.

"Yes, but it makes me nervous. I don't want you to get caught in here."

"You can just say you had a friend over, if I do."

I give him a look. "Like that would go over."

"I wanted to make sure your lock is working."

"Yeah, it is. I just need to make sure I lock the doors now."

He puts his hand on my waist and pulls me close. "Now that's just hurtful," he says, nuzzling my nose.

I laugh and put my hands in his thick blond curls. His eyes flutter back.

"That feels so good," he whispers. He closes the distance between us and kisses me. And it goes from heated to blazing within seconds. He grips the back of my thighs and picks me up, my legs straddling his waist and he lays me on the bed, my hair splaying around me.

"God, you're beautiful," he says.

I stare up at him. "So are you," I whisper.

"We don't have to do anything you don't want to do," he says, suddenly looking unsure.

"You have too many clothes on."

He grins and tugs his shirt off. He lifts a brow, waiting to see what I do next, and I point at his pants. He's out of them in seconds. I admire his golden skin and the way his boxer briefs hug his already hard cock. It makes my mouth water and I tug his hand and then grasp his waist, pulling him on top of me.

"Ronan knows you're here?" I ask.

"Yes. He would be here too if he didn't have too much homework to do."

I turn to mush at the thought of both of them here, kissing me at the same time. But when Wells starts kissing me, his skin against mine, he completely consumes me. I rock against him, and he thrusts back, diving deeper with his

tongue at the same time, claiming my mouth. His hands are everywhere and not in all the places I want them, and I explore his body too, his hard ripples and soft skin almost more than I can take.

He kisses down my neck and pulls my bra down, spending time with each nipple and tweaking them with his fingers and tongue and teeth. I squirm underneath him, wanting more. His fingers move down between my legs, and he glances at me for permission before pulling my panties down my legs and filling me with two fingers. I cry out and he kisses my moans, his fingers working their magic, in and out, and coming out to swirl my wetness against my clit. Over and over, relentlessly, he works me over until I'm writhing underneath him.

"Wells," I moan when he leans down and takes my nipple in his teeth, the slight pain skyrocketing between my legs. I rock against his hand and crest over the edge, pulsing around his fingers. He watches, his eyes shining.

"You are so fucking hot, Lennon."

I moan again and slide his briefs down, his cock bobbing against my stomach. It's hard and long and thick and like hot velvet against my skin. I close my hand around it, gliding up and down, my thumb catching the bead coming out of his tip on the way back down.

"Hold that thought," he says. "I don't want to lose it as fast as last time, and I'm dying to feel you squeeze my dick the way you just squeezed my fingers." He grabs his jeans and gets a condom out of the pocket. "Put it on me?"

I lean up and slide it on him and when he inches into me, we stare at each other. He brushes my hair back and kisses me, filling me completely. He's still for a moment, and this is already a thousand times better than the other times I've had sex. He starts moving slowly, leaning down to kiss me again, and then pulling back to see if it's still good.

"It's so good," I whisper.

He grins, his teeth grabbing his bottom lip as he drives into me. "Fuck yeah, it is. Tell me how you like it," he whispers.

"I think you can feel how I like it," I say, clenching around him.

"Mmm. Not yet. Hold that thought," he says, grinning.

He pulls out and thrusts back in...and does that until my eyes roll back in my head.

"I can't hold that thought any longer," I say, shaking.

He leans up, his hands on either side of my face, and fucks me so hard I

feel like I'm going under the ground. And I am here for all of it.

I come so hard, I grab my pillow and cover my mouth with it, while he watches in fascination, never losing his tempo. Just as I'm starting to come down, his eyes close tight and his mouth opens as he hardens even more before spasming into me. I lose it again and it's the most unbelievable wave of sensation.

When we're calm again, he kisses me again before pulling out and going to the bathroom to dispose of the condom. He comes back in and throws on his briefs before getting back on the bed.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

"Better than okay."

"Yeah?"

I nod and lean into his shoulder, my nerves coming out for the first time during all of this. "Where did you learn to do all that?" I ask, giggling.

"I was going to ask you the same question," he says, his dimples popping out.

Something hits my window, and he jumps up.

"Shit. I've gotta go."

"What's wrong?"

"That's Ronan letting me know I've got about five seconds to bolt. Brewster must be checking the alarm system."

"How do you know that?"

"Oh, Lionheart. I can't give away all my secrets in one night."

He kisses my shoulder and then my mouth and is out the window before I have time to ask anything else.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Wells texts early the next morning. **Wish you were here this morning to start the day out right.**

I smile but don't say anything. I slept better than I have in a while, but as soon as I woke up this morning, my brain went into overdrive. I just want to make sure Ronan really is okay with this. It sounded like he was according to Wells, but I need to see for myself. And my feelings for Abel and Bishop are still firmly planted in my heart. I don't see that going anywhere anytime soon.

How could they possibly be okay with sharing me?

Well, there's Naomi, so that's not even an option, I remind myself.

I guess I just can't make peace with it. Not yet anyway. I want them. There's no one else I want. But I can hardly expect them to only want me. It's clear that they're players.

Ronan and Wells are out by my Jeep the next morning. Wells kisses me on the cheek.

"Morning, beautiful," he says.

Ronan kisses me on the lips, lingering there for a moment. "I want to hear your moans in person one of these days. Only if you feel the same," he says. He leans back when I gasp. "I could tell something had happened by the way Wells was grinning when he came back. He didn't say anything but that your moans are like music."

"That's saying something," I grumble. I put my hands on Ronan's face. "You're not mad?"

"No. That's what we're trying to tell you. We want you, and we know we can't make you choose."

“Are you mad I said what I did?” Wells asks.

“No, but only because Ronan took it so well,” I admit, laughing. “I’m still uncertain about how all of this will play out and what changed your minds about me. I keep thinking the floor is going to fall out from beneath me.” I smile and pinch my arm. “I keep pinching myself to see if this is real.”

Ronan gets in the front seat next to me and Wells gets in the back, leaning between the two of us.

“It’s real,” he says.

I start the car and pull out. “And Abel and Bishop? I’m not sure how to get past them.”

“Just give them time,” Ronan says.

It all sounds a little too good, a little too simplified, but because it’s what I want to hear so much, those words become my mantra.

Abel and Bishop obviously know I had sex with Wells too and they are not as copacetic about it as Ronan. Bishop is back to not looking at me and pretending I don’t exist, and Abel is pouring the wrath of a thousand demons into his steady stare. At chemistry, when I have to sit next to him and pretend like we’re a team on our labs, I turn and get in his face when the teacher is preoccupied helping someone else.

“Don’t you think whatever vendetta you’ve had against me all this time has run its course? You got what you wanted—you took all our money, you ruined my family name—and here I am, still trying to be your friend. I hated my father too—can’t you see that? But I won’t ever hate you and I can’t believe you are holding onto this hatred of me like it’s your talisman. When will it be enough?”

“You lied to us, and you continue lying, and no, I won’t forgive you for that,” he says simply, staring at the glass vials in front of us.

“Because I didn’t tell you who my father was? I understand it was a blow, and I’ve tried to apologize for that, but I was there just like you were. He didn’t treat me any differently than he did you!” I snap. “Shouldn’t that absolve me?”

He turns then and I gasp, his lips curled and the emotion behind his eyes staggering. “There you go with the lies again. If you believe he treated you

the way he did me, then you've spent a lifetime in denial. You can't make me believe you don't know the truth. And just because you're spreading your legs for Ronan and Wells doesn't mean you'll ever be one of us again."

My eyes blur until I can't see his features anymore. "Apparently, I'm missing something that no one will fill me in on, so until you do, don't look at me, don't speak to me, go ahead and do what Bishop is doing and pretend I don't exist."

He gets in my face, turning toward my ear just as he almost touches me, his lips brushing against my skin. "A Gentry will *never* tell me what to do. Understood?"

Tears drip down my face, and it's a relief because I can see again. I wipe my face and move my chair so it's as far from his as I can get and still reach the table.

I'm too distracted to do any work though.

"We've gotta get him out of here," Bishop says, his eyes on Abel who is standing beside me and Wells.

Ronan is next to him, and he leans in closer, watching the area behind us to make sure no one is coming. "I think tomorrow night is our best option. We're switching to the west field, and I've found a new way out."

We all start talking at once, except Abel, who stands there in the same hollow way he has since he came back three weeks ago.

Ronan holds up his hand. "Hold on. I'll explain everything and I've marked it too, so you'll recognize it if we're all getting there at separate times."

"What do we do once we're all out?" That's the topic no one has wanted to discuss because that's what feels impossible. The five of us on the run with no resources.

"One thing at a time. We put distance between this place and then we figure out what's next," Bishop says.

I nod and listen as Ronan gives us detailed instructions as fast as he can before we have to separate and get back to work.

I don't even know how many times I've wondered how different our lives

would be if we'd left together. Would they have still hated me when I told them who I was? Or would it be different since I'd turned my back on everything and gone with them?

I guess we'll never know.

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CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

Ronan

Wells and I are the only guys out of the four of us who were handcuffed and kidnapped during the night when we were brought to Camp Capitree. I think it traumatized him more than it did me. I've had a long history with violent adults.

My dad died when I was four and it was just me and my mom for an idyllic five years. I don't remember much about my dad, but my mom didn't seem heartbroken that he was gone. And it's strange to say it since we technically should've been grieving, but I was little, and my mom and I never talked much about my dad. That time with her was one of the best times of my life. And then she met a man who quickly became my stepfather.

Jim, a white, wealthy businessman who didn't look like he'd be able to bench press a hundred pounds but was the champion in his weight class for four years straight at The Marshall School, one of the most prestigious private schools in Duluth. That fact seemed to work its way into every other conversation.

The first time he backhanded me, my mom rushed between us, and he backhanded her too. I thought we'd be out of that fancy house overlooking Lake Superior, but we stayed. We stayed through the fights. We stayed through the apologies and the promises that he'd never do it again. We stayed while my mom fought cancer. And lost.

I'm not sure how Jim heard about Camp Capitree. I'd never heard of the

place or that he was thinking of sending me here until I was taken in the middle of the night, after I'd gotten into a fight at school, and one of the guys who drove the van the hours from Duluth to the outskirts of Sikoma mentioned to the other guy that the camp was about to undergo a growth spurt in the coming year. Apparently, the man in charge, someone named Gentry, was a man with connections and once something happened—I missed what the guy said that something was—there would be a huge influx of kids sent to the place from the state.

Sitting in the van with handcuffs on, I actually felt hopeful. At least I wasn't with Jim anymore.

I've always been quiet. My mom and I had an easy way about us where we didn't have to talk to be having fun. But if there was ever anyone I could tell anything, it was her. I feel the void of her in my life every single day, but it helps to not be in the house where her things are. To not relive the spaces where I had to watch Jim yell at her. Where I had to step in and get punched so she wouldn't get hit.

It's best to observe and keep my opinions to myself. And for the first few months at Camp Capitree, that's what I do. But I've made some friends in spite of that. Really good friends. And I don't know what it is about them, but it's the first time I ever remember feeling safe since my mom and I were alone during those years I've bookended as the best time of my life.

And there's a girl. Lennon. She's the first girl my age I've had a crush on. She's like an angel come to life.

I realized I was in trouble when I saw how Abel, Wells, and Bishop looked at her too, because there's no way someone like me could ever catch the attention of someone like her. Jim always made sure to never leave permanent marks with his beatings, but the things he has said to me, the names he's called me, those are the scars that keep me awake at night. The scars that make my shoulders bend and my head hang down.

I didn't look anyone in the eye for at least a month when I got here. Until Lennon needed my help with that prick Jordan, and she put her hand in mine, trusting that I could take care of her.

She makes me want to stand taller. Have purpose. Believe in myself.

"Ronan," she calls.

I turn and she's motioning for me to follow her. I glance around, the need to always place the guards' exact location ever-present, and when it's safe, I jog over to her.

“The chef threw out cake.” Her face is pure glee, and I stand there just staring at her for a minute before her words process.

“What?” I say incredulously.

“I know!” she squeals. “Come on, if we both go, maybe we can carry enough for the five of us without anyone catching us.”

“Let me go. I don’t want you getting in trouble.”

She gives me a look. “No way. And if you see guards coming, promise me you’ll run. I’ll deal with them.”

“Hell no,” I say.

She puts her hands on her hips and I struggle to not glance down at her boobs.

“Do you want cake or not?” she asks.

“Hell yeah.”

She grins. “Let’s go.”

We run behind the small cottage that houses the kitchen. There are always strange smells emanating from it, and sometimes it’s painful because just because some kids get to eat what they’re cooking, doesn’t mean all of us do. More than half of the time, we’re required to find our own food out in the surrounding woods and the smells from the kitchen are torture.

We watch from the woods in the back of the cottage as the guard walks around the perimeter of the building, and we wait until he’s in the front before we make a run for it. She’s there before I am, opening the garbage and pulling out the cake that’s on top.

“Why would they throw it away?” I ask.

“I don’t know, but it looks fine to me.”

I smell it and it smells fine. More than fine.

We grab as much as we can carry and go back into the woods. When the guard is in the front again, we run back to where we were last working with the guys. They’re nowhere to be found.

“Shoot,” she says. “I’d hoped we could celebrate together.”

I grin at her. “What are we celebrating?”

“Friendship.” She bumps my shoulder with hers and my heart catapults into the ground and back into my chest again. Before I know what she’s doing, she’s smashed cake into my face and runs past, her eyes dancing as she looks back.

I make a face like I’m mad, but then I get a taste of the cake and it’s delicious. I chase after her, and when she slows down for me to catch her, I

stuff her mouth with cake. We're both laughing and cake is all over our faces and we're both still trying to hold onto the rest of it so we can share it. We end up eating all of it, laughing until we cry, our bellies full for the first time in so long.

"I feel bad saying that my stomach hurts," she whispers when we've finished it and are trying to clean up our faces and hands in the snow.

"Is it worth it?" I ask.

She turns to me and grins. "So worth it."

I lean over and lick her cheek. "You missed some frosting."

She cackles, and it's the best feeling in the world. I feel ten feet tall.

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CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

“Should we be worried about your safety?” Ever asks, as we’re walking in the parking lot. “Because honestly, the whole slashing your wardrobe thing is kind of creepy.”

“I’m hoping she’s just mean, but harmless.” I make a face.

Ever doesn’t look convinced. “What is Cade saying about it?”

“Nothing to me. I know none of this is easy for him and I feel bad about that.”

She looks back and sees Ronan and Wells walking toward us. “Seems like you’re getting along well with *The Valiant*,” she teases.

“Some of them,” I say, smiling at Ronan and Wells as they reach us.

“Homework at our place?” Wells asks.

I shake my head. “I’m dropping Ever off and then going to the bank before work.”

“What time are you working?” Ronan asks.

“Five to ten. I can take you guys home though—there’s room.”

“Nah, we’ll catch Abel. See you later,” Ronan says. He pauses like he wants to kiss me, and I grin. He returns it with a flirty grin that looks like a promise, and I sag against my car.

Wells doesn’t hesitate. He kisses me right in front of Ever, and I give him a gentle shove back when his tongue gets involved. We’re both laughing when I pull away, and a few of the girls who are always staring longingly at *The Valiant* stop what they’re doing to watch us.

I get a text from my aunt asking me to come home right away and since she’d normally be at work still, I’m concerned.

I text her back. **I need to drop Ever off and then I’ll be right there.**

You ok?

She doesn't answer back, and I motion to Ever. "Sorry, my aunt needs me—let's go."

She hops in and I wave to the guys, hurrying into the Jeep.

"Everything okay?" she asks.

"I don't know why she's home early and she doesn't typically ask me to rush home for no reason." Well, except for the other night, but things had been weird between us, and I think she just wanted to make sure we were okay. Besides then, one of the last times she told me to rush home was when she needed to tell me my dad was dead. I push that thought aside and get Ever home as fast as possible.

"Text me if you need me...and just to let me know you're all right," she says as she gets out.

"Okay, I will."

When I get home, Aunt Darby rushes toward me, hugging me to her. "Cassie got my clothes today and Brewster is calling a family meeting," she whispers.

"Shit. I have to be at work by five. When is this meeting?"

"As soon as Cassie gets home. You're off the hook if it's past five. He's been texting and calling both kids and they're not answering."

"I didn't see Cassie." I frown. "I didn't see her all day, now that I think about it." I've been distracted between basking in the thoughts of my night with Wells and distraught over my fight with Abel.

"She wasn't at school?"

"She wasn't in the classes we share."

"I better tell Brewster."

I nod and go back with her. "I need to thank him for paying for my car and the money."

"I thanked him for you, but yeah, that would be really sweet of you," she says.

As we near his office, down a hallway I've never been before, I hear Brewster cursing. I look at Aunt Darby and her eyes are troubled. "Maybe now is not a good time," she whispers.

"You need to tell me how you fucking lost ten million, you motherfucker," Brewster says. "How much am I paying you to make sure this doesn't happen?"

Aunt Darby gasps and we freeze.

“You have the rest of the evening to figure it out and get it back or you’re fired...no, don’t fucking apologize. Fix it!” He slams the phone down and I back away from the closed door.

Ten million. Ten *million*?

“I’ll just come back later,” I tell her.

She nods and looks uncertain about what to do.

I turn and nearly bump into a picture on the wall. I steady it and then lean in. My insides tremble as I see Brewster with my dad when they were younger, arms around each other’s shoulders.

“Brewster was friends with Dad?” I whisper.

“What?” Aunt Darby frowns and then sees what I’m looking at. She steps closer. “I haven’t noticed this being here before. Yeah, they were always close, even after we broke up.” She makes a face and straightens the picture.

I don’t even know how to feel about this revelation. There are too many problematic layers to uncover, and call it denial or self-preservation, but I just can’t delve into that today.

Cassie doesn’t show up before I leave for the bank, and I don’t see Aunt Darby before I leave either. Hopefully they’ll resolve a few things while I’m at work. I’m still stuck on the ten million. Brewster’s pissed, no question, but it wasn’t panicked, which is more what I’d expect from someone who’d just lost ten million dollars.

When I pull into the bank, I grab my backpack and pull the wad of cash out, stuffing it in my pocket. I head inside and fill out the slip, standing in line for a second before it’s my turn. I deposit the thousand dollars. When I glance at the slip she hands me afterward, I nearly drop it.

I turn back to the teller. “This—uh, there’s more money in here than I should have.”

She laughs. “I would love to have that problem.”

I laugh awkwardly too. “No, really, is there a way to tell where it came from?”

She does a few clicks to get back to my account and shakes her head. “It looks like you deposited ten thousand dollars the day after you opened the account.”

I stand there staring dumbly at her until the man in line clears his throat and I thank her for her time before driving in a stupor to work.

How would Brewster access my account and why wouldn’t he and Aunt Darby tell me that was happening? I mean, the gesture is generous, but the

whole thing is beyond strange. As I walk into the restaurant, most would feel elated that things are falling into place financially, a magical sum dropping into my account without me doing anything, but a sense of dread is building, and not slowly, but more like careening into mountain-sized red flags.

Something isn't right.

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CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

Work is uneventful. It's busy but manageable and I keep watching for the guys, hoping they might come in. It's just as well that they don't—I'm able to focus on the tasks at hand and get to know my coworkers a little better. Mel is a riot. She's worked here the longest and knows everyone in town and all the gossip that goes along with them. I'd say she's in her forties maybe and on the hunt for a good man.

“Sad to see that your aunt snagged the one wealthy man in the area that I'd show my parts,” she says, laughing her husky laugh.

“Sorry?” I laugh apologetically, cringing at the thought of her parts and Brewster's parts and anyone else's parts.

“Girl, if I had the chance to sit pretty in that house while going to Loxley Prep, you would not find me hostessing at Maverick's. What is a gorgeous girl like you doing stuck here?”

A family of four comes in and Mel yells out their names and hustles them to a table in her area, which is lovely since I didn't know how to answer that question.

Everyone assumes I'm a mooch, and I guess I am since as of now I am living in someone else's home without paying anything...I'm actually getting *paid* to live in his home. So weird.

I deposited a thousand dollars and had another ten thousand in my account. That's what plays over and over in my mind while I try to keep up with work.

I shake my head and chat with Mel and Samson when things get slow. I like him too. He says two words to Mel's hundred, but he's just as delighted in her gossip as I am. In fact, I suspect if Mel would open her eyes and be

willing to go for someone younger than her and not as rich as Brewster Vandenberg, Samson would be happy to fill in the boyfriend slot.

The hours go by quickly and when I step outside, the chill goes straight through me. Damn, I thought I had a little more time before the weather killed me around here. I hurry to the Jeep and see an SUV stalling in the parking lot. It looks like Abel's, but I'm too cold to find out. I pull out of the parking lot and notice it trails behind me, keeping a little distance between us but making all the same turns. I don't know what to do, whether to go home or whether to lose the vehicle, so I take a quick left and then a right and park on a side street, turning my lights off. I wait for a few minutes and then drive home, hoping I imagined that. It was probably just someone eating at Maverick's and leaving at the same time, no big deal.

But when I pull onto Vandenberg Waterfront, there are flashing lights everywhere. Police cars and other vehicles I don't recognize. People are milling in the grass out front with lanterns and flashlights. I pull in the driveway and park to the side of the chaos.

I rush toward Aunt Darby as soon as I spot her, and she's crying.

"What's going on?"

"I tried to call you. I'm sorry to bother you at work."

"I didn't even see that you'd called yet. I just got off. What's wrong?"

"Cassie is missing. When we realized she hadn't been at school today, Brewster alerted the police because he and Cade have not seen her since last night. They're going out to conduct a search."

"Wow. I can't believe it." I don't know what to say. Could she really be in danger somewhere, or did she take off and is trying to prove some kind of point? Either option is not looking good at the moment.

"Let me get my sweater and I'll help look."

She nods and I run into the house, nearly knocking into Cade.

He's a mess. His eyes are red, and he looks panicked.

"I'm so sorry, Cade. I'm getting something warmer on and then I'll come help look for her."

"Don't bother, *bitch*," he spits out. "She told me last night what you did to her."

"What? I didn't see her last night. What are you talking about?"

"She said you cut your own clothes up in an attempt to get money out of Dad and he fell for it!" He gets in my face. "I think it's your fault she ran, and I will make your life fucking miserable because of it. Do you

understand?”

“I didn’t, Cade. I didn’t touch my things and she was laughing about it right after. It’s okay, we can work things out, but it’s not like that. I want to help.”

“Get out of my way. You’re wasting my time. You need to get out of my sight and out of this house. I won’t let you turn my dad against me too.”

I stare after him, stunned as he walks away. I shake my head to clear it and run up the stairs, looking for my sweater and throwing it on.

The crowd has thinned considerably when I go back out, most already walking down the beach on both sides. We wander around the surrounding miles for hours, and around three in the morning, a scarf that Brewster thinks is hers is found back on the beach close to the house. It had been covered with sand and when the dogs finally arrived, they found it.

Most go home then, promising to return in the morning to continue the search, and some keep going, Brewster and Cade not stopping. I’m exhausted but determined not to stop until they do. I wonder if Brewster blames me for her disappearance too or if he even knows what Cassie told Cade. From what Aunt Darby said, it sounded like she’d as much as admitted to doing it. It’s not important right now. We just have to find her and God, I hope she’s okay.

Around five, the search is paused, and we shuffle back to the house, dead on our feet. I want to sleep, but I’m afraid if I do, I won’t make it to school on time.

“Oh, lovey, stay home and rest,” Aunt Darby says, when I tell her as much.

“I don’t want to get behind,” I argue but only barely.

“They’ll understand,” she says. “Sleep, and hopefully when we wake up, she’ll show up and it will all be a huge misunderstanding.”

“I hope you’re right.”

I pause when I pass her room. The door is open, and Brewster is standing in there, his head in his hands. He looks up when he hears me, and something flashes across his eyes. Something not entirely welcoming.

“She’ll come back,” I say softly, hoping with all my heart that I’m right.

I rush past the room and close my door, and it takes longer than I expected to fall into a fitful sleep.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

By the afternoon, it's been announced on every news station that Cassie Vandenberg is missing. There's talk of kidnapping and blackmail due to the fact that Brewster is such a wealthy man. Very little consideration that she could've just walked away.

For a town as small as Sikoma, it does seem unlikely that she could disappear without anyone seeing her, but as the hours pass, no one can account for seeing her in the hours she went missing.

Ever texts me throughout the day telling me what everyone at school is thinking. Rumors are flying like crazy. Most kids at school think she left. Some are saying she had a boyfriend, but no one knows who it is. I ask her if anyone thinks she was kidnapped...like a hostage situation.

Some of Cade's friends are saying that, but no one seems to believe that around here.

My hunch is that she left in the dark and maybe had someone help her get out of town, someone who is keeping quiet now, but I'd assume Cade would be her confidant and he is not faking how heartbroken he is. The guy looks like a zombie and is ready to punch anyone who looks at him wrong, and bursting into tears in the next second.

I pull Aunt Darby aside and ask how Brewster's doing.

"He's a mess," she says. "He's waiting for a call from the kidnapper."

"He has proof that she was kidnapped?"

"No, but he won't accept that she could've just left."

"I need to tell you something." I glance around and lean closer. "When I went to deposit the money you gave me from Brewster, I found ten thousand dollars in my account."

Her eyes widen. “What in the world?”

“I know. I think I should tell someone. The timing is too strange with everything going on with Cassie.”

She’s shaking her head before I can finish talking. “No, I don’t think so. It will just get things off track with finding her.”

“But what if it’s related?” I argue.

“How would it be? No, Lennon. Trust me. If anything, I’ll just mention it to Brewster. I bet he deposited that as a conciliatory gesture.”

“Wouldn’t he have said something? And he just lost money. I don’t think he’d—“

“Let’s just let the police keep looking,” she says. “Cassie will come home, and we can get to the bottom of this.” She squeezes my shoulder and I take a step back. “The more time that passes that we don’t find her, the scarier this becomes, you know?”

I nod. “Okay. I think I need to get out of here,” I tell her. “Cade thinks this is my fault, and I don’t want to make it worse by being in their faces all the time if Brewster believes that too.”

“He doesn’t,” she says, reaching out for my hand. “Just let things calm down a little, lay low, and it will all be okay.”

“I’m just not comfortable—” I start to say and stop myself. “Let me know if you hear anything.”

She nods and I go to my room, locking myself in. Nothing is making sense.

I get a text a few minutes later. Ronan.

Come over. It’s madness over there.

I think about it for a few minutes and text back. **Are you sure? It’s tempting.**

Please. If you don’t come over within ten minutes, I’m coming to you.

Don’t you dare. I laugh, imagining him trying to sneak in with all the cops around here.

I hike my backpack over my shoulder and do my best to sneak past everyone without being seen. Right before I reach the front door to the guys’ house, I text Aunt Darby.

I’ll be at a friend’s house. <3

She messages back right away. **Okay. Love you. Be extra careful, okay? Keep me posted on where you are.**

Okay. I love you too.

Ronan opens the door before I knock and when I step inside, he holds his arms out. I sink into him, my eyes closing as he envelops me in the warmest, safest hug.

“Breathe,” he whispers.

I take a deep breath and then another, feeling my muscles relax.

“Are you exhausted?” he asks when I pull away.

I nod. “It’s awful. There’s been no word from her and nothing but a possible scarf to go on. Even if it’s hers, it’s not that unusual since it was at the beach closest to her house.”

“What would help you right now?” he asks.

I smile up at him and he leans down, his forehead touching mine. “This sounds crazy, but I’d kill for a hot bath. I haven’t been able to get warm since being out all night.”

He grabs my hand and pulls me upstairs and into a room I didn’t see the other night. It’s huge and has a massive bed with no linens and little else in the way of furnishings, but when we go into the bathroom, I squeak.

“This tub!”

“I know. It’s why none of us claimed this room. We all prefer the showers. None of us have even used this. But have at it. I’ll grab some soap and a towel from my bathroom. One sec.”

He leaves and I turn on the water. The bathroom is all white and the tub is a huge oval, fitted into the windows overlooking the lake. I can’t believe they’ve never used it.

He’s back, hands full, and he puts everything in place, including a black candle on the ledge of the tub.

I lift an eyebrow.

“I like candles, what can I say?” He grins and lights the candle, tugging me toward him when he’s done. He kisses me and I feel weightless. He pulls back before I’m ready and I make a face. He kisses my nose and laughs.

“I put one of my shirts next to the towel. Let me know if you need anything, but I’ll give you some privacy. Just come find me when you’re ready for company. But you can just crawl into one of the beds around here and crash if that’s what you need, too.”

“Thank you, Ronan. Really. I can’t tell you how much this is helping me right now.”

He smooths my hair back, his fingers lingering on my cheeks. “I’m glad. It feels right, having you here.”

I sigh and grin as I sink into the tub a few minutes later. The water feels heavenly, even without all the amazing oils I used to put in my baths. That'll be the first on my list of luxuries when I get my paycheck. I've already decided I'm not touching the money Brewster gave me.

I lose track of time, lying in the tub until I'm a prune and have exhausted all the theories of where Cassie could be. The sun is beginning its descent and the colors are spectacular. I enjoy the show from the tub, filling it with more hot water as it cools. Eventually, I want to see what the guys are doing and put my bra and Ronan's shirt on. I can't bring myself to put on my underwear from earlier. Maybe I can borrow some of his boxers too.

I wander down the hallway, my hair wet against my back, but I'm warmed up finally, even with a wet head.

Ronan is lying back on his bed, reading one of his books from school when I tap on his door. He motions for me to come in and grins. "You feel better, don't you?"

"Like a new person."

"Come here." He slides over, making room for me on his bed, and I crawl next to him, settling into place in the crook of his shoulder. "You want to watch a movie or do homework? Sleep?" he asks.

I put my hand on his cheek and pull him closer, my lips finding his.

"Even better," he whispers.

His tongue dances with mine. A slow dance, tentative but so enticing, and it builds to a fevered frenzy with time. Ronan is patient, his kisses and his touch building until I can't take anymore. He stops and leans over me, his eyes twinkling.

"I really do want you to rest," he says. "I didn't call you over here just to have my way with you."

"This is better than any rest," I say.

He laughs and kisses down my neck. His hand creeps up my bare thigh and he groans when he finds no panty line.

"You're tempting me, Lennon Mae. My restraint is hanging by a goddamn thread."

I tug his shirt over his head and his amber eyes burn. I run my hands over his skin, his pecs and his biceps a shock to my system.

"No more scrawny boy," I whisper.

"Nothing scrawny here," he agrees. He slides the shirt up my legs, and his breath hitches when he sees me. He keeps going and when it's over my head,

he takes my bra off and leans back, staring at me.

“No more scrawny girl,” he whispers. “You’re a fucking goddess, Lennon.”

I flush under his approval and then yelp when he bends down and takes one long lick down my center. And then another and another, until he’s feasting on me like he’s never eaten until this moment.

I moan and cover my mouth with his pillow, and he moves it. “Let me hear you,” he rasps.

His tongue drives into me, plundering in and out, and then he swipes back up, circling my clit until I’m practically weeping. My back arches and I lean up on my elbows to watch him. And that’s when I see Bishop in the doorway. His eyes are tortured, his expression frozen, as he watches me and Ronan. I reach up and squeeze my nipple, twisting as Ronan attacks my clit with everything he has. Bishop’s hands fist, and I see the outline of his massive cock bob in his sweats before my head falls back and I explode into Ronan’s mouth.

Ronan slows everything but doesn’t stop, wringing everything possible out of my orgasm, and when I open my eyes again, Bishop is gone.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

“Have I missed the fun?” Wells asks a second later.

“I forgot to close the door,” I whisper, grabbing Ronan’s shirt to put back on.

“Please don’t cover up,” Wells says. He walks toward us, Ronan shifting to move next to me on the bed, and leans over to kiss my forehead. “Bishop looked murderous, so I had to come see what was happening. Carry on.”

I look at Ronan and he rolls his eyes, but he’s grinning. “This is weird, right?” I ask.

He laughs. “Yeah, a little bit. But doesn’t it feel right too?”

I glance at Wells, who looks elated to be alive, and groan. “Mostly. I’m not super experienced in all this and am not the sharing type, so I don’t know how to expect anything out of you guys.”

Wells’ expression shifts. “Oh, we’re not sharing you with anyone else,” he says. “The people in this household are staying one unit.” He pulls his five fingers together into a point like that explains everything. “We can talk about it later. I didn’t want to interrupt, I just wanted to watch.”

I cover my face with my hands and Ronan leans over and kisses me. And that’s all it takes for the awkwardness to go out the window for me. I kiss him the way I was before and when he thrusts into my stomach, his boxer briefs still on, I reach down and pull those off, getting my hands on his unbearably long cock.

“Why are all of you so perfect?” I whisper.

“I had to get in there first because the rest of the bodies are better than mine,” Wells says. He’s in the chair and when I look over, he’s stroking himself.

“Please, you are not suffering,” I mumble, looking back at Ronan. I stroke his silky length and then lower myself, putting my mouth around him.

“Fuck,” they both whisper.

He’s too big to fit in my mouth, so I work my hands, hoping it’ll come naturally because I’ve never done this before. I guess it does because I just follow my instincts, his sounds, and the way I get wetter the closer he gets. I moan as he hardens in my mouth and increase my tempo, taking him back as far as I can go and suctioning him with my mouth until he’s pumping into me.

I hear Wells moan as his fist moves faster and he lets out a long groan.

“Fuck, I’m gonna come, Lennon,” Ronan says, and I don’t stop, feeling the hot shoots in my mouth and swallowing as I get a breath. I lap it up until he’s spent, my mouth slowly sliding off of him. “Goddamn,” he whispers. “The fuck you do to me?”

I laugh and he pulls me on top of him, our chests slick with sweat. He squeezes my ass with both hands, and I feel him twitch beneath me. My eyes fall shut and when I open them, he’s looking at me with something close to awe.

I still can’t believe this is happening.

“That was the hottest thing I’ve ever seen,” Wells says, his voice husky.

“Are you okay?” Ronan asks.

“So good. I think if we never leave this room, I will be perfect,” I say, leaning my forehead against his.

“Stay,” Wells says. “There’s plenty of room here. We’ll let you sleep...if you want.”

I laugh and slide off of Ronan because if I keep lying on top of him, I’ll never leave.

“You make it very tempting, both of you. I should get back. I don’t want to worry my aunt, and Cade’s blaming me for what happened, so I want to stay out of his way and yet let him and Brewster know I’m there to help with finding Cassie.” I sit up and pull Ronan’s shirt on. “I don’t really know the right thing to do, but I think it’s best if I’m there for my aunt right now. She really wants this with Brewster.”

“Wait? Why does he blame you?” Ronan says, sitting up.

“Night before last, she told him I cut up my own clothes and blamed her to get the attention...and I don’t know—to get Brewster’s money maybe?”

“And he bought that? Shit. He knows what Cassie’s like. He can’t

seriously believe that shit.”

“What’s that saying—*blood is thicker than water*?” I regret saying it the minute the words leave my mouth, but I can’t take it back.

The warm, sexy afterglow shifts into unease, and I glance at them, trying to read their expressions.

“Obviously that’s not true in every situation,” I add. But it sounds weak and when they don’t jump in to say anything, I know that as much as the three of us want everything to be peaceful and resolved between us, it’s still not.

Will it ever be?

“I should go.”

No one argues that this time, but when I get my clothes on—over Ronan’s shirt because I’m not ready to let it go—and pick up my backpack, Wells walks over to me and kisses me. It’s short but effective. It helps soothe some of this weirdness.

“Don’t take any crap from that family,” he says.

I nod and glance at Ronan. He looks deep in thought, and I wish I knew what he was thinking. The white comforter is draped over him, making his dark skin stand out, and he looks like a masterpiece. I want to crawl back in bed with him and remind him that I’m the Lennon he remembers.

“Thank you for the hot bath and...our time together...I won’t forget it.”

That seems to jar him out of his thoughts and his expression softens. “It was better than I dreamed, and I won’t forget it either.”

I want to ask why this feels like goodbye, but I’m afraid I won’t like the answer. I walk out of the room and hear Wells and Ronan’s voices rising. I can’t tell if they’re arguing or not, and I walk away faster, down the stairs and am almost to the door when I see Bishop sitting in the striped chair. I pause. The room is barely lit, but I can just make out his features. He’s cold and detached and it’s another arrow to my heart.

“You hurt either one of them and I will see to it you never set foot near them again.”

It’s silent for a few beats and I nod before making my way to the door. I shut it behind me and lean against it, letting the frosty air revitalize me enough to make the walk to the Vandenberg’s. I don’t have time to crumble like my body and heart want to.

There are still news crews on the lawn surrounding the Vandenberg house and I make sure to go through the backyard of the house between and sneak

in the back door. I come to a standstill when I go through the kitchen and see Brewster, Aunt Darby, Cade, and two men in black suits.

Everyone but the two men looks shaken. Brewster has aged overnight, his hair lank and dark circles around his eyes. Cade looks shell-shocked, and Aunt Darby looks jittery. They see me walk in, but no one acknowledges me, so I keep quiet too.

“He wants a hundred million dollars.” Brewster’s voice is shaky and hollow.

The next thoughts whirling through my head are not something I’m proud of.

This amount must be more alarming than the ten.

Shame on you for thinking the man is anything but distraught about his daughter.

Well, at least Cade can’t blame me now for Cassie’s disappearance.

You’re thinking of yourself right now? You really are your father’s daughter.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

The kidnapper made contact an hour before I got home and expects payment by Monday night, ten p.m.

“How does he expect me to get that kind of money over the weekend?” Brewster says, wiping his eyes. “And I told you about the ten million missing. This is connected, I’m sure of it.”

“Your accountant says that was an error with your portfolio—“

“It wasn’t a fucking error. That money was taken. Figure out what fucking happened,” he yells.

I’m itchy, the need to tell them about the ten thousand about to burst out. Aunt Darby seems to know and gives me a pleading look to not say anything with a barely noticeable head shake.

I have to get out of here if I’m not supposed to say anything.

“Can I talk to you for a minute, Aunt Darby?” I whisper.

She glances at Brewster. “Can it wait?” she says.

I shake my head.

She follows me out into the hall. “Is everything okay?”

“I’ll be staying at the neighbors’—the white house. Message me day or night and I’ll be right over.”

“They’re good with you staying the night? Who lives there?”

“The guys. And yes, I can stay as long as I need. There’s a lot of room.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

“I’m too antsy staying here right now. I came back tonight because I was worried about you. I still am. This is crazy, Aunt Darby.”

“I’m fine. Don’t worry about me. We’re gonna get Cassie back and everything will be okay, but make sure you guard your heart with those

boys.”

“I’ll do my best.”

We stare at each other for a long moment and then hug quickly. Finally, I turn and walk upstairs and pack what little I have in a small suitcase and my backpack.

I glance at my phone, hoping there’s something from Wells or Ronan, but nothing.

I go out through a side door this time and get in my Jeep. If this doesn’t go well, I’ll stay in a hotel for the night. I have the money now to do that. I pull into their driveway and sit for a few minutes, losing my nerve.

My phone dings and I glance at it, relief filling me when I see a text from Wells.

Why are you sitting in our driveway? You need me to run away with you? Because I will. :)

I grin, letting out a long exhale. **Can I stay the night after all? If it’s not a good idea, I’ll get a hotel.**

Get in here.

I gather my things and walk toward the front door, my nerves kicking up. I’m not sure why I thought this would be a good idea. I turn and start to walk back toward my Jeep, when the SUV pulls in. I freeze like a deer in the headlights and watch as Abel steps out.

He walks toward me, stopping when he’s about two feet away. “Lennon Mae Gentry on the run?” he says coolly.

I wheel my suitcase closer. “I suppose it looks that way. Wells invited me to stay the night.”

“And you needed a suitcase for that?”

“This wasn’t a good idea.”

I move past him, and he reaches out, grabbing my arm. My skin goes hot, and my heart skitters out of control.

“Not so fast,” he says, his voice low. His breath skates across my ear and I close my eyes, willing my heart to slow down.

“What’s a girl like you doing fucking my brothers? Who knew you were such a dirty girl?” His raspy voice sends a shot straight between my legs and I hate myself for it. “When I said you were ours, I didn’t mean your pussy. I meant your soul.” He puts his hand on my heart and I swear my heart practically leaps out to grab him. He drops his hand, as if disgusted by me. “I’ll allow you to go in my house because I don’t want Wells and Ronan to

be disappointed by you once again.” He holds his thumb and pointer finger an inch apart. “You step out of line even the slightest bit and you won’t be welcome. Ever.”

I brush off my arm where his hand had been, feeling filthy. “If Ronan and Wells are able to forgive me, I don’t understand why you can’t.”

His voice gets even colder if that’s possible. “This pretense you insist on keeping up is why I can’t move on. My experience at camp was entirely different than the experience you or the guys had.” He leans close again and I shiver before he’s even spoken. “Stop pretending you don’t know what he did.”

I lean back and touch his arm and he flinches and shoves my hand off. “Tell me. I want to know. Please, Abel.”

There’s a moment where the moonlight hits his face just right and I see the vulnerability in his eyes, the uncertainty. I step closer to him, and his face is engulfed in darkness again.

The door opens and Wells stands there. “Lennon, are you okay?”

I’d feel smug that Wells is looking out for me if it weren’t for the fact that Abel’s shell seemed close to breaking for the first time. I glance at Abel again and he moves past me, walking toward the door.

“Stay out of my sight, Gentry,” he says, as he goes in the door.

Wells moves toward me and hugs me as I try not to cry. “I’m not going to stay,” I whisper.

“Yes, you are. It’s too late to go find a room somewhere, and this house is big enough for all of us. I know it might not seem like it right now, but Abel is softening. A year ago, there’s no way he would’ve allowed you within a thousand yards of this place.”

“That doesn’t make me feel better.”

He chuckles and puts his arm around my waist, leading me into the house.

“Ronan will want to see you,” he says. “He feels bad for the way he left things with you tonight.”

“I’m just so confused. One step forward, ten steps back, and then the next day, it just starts all over again.”

“Lennon, we don’t just have *baggage*, we each have about an airport’s worth of baggage avalanching on us. Some days it’s too much to carry.”

I nod. “I get that.” And I do. The memories of Camp Capitree, as well as the families that sent us there, are something that doesn’t go away. We’re each living in that shroud daily and just trying to survive.

“Come in. I offer up my body if you need someone to lose yourself in,” he says, the grin I can’t resist coming back out.

“I second that,” Ronan says behind us. I turn and he walks toward us, wrapping his arms around both of us. “I’m sorry for earlier. I just got snagged into the past for a second.”

“It’s okay.”

He picks up my suitcase and Wells tugs my backpack off of my shoulder and we walk inside. Bishop and Abel are nowhere to be seen and I breathe a sigh of relief over that. I know I can’t stay here and hide from them forever, but for tonight, maybe it will be okay.

Ronan leads me to the room with the tub, and this time, the bed has a comforter and piles of pillows on it.

“I got this ready when Wells said you were coming to stay. I’d rather you sleep in my bed with me, but I don’t want to assume...”

I put my hand on his cheek. “Thank you. This is perfect.”

Wells leans against the doorway. “Are you hungry? Do you need anything?”

“No, I’m exhausted actually.”

He comes over and puts his hands on my face, studying my eyes as if to seek the truth. When he’s satisfied, he kisses me. It’s long and sweet and just as I’m getting weak in the knees, he pulls away, leaving me wanting more.

“I’ll never leave if I don’t go now.”

“Stay,” I tell him. “You too, Ronan. If you want.”

Ronan closes the door behind him. “I want.”

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

I get ready for bed in the bathroom of my dreams. I thought I was fine without all the fancy things from my past, but this bathroom is something I'm one hundred percent on board with. I freshen up but put Ronan's shirt back on when I'm done and gather my hair into a huge updo, so it'll be out of my way as I sleep.

When I step into the bedroom, they're sitting on the end of the bed, one on either side. I giggle at how awkward they look and Wells grins back. Ronan groans and falls back on the bed. I step between his legs, and he sits up, putting his hands on my waist.

"How about we just sleep tonight? Let our minds process all of this," I say. "Wells and I were talking about the colossal amounts of baggage we're all carrying, and it's probably best if we hit pause when it gets to be too much."

"So, there's no getting lost in this body tonight? Is that what you're saying?" Wells says.

"Pretty much exactly what I'm saying." I laugh. I crawl over Ronan's legs and get in the center of the bed, sighing as I get under the covers. "These sheets are so soft."

"Abel is particular about the sheets that enter this house," Ronan says, laughing. "But none of us complain about it because they're goddamn amazing."

I stretch my legs out and nearly moan because he's right. Best thing ever. They crawl in next to me and the heat of their warm bodies next to me after this painfully long day feels like heaven. Wells tucks my back into his chest and my head rests on Ronan's shoulder. His fingers trace shapes along my

arm and before I know it, I'm asleep.

I've had to work close to the classrooms today. Most of the kids who go to class don't have to work, and I haven't been in the classroom once since I got here. I was a good student before I came, but I can't imagine how far behind I'll be when I get out.

If I can even go back to school. I don't know how that works without parents enrolling me.

Today is the day. I can't believe I'll be free of this place.

Free of my parents.

Forever.

I don't really care where we go, as long as I'll always be with the guys.

I glance at the huge clock outside the building...only three minutes since the last time I checked. It's throwing me off to be working out here when I've been far from the buildings for the past three weeks. It'll be much harder to sneak off to the west field. Five hours before we eat, and I can hopefully check with one of the guys to make sure everything is still set to leave tonight. My stomach is in knots. I can't wait for this part to be over. I haven't been able to relax all day. And it feels like Jordan senses something is happening because he has been riding me all day. I can barely move ten feet down the pavement without him inching closer and closer.

One more day, I keep telling myself over and over.

One more day and I'll never have to see this place again. Never have to see these people again. It can't come too soon.

Another glance at the clock. Another three minutes have passed.

I do my best to not look at the clock for at least five minutes and that becomes the game of how I pass the time while I work the next hour. But everything about this day is different.

I'm pulled out of the group and taken to the showers, where I'm given toiletries and a clean pair of jeans and a shirt.

"What's happening?" I ask even though I know this particular guard, Jo, a large muscular woman with slicked-back hair, won't answer. She's firm with her stick and short with her conversation, and she expects us to be silent at all times.

I take a shower, hardly able to relax enough to enjoy the hot water. I haven't had a hot shower in a couple of months, and it certainly hasn't been

alone. I hurriedly dry off and put the towel around my hair while I get dressed. I've just put my shoes on when I flip over the towel and let my wet hair tumble down my back.

Jo barks outside the door. "Time's up. Come on out, F-456."

I rush out without pulling my hair back. When the guards call, you jump. She leads me outside, handing me a lightweight jacket I haven't seen since I came to camp. My veins turn icy, and I stare up at her, the fear in me more palpable than it was when I was attacked by Jordan, more than any discipline I've gotten that's been too painful. I am terrified of what this means.

I put the jacket on and step outside with Jo gripping my elbow. I want to bolt now and never look back. One of the guards brings two groups near the classroom and my heart thuds when I see Abel, Ronan, Bishop, and Wells... or as they're known to everyone else: M-470, M-482, M-490, and M-501. They stare at me in surprise. It's been a while since I've been this clean and they've never seen me with my hair down.

Cars start rolling through the gravel and when they reach the pavement near the building, they pull to a stop. Mud kicks up around the tires, the rain we've gotten recently making a mess of the gravel. A police officer steps out, along with the mayor. I've met the mayor once before and didn't like him. And in the last car, my parents step out.

No. I try to move toward the guys, but Jo grips my arm and leads me to stand near the new brick sign we recently built. A cloth is over it right now—one that wasn't there before—and my parents walk toward me, along with the mayor and officer. A reporter, a cameraman, and a photographer watch from the sidelines, getting in place to record all of this.

I can't stop looking at the guys. I know the panic is showing on my face and it's making them nervous. I don't want them to do anything to get in trouble, but I want to escape more than anything. I start to cry, and Abel moves to come to me. Bishop holds him back when my parents move on either side and my mom hugs me. If it was something she normally did, I would happily sink into it, but she didn't hug me when she left me here. I don't remember her ever hugging me. When she lets go of me, my dad hugs me. I try to pull away and his voice is low in my ear as he says, "Make this difficult and you will not eat for a month."

I go still and he pulls back, all smiles. Tears stream down my face and my dad laughs.

“My daughter is so happy to see us, she can’t stop crying!” His voice booms and I jump.

The kids are quiet, but I don’t look at them. I stare at my friends, hoping they can see the agony this is for me. I didn’t want to keep the truth from them, but how can I explain the monsters that are my parents?

“We have happy news today. As you all know, I’m Dr. Lance Gentry, owner, founder, and the psychologist of Camp Capitree, and it’s my honor to welcome our visitors today. Mayor Hayes, would you like to say a few words?”

“I’d be honored to,” Mayor Hayes says. “Lance Gentry has done an amazing job of building a safe place for troubled kids to come and find respite, a place to work out their problems through therapy and becoming one with nature. When he first told me about the idea of this camp, I knew he was onto something, and I’m happy to say Camp Capitree is now recognized as an accredited facility for troubled kids and mental health. I’d like to symbolize the importance of this by unveiling the new sign. Camp Capitree will be here for years to come, and you will be able to say you were here for this momentous occasion!”

He looks around like he expects everyone to cheer, but no one utters a word. He shakes hands with my father, pictures are taken, and I stand there miserable. When the little ceremony or whatever this joke of a celebration is done, I try to move toward the guys. My dad clamps his hand on my shoulder, and I’m forced to stay put.

“Smile,” he says between his teeth.

I bare my teeth, and he clenches my shoulder harder until I make it more convincing.

I can’t wait until it’s over, so he’ll leave. I haven’t seen my parents in so long, and I’d hoped I’d never see them again.

But a few more pictures are taken, and he dismisses everyone. As they’re dispersing, he leads me to the car.

“Get in,” he says.

I turn to look at him in shock. “You want me to go with you?”

“Unless you’ve not had enough of this place?” he sneers.

“I don’t want to leave,” I tell him. It’s the wrong thing to say. I should’ve begged him to take me with them, then maybe he would’ve let me stay in hopes of torturing me.

“Too bad. Say goodbye to this place. If you’re lucky, you won’t be back.”

I choke back a sob and look back, trying to see the guys. They're standing in a row near the edge of the pavement, their faces splayed with shock. Abel is shaking. Bishop and Wells have their arms around him, and Ronan is behind them, his hand on Abel's back, each trying to steady him. Or keep him from running after me, I can't tell.

I lift my hand toward them, tears rolling down my face, and my dad shoves me in the car. When we pull away, I look back and they're still standing there watching me leave.

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CHAPTER FIFTY

Abel

“What the fuck was that?” I yell once the guys have all shown up at the place we agreed to meet before our escape.

They look stunned to see me talking and I feel bad that I’ve been such a wreck around them since I got out of solitary.

“She’s Gentry’s fucking daughter,” Ronan says, staring into the trees.

“I can’t believe it. I can’t goddamn believe she didn’t tell us,” Bishop says.

“Did you see how miserable she was?” Wells says, a tear falling down his face. “She hates him. We all know she hates her parents. She didn’t want to go with him.”

“Yeah? Then why didn’t she just tell us the truth from the beginning if she hates him so much? We would’ve forgiven her for that.” I kick a rock and let out a long strand of curses as I grip my foot. “Her braid must have been a sign to the guards to go easier on her.”

“They didn’t though. She went through the same things as us,” Wells argues.

I shake my head. Like hell she did. “No, she didn’t. And thank fuck for that.” I sigh. I’m angry with her, but mostly just devastated that she’s not here with us. “What are we gonna do without her?” I ask, my voice shaking. I clear my throat and give my whole body a shake. I’ve got all this energy coursing through my body, and I want to hit something, anything, but we

need to get out of here.

“We should go,” Bishop says. “We’ll find her later. Get to the bottom of this shit. But for now, we should get out of here.”

“You’re right. I’m sure she had a good reason for not telling us,” Ronan says. “And the sooner we get out of here, the sooner we can get her out of his house.”

I nod. “Yeah, I like that idea.” I reach out and their hands pile on top of mine. “This changes nothing. Except now we know where we’re going. We get Lennon out of that house and then go start a life together.”

Our hands lift and we have renewed energy as we go through the space in the fence. Besides the sole of Wells’ shoe snagging on a wire, the escape is seamless. We walk through the woods, and I can hear the sound of traffic on the street ahead. My heart rate picks up.

“Hear that? Real life awaits.” I start grinning as we walk that last stretch before the street comes into view. “Take a right up there at that tree line and then we’re home free.”

It’s so close, I can taste it.

We take a right and there perched against the front of a police car is Dr. Gentry. Or Lance, as he wanted me to call him in our “private time” together. I reach out to keep the others from stepping forward and notice the guards with tasers in the woods surrounding us.

Dr. Gentry walks toward us, smiling the same smile he gave the camera earlier. It’s as fake as it gets.

“Heard you boys were planning your escape tonight. I’m afraid that’s not gonna happen.” His smile widens. “Not on my watch. Did you really think my daughter wouldn’t tell me who the real troublemakers are around here?”

We are each sent to solitary, and it is a special kind of torture that I wouldn’t wish on anyone. The way your mind begins playing tricks on you. The hunger that never leaves. The darkness becomes a beast that I never minded before.

Months pass before I see the guys again.

I cry when I see them. They do too. They’re unrecognizable, their eyes hollowed out, caved-in stomachs, and the way Wells especially looks like he’s seen things he can never unsee. Their expressions when they see me let me know I’m not hiding it any better than they are.

It’s another six months before we try to escape again and this time, it

works. There's no Lennon on the inside, telling her daddy all our secrets.

It takes time, but with so much time to plan while in solitary, our future comes together faster than I'd hoped. We each eventually emancipate from our parents, Ronan making sure he stays far from his stepdad's circle of influence, and the four of us settle in a tiny apartment in Omaha, Nebraska for a while before making our way back to Minnesota. And my plan to take every cent of Lance Gentry's money and use it however I see fit takes root and multiplies.

Not a day goes by that I don't curse Lennon Mae Gentry's name.

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CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

I wake up, my face wet. I wipe my cheeks, moving Ronan's arm off of my waist and Wells' leg off of mine. I crawl as carefully out of bed as I can to not wake them up, and open the door, tiptoeing down the hall. I head to the kitchen, my steps silent across the hardwood floor.

I put my head in my hands and sob, my shoulders shaking as I let it out while still trying not to make a sound. I feel everything about that day my parents picked me up as strongly as if it was yesterday. Things I'd forgotten came back in the dream—my dad acting like I was crying because of being happy to see him. The way Abel shook—was he afraid of them taking me away or was it something else?

“Getting sexed up not what you thought it would be?” Bishop steps out of the shadows and opens the refrigerator.

I just cry harder, trying to walk around him and out of the room.

He puts his hand on my shoulder and stops me. “Hey, what's going on with you?”

“Don't pretend to care,” I croak.

“I'm not. But I care about those guys in your bed, and I want to know why you're out here acting like you're dying.”

I try to wipe my face and choke back a sob, looking at him in torment. “Why? You guys saw me leave that day. Yes, you didn't know who I was, and I should've told you, but they made me swear I wouldn't when they left me there. Didn't you see how leaving you was the last thing I wanted to do? You knew me. Couldn't you see the pain I was in?”

He stares down at me. A stone wall.

When he doesn't say anything for an excruciating minute, I try to move

around him.

“Why did you tell him our plan?” he says.

I turn and face. “What?”

“If you cared about us so much, why did you tell your father we were planning to leave that night? We were worried about you. You *did* look miserable, and something didn’t feel right. But then *you* sent him out there to catch us as we made our escape.”

“I didn’t,” I say in horror. “No...” I shake my head.

“He knew our exact location, said you’d told him who the real troublemakers were around there, and we were separated and put in solitary for six weeks. If you didn’t tell him, then who did?”

I have to grip the counter to steady myself. “Bishop. I didn’t tell him that. I swear to you I didn’t.” I lean over and throw up in the sink, my whole body trembling. When I’m done, I stand up straight and try to rinse it away. “I didn’t,” I say, my voice breaking. I start scrubbing my hands frantically with soap, and when I look at Bishop, his face is haunted. I can’t tell if he believes me or if he’s caught in the past with me. “I was locked in the basement of our house when I got home. I promise you I never said a word to anyone about leaving. Or anything about you at all. I was counting down the minutes until I could leave with you guys that day—” A sob breaks out again and I bend over, my head down, as I try to breathe through the nausea.

I rinse my hands again and again, until I feel Bishop’s hand on my back. I jump and he puts both arms around me, his chest to my back, as he reaches over and turns off the water. He wraps my hands in a towel and dries them and when he’s done with that, he stands there cocooning me between his arms until my shakes subside.

“I’m so sorry,” he whispers. He says it again in my hair, his lips against my head, whispering the words over and over as he gets me warm. He turns me around and pushes my hair back, wiping my tears away with his thumbs and then wrapping his arms around me again. My breathing steadies and calm washes over me the longer he holds me.

“You believe me?” I finally whisper.

“I do,” he says. “I never thought I’d say this, but I do believe you.”

“Thank you,” my voice cracks. “I wish I’d known all this time that that’s what you were told. I would’ve found you a lot sooner.”

“It might take a while before Abel comes around, but he needs to hear this. Do Ronan and Wells already know?”

“No. They’ve never told me what happened to you guys that night. It makes sense why you’ve hated me.”

I lay my head on his chest and his hands move slowly over my back in soothing circles. I let my hands roam over his back, loving the feel of his hard muscles shifting under my touch. It’s obvious the minute he hardens, the heat of him against me making my breath catch, and my nipples harden in response. His hands freeze on my back, and he pulls away, lifting me by my arms and setting me back.

“We can’t, Lennon. I’m sorry. I need this job. Too much is at stake here.” His eyes are glassy, and he looks at my lips, taking a step back. “I’ll try to make all of this right,” he whispers and walks away.

I stand in the kitchen for a few minutes, trying to get my bearings before I go back upstairs. I get a glass of water and drink most of it before tossing the rest in the sink. I get to the stairs and hear something, my curiosity getting the better of me when I realize I wasn’t given the full tour of whatever is down the hallway to the left. I follow the sound and there is a blue light underneath coming from the cracked door. I push the door open, and Abel is sitting in front of at least a dozen screens. I take a few steps closer, wanting to see what has him so entranced that he doesn’t even hear me. I focus on the screens and see a yard in one, in another, an office...it looks familiar, but it’s dark, so I can’t fully tell where it is. Another screen has a kitchen, and I put a hand on my chest, my eyes moving rapidly to the other screens with different bedrooms. When I see mine, I gasp, covering my mouth quickly when I realize he heard. He turns and his eyes narrow on me.

I back away and he stands up, stalking toward me. I slam into the door, and he shuts it behind me, forcing me into it.

“Why are you watching the Vandenberg house?”

“Don’t you think it’s suspicious that right as you move into the house, Vandenberg’s daughter is taken?”

“Let me go.”

“There’s no one you can tattle to now, Lennon,” he says, his lips curving into a twisted smile. “And no one would believe you if you did.”

“What have you done?” I cry.

“It all comes back to you,” he says. “So maybe you should tell me what you’ve done.”

To Be Continued...

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you for diving into the Loxley Prep world with me! I hope you'll enjoy this series as much as I've enjoyed writing it.

Thank you, Emily Wittig Designs, for these beautiful covers. I'm in love with them and think you're wonderful.

Thank you, Christine Estevez, for editing my words and being awesome every day.

Thank you, LP, TK, and TH, for being incredible betas!

Thank you, Nina Grinstead and Valentine PR, for holding my hand along the way and for being amazing.

Thank you to my family and friends who motivate, encourage, and love me no matter what.

And thank you to every reader, blogger, and author who has shared my books and left reviews. I'm so grateful you're reading my stories!

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When Hattie Jude is not reading, she's writing...and when she's not doing either of those things, she wishes she was.

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