



TWISTED
Games

BOYS OF BRIAR HALL
BOOK THREE

ELENA LAWSON

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Prologue

UNKNOWN

THE PAIN WOKE ME.

Its angry claws dug into my chest and arms, dragging me up from the depths of a deep and dreamless unconsciousness.

A foul taste defiled my dry mouth and I resisted the swift and sudden urge to turn over and vomit onto the cement floor. But, unwilling to move just yet, I forced the rank taste of death down as I swallowed, trying to moisten my aching throat. Knowing there would be nothing to throw up even if I succumbed to the urge. My body felt frail, wisp-like as though hollowed out and stuffed with leaves.

My sight returned in increments, eyelids heavy and crusted so thickly my eyelashes plucked themselves free of my flesh as I worked to open them.

Breathing hurt.

My brain was on fire.

I couldn't feel my fingers.

But I was alive.

My neck strained as I turned stiffly on the sweat-soaked pillow beneath my head, trying to blink through the haze clouding my eyes. The cold room wavered in and out of focus. I groaned, but that only made my ribs scream in protest of the vibration.

Fuck.

I couldn't be sure how much longer I lay there in a pool of my own sweat and blood and piss and stink, but long enough that the feeling returned to my fingers. Long enough that I could draw a fuller breath and the dim light no longer seared my eyes. Until I could move enough to reach over my battered body to the IV needle I'd haphazardly jabbed into my vein when the fever came on, bringing with it a delirium so complete that I saw four of my own arm as I fed the needle into my skin. I tugged it out with a grunt, and felt the warmth of fresh blood pool and spill down my forearm.

The IV bag hung shriveled where I'd fastened it to the wall above my cot with a blade stabbed directly into the wooden beam.

I had no doubt it was that bag of hydrative solution that prevented my death.

I'd misjudged the injuries.

The broken ribs were more a nuisance than anything, and gratefully none had punctured a lung. The fractured elbow would heal. The bleeding into the skin and soft tissues around my chest was ugly as shit but it would fade with time and proper circulation. It was the head trauma I'd misjudged. The internal bleeding had seemed slight. Manageable without emergency intervention.

But instead of better, it'd gotten so much worse.

It was a small miracle I was alive. That I still had the ability of rational thought.

Though I doubted the throbbing ache pressing on my skull like a drum would ease any time soon.

Hands shaking, I carefully eased myself upright, shutting my eyes against a wave of vertigo I was sure would take me to the floor. But my grip on the cot's edge saved me from the fall and I waited until it passed.

My cell phone peeked out from beneath the cot and bent to grab it, coughing when the movement sent a bolt of lancing pain through my side.

The screen flashed to life, blinding me, the battery icon in the top corner red and blinking.

This couldn't be right.

I'd been on this cot, unconscious for five days. Nearly a fucking week.

Slowly desiccating in this dungeon of my own making.

My upper lip curled into a snarl.

What had I missed in those days.

Where was she?

Was she still alive?

How many times had she allowed them to touch her?

My blood heated with a fury so swift and all consuming it made my vision blur and tint with crimson. Made my weak muscles shudder and ache. The Crows would be punished for touching what was mine. No amount of pain or weakness would stop me from meting it out.

It'd been too long.

A week since the fall from the window, and I could do nothing in this state. I had to wonder if I could even stand, much less follow her.

Ava Jade. What have you been up to?

The question ate at me, striking a new fire in my blood. Enough to propel me to standing.

My legs buckled, but I braced myself on the cool wall, damp with condensation.

It took minutes to cross the small room, but I got there, to the long desk and the sleeping monitors awaiting the stroke of my fingers to wake them.

I slipped into my chair, numb fingers turning each one on in turn before reaching below to the small fridge to grab a bottle of water.

The unwatched video and audio files were in the hundreds. I settled in to watch and listen to every last one, sipping the

chilled water as they began to play, their sounds filling the space. Filling my mind. Sharpening my focus and my resolve.

It took hours, and with each recording, my muscles tensed. Until they burned. Until *I* burned.

My knees popped as I rose once more, going to the wall where I kept her.

Her face stared down at me with anger. With disdain. With resolve. With eyes sparking with life.

I pressed a palm to one of the photos I developed. The one of her asleep in her room at Briar Hall. So innocent. So peaceful. It was a face I doubted any other man had ever seen. I treasured it most of all.

I thought she would, but she didn't wake when I crept in. Not when I hid in the shadows at the edge of the room with her panties in one fist pressed to my face and my cock in the other. I liked that she smoked pot with Becca some nights before bed. Those were the nights she slept the soundest. Though I wouldn't tolerate such behavior once she was in my possession.

My eyes shut as I recalled that scent. The scent of her pussy. The taste, diluted by the soapy flavor of her laundry detergent.

Soon, there would be nothing to dilute that taste. Nothing to corrupt its singular essence.

When she was mine, and no one else's.

I traced the red line of string fastened between two pins on the wall, the one tracing upward, to the blueprints for Briar Hall, and across to the picture of Rebecca Hart. Her network of red lines flaring out like a spider's web over the top of the wall. To her father and his business dealings. Her mother's death certificate. Her connection to the Crows. She was always my mark. The girl Rook Clayton had taken a sexual interest in last year. The girl who had every reason to hate the Crows. The girl who, if I worked her just right, would prove a worthy asset and informant. I'd hoped, eventually, to turn her into a full blown spy. Convince her to bed them, gather better intel.

For me. For *us*. For all the things she ever wanted but couldn't have.

Once, Becca's was the only female face on this wall.

And then everything changed...

I could hardly believe it when I saw Ava Jade all those weeks ago on the pre-dawn streets of Thorn Valley. There she was, muttering curses to herself as she hauled a swollen suitcase up the street. Though I didn't know her name then, only her face. Those fiery eyes. The whip of her sleek black hair.

I wasn't certain at first, but I followed her, unwilling to lose her again if fate had brought us back together.

I'd searched for her after that night in Lennox at the train tracks, but I never found her. I assumed she'd run after what she did.

The memory made my cock hard in my soiled jeans and I pawed at it, a shuddering breath passing my lips.

If I'd known how she would haunt my every sleeping and waking moment, I'd have taken her then, but I was younger. I hadn't come into myself. I didn't know what it was to own another person. To bend them to my will. To break them. To burn myself so irrevocably into their minds—to imprint myself so fully onto their souls—that they were no longer *them* anymore, but just extensions of *me*.

Mine.

And just like Ava Jade, there was no one to miss them when they never resurfaced again.

But I wouldn't bury her.

Her, I would keep. I would practice restraint *for her*.

She would see, I could be her everything and more.

How serendipitous, that if I hadn't taken her father's life, she never would have left Lennox. Never would have gone to Thorn Valley. I might never have found her.

Fate.

She just needed time and a strong hand to show her what she couldn't see for herself. That she was better off without her father. Better off without The Crows. Better off with me.

It would take time and patience to show her. To smother her fire and teach her obedience.

I would do it for her. I would do anything for her.

But first, there were three *problems* to deal with.

Well, more than three, but I would start with them just as I'd always planned to. *The Crows*.

It would be to both my personal benefit and my advancement in the gang to decimate them, and after all the recon I'd been doing I was finally ready.

I'd do it for Ava Jade.

But I was also going to do it for *me*.

We deserved Thorn Valley and all the territory between. It should've been ours from the start. If our leader had half a brain, it'd already be in our hands. But no one seemed to understand that a man's greatest weapon was his mind. Not his gun. Nor the number of bullets inside it.

His *mind* and what he could do with it. The things he could make happen simply with knowledge and know how.

I reached for the new papers resting in the print basket atop the desk and tucked a few into Ava Jade's file from Briar Hall to inspect with a closer eye when my head stopped throbbing. The others I placed on the board, tacking them on, running red thread between every other thing they could be connected to.

The connection formed immediately between two items and I grinned. *Gotcha*. Snatching a permanent marker, I wrote *does daddy know?* Beside the gps location I just pinned. A concert venue.

I grabbed a burner phone from the basket next to the printer and slid the cheap plastic backing off to shove in a prepaid SIM card, powering it on. A message waited for me there. One I hadn't expected.

Unknown: This ends now. If you have even a shred of dignity, meet me in person. I want to see the face of the coward who tried to drug me.

I smiled.

Not yet, my love.

But soon. Sooner than you think. Once they're gone, and it's only you.

I quickly powered off the phone and pulled out the sim. I couldn't use it now. Too risky.

I'd have to get a message to the boss another way. Let him know I was alive. Still undercover.

And Becca. After what I saw and heard from my surveillance, she would no longer be of use to me. A shame. She'd proven great practice for the real thing. A testament to my ability to control my darkest urges. It wasn't without great difficulty at first, but once I began to look at it as the game it was, it became easier. Easier still when it was a game I kept winning.

I'd take this minor loss and learn from it. As I had every other loss before it.

The Crows wouldn't catch me off guard again.

I unpinned the single sheet of paper containing my false identity next to Becca's photo and tore it in two.

For Becca, I was Jericho.

But I had different names for others.

None of them my real name.

I couldn't stand the sound of it spoken aloud.

All I could hear was my mother's voice in that name. Her threats. Her dominance. Her manic commands to do it more, do it better, do it, *or else*.

My self reckoning happened the day I turned the tables. The moment I took the control from her hands and put into my own. Wrapping those hands around her pale throat. The

transference of power flooded me like a drug. And I couldn't get enough.

I wouldn't ever get enough.

It was time for a new persona. A new face. A new way in.

And I had just the thing.

They wouldn't even see me coming.

CHAPTER

One

GREY

THE ROVER'S tail lights vanished from view, carrying Ava Jade and Becca away from Nomansland. Away from us.

Numbly, I watched them go, only half aware of Diesel exiting the warehouse behind us, grunting as the others helped him walk.

“Get in the fucking car,” Rook growled, stalking back toward the stolen Civic still idling with three doors open wide to the night air. “We need to go after her.”

“No,” Corvus called, his voice a deadened monotone.

When Rook spun to glare at Corvus, nostrils flaring, I cringed at the mosaic of pain and fury in his black eyes. There wasn't much that affected him like that, mostly because he didn't give two shits about anything in this world except for us.

Us and *her*.

“*No?*” Rook demanded, his body heaving as heavy breaths flooded his lungs and a muscle twitched in his upper lip. “What do you mean ‘no’?”

Corvus' hurt gaze dragged to me, but I wouldn't help him. I couldn't.

Didn't know what to do.

She left.

She left.

Becca betrayed her, betrayed *us*, and she saved her anyway. Saved her and left us behind.

“Boys,” Diesel called, his voice tight.

Blinking, I looked away from Rook’s seething anger and Corvus’ cold eyes, finding my feet as I turned to face our father.

Neither Corvus nor I stopped Rook as he stormed back, his face pinched as he strode straight to Diesel, making our father stand straighter, shucking off the help of Pinkie and Axel helping him stand.

My stomach turned as Rook stopped no more than a few inches from Diesel, his entire body shuddering with barely controlled rage. “Why?” he hissed in Diesel’s face.

“You know why, Son,” Diesel replied calmly.

“Becca is a girl who made a foolish mistake,” Rook snarled, his fists turning to claws at his sides. “She was manipulated. Played. She—”

“Is a girl who could’ve gotten you all killed,” Diesel finished, snapping back at Rook.

My brother scoffed, bringing up a hand to rub over the stubble coating his jaw as he stepped back, purposefully putting distance between himself and Diesel, not trusting his control.

“Boss, here,” Pinkie said, setting a chair in the middle of the abandoned road for Diesel to sit on, a first aid kit hanging from his pinkie. “Sit down, let’s patch that up—”

“No,” Diesel replied. “I’ll do it. Leave the kit. Get the others to the Vet before they bleed out. We’ll come back for Garrett’s body.”

Ice water filtered into my veins, and I closed my eyes against a wave of stomach-churning vertigo.

I knew Garrett. He was a good man. But I couldn’t fault AJ for doing what she felt she needed to survive. This was as

much Diesel's fault as it was hers.

"Boss..."

"Go. I need to talk to my sons."

Pinkie hesitated, eyeing us all in turn before doing as he was bid, piling the other injured Saints into a van before taking off.

Diesel kept a wary eye on a pacing Rook as he sank onto the chair and opened the first aid kit with sloppy fingers. He was pale, I realized. Far too pale. The hollows beneath his eyes darker than I'd ever seen them.

I wanted to be angry with him like Rook. I wanted to hate him. To run after Ava Jade and put my arms around her. Keep her safe. Take her far away from here.

But also...

This man was my father. The only father I'd ever known. A man who would do anything to protect his sons. *Anything*.

I could never run if it meant betraying him. If it meant betraying this family.

Teeth clenched, I went to him as the van sped past us, bumping from the gravel at the side of the road onto the pavement. I bent to my knee and took the kit from him, unzipping it the rest of the way to lay it out on the road next to us. I didn't ask what happened, only gripped the edge of his jeans and tore them all the way up to his knee, exposing a gnarly injury to his Achilles and a puddle of blood forming around the sole of his boot.

My hands stilled for a moment, and I grimaced. It was beyond my skill to mend. It would be a miracle if Ava Jade hadn't severed the tendon and nerve endings. I could patch it for now, stop the bleeding, but it needed seeing to by a professional if he expected to walk properly on it ever again.

I glanced up at him, conveying that I was out of my depth here. He nodded. "Do what you can."

"You should see a surgeon."

“This is more important.”

I didn't argue, and the smell of tobacco drifted to me on the cool breeze as I did my best to sterilize and suture the wound, winding it tight with gauze and tape. It was a hack job if I'd ever done one, but it would do for now.

Rook hardly finished his first cigarette before stomping on its ashes and lighting another, gaze fixed to the pavement as he paced.

Diesel gave me a nod as I finished and put away the gauze, flipping the first aid kit closed as I pushed back to standing.

“This is fucked.” Rook growled to himself, halting his pacing to stand near Corvus, who for once, seemed to have absolutely nothing to say. “You should've told us what was going on, Dies. We could've handled it.”

“You might not like the way I decided to handle things,” Diesel challenged him. “But I wasn't wrong about her. I'm *not* wrong about her.”

His phone chimed in his pocket, and he drew it out, the edges of his mouth turning down as he read whatever message waited for him there.

“You *are*,” Rook argued, and this time, I had to agree with him.

“He's right,” I told Diesel, speaking for the first time since she left. My voice hoarse and raw. “What Becca did was stupid. She shouldn't have gotten herself mixed up with an Ace in the first place, but from the sounds of it, she was played *hard*. AJ is a lot of things, but she isn't stupid. She wouldn't let her friend die for making a mistake.”

It took everything I had in me to hold Diesel's accusing stare. It was obvious he thought I—out of all of us—would agree with him. And I did, to a certain extent.

When I didn't buckle, Diesel sighed, leaning back heavily in the old wooden chair, looking for all the world like the king of anarchy he was, amid the scattered debris and abandoned buildings around us. “Perhaps I may have taken things a *little*

too far, but I promise you boys, I am *not* wrong about the girl. And I can prove it.”

He had our attention now. Even Corvus seemed to come back to himself, gaunt face lifting to peer over at Diesel. “What do you mean?”

“There’s something I need you all to see, and once you see it, you can decide for yourselves what is to be done with your *Sparrow*.”

Corvus winced.

“And if we decide she’s worthy after seeing whatever it is you intend to show us?” I hedged, needing to be clear.

Diesel locked his cool blue eyes on me, analyzing the meaning behind my words before replying. *You won’t*, his eyes said, but his mouth said something different. “Then I won’t fight you. I will welcome her as a Saint.”

Hope bloomed in my chest, but it couldn’t grow past the iron cage of my ribs, making the doubt seep back into my bloodstream and coat my thoughts like poison.

There was another unknown variable in all this, and it hurt to even allow the thought to take root.

We might’ve already lost her anyway.

What if it were too late?

After this, would she even want anything to do with us? With the Saints?

Rook began pacing again, two steps to the right, turn, three steps left, and back again, a knot between his brows. “This isn’t right. I don’t fucking like it.”

He stopped, his back to us as he stared down the road as though he could make her come back with the force of his will alone.

He whirled on Diesel. “What is it that you know?”

“I need you to think rationally, son. I understand your anger. It isn’t entirely misplaced. But right now, I need you to trust me. There’s someplace we need to be.”

He looked between the three of us, holding each of our gazes before speaking again. “Are you with me?”

The dual meaning of the question wasn’t lost on any of us and my teeth locked, making it impossible for me to answer him.

“Grey, help him up,” Corvus decided for the three of us. “We’ll take the Civic.”

The stiffness in Diesel’s shoulders abated, but the hardness creasing the skin around his mouth and eyes never ceased.

Corvus’ reply told him all he needed to know. We would go with him, but that didn’t mean we were *with him*, not when it came to Ava Jade. I wished I could reassure him. Wanted to. But it felt like a betrayal.

The same emotion was mirrored on both my brothers’ faces.

If faced with a choice between Ava Jade and Diesel, we wouldn’t choose.

We couldn’t choose.

Would whatever Diesel intended to show us change our minds?

My stomach soured as my mind filled with a million possibilities—the ways in which she could be permanently expunged from my heart and mind. There weren’t many, and I doubted any of them would ever fully do the job of erasing her from the empty places inside of me she’d filled but...

What if Diesel were right?

What if there were a way?

Could I bring myself to do what needed to be done?

Hollow, I pulled Diesel’s arm over my shoulders and hauled him to his feet, taking the bulk of his weight. We followed Rook and Corvus to the Civic, each footfall feeling as though it was taking me one step closer to my destruction.

CHAPTER

Two

AVA JADE

“ARE YOU SURE HE’S COMING?” I asked Becca for the second time, my fingers tightening on the wheel.

I squinted into the growing dawn light outside of her father’s Thorn Valley office building, trying to find signs of life. We were sitting ducks here. It was possibly the *worst* fucking place Becca could have asked her father’s driver to pick her up, but she’d hung up my cell before I could tell her to make alternate arrangements.

“I’m sure.”

I vibrated in the seat, muttering to myself. “Come on. *Come on.*”

“Aves...can we please talk about—”

“*There!*” I interrupted her, jerking forward to point at the sleek black sedan pulling around the building. “Is that him? Do you know the plate number?”

I unsheathed a blade and sat up straighter, watching as the car inched closer.

“No, but...” Becca leaned forward from the back seat, her body fitting easily between the two front seats. “That’s definitely him.”

I relaxed, though not entirely. I could feel Becca’s eyes on me, but I couldn’t bring myself to look at her. Didn’t want her to see how much her betrayal had shattered me.

“You need to go,” I said, swallowing past the lump in my throat. “Do exactly as I said. Your driver has your passport, right?”

I caught her slow nod from the corner of my eye. She’d asked him to bring it during their call.

“Good. Then you go straight to the airport. Go to your dad’s vacation home in Europe—”

“It’s in Paris, you should come—”

“*Shhh*,” I hushed her sharply, my body flushing with heat. “Don’t say anything else. I don’t want to know where it is.”

“Do you really think they’ll come after me?”

At the fear in her voice, I finally cracked, turning just enough to see the gleam of it in her brown eyes. “I don’t know,” I told her honestly.

She inhaled shakily and cleared her throat as the black sedan pulled up beside the Rover in the empty backlot of the building. “Are you going to be okay?” she asked in a watery voice.

“I don’t know that either,” I admitted. “But I’m done running. It’s time for these *Saints* to pay for their sins.”

Becca’s grip on the seat tightened until her knuckles were white. “I can’t talk you out of it?”

“No.”

She hung her head. “For what it’s worth...I really am sorry. I should’ve—”

“*Should’ve* doesn’t help me, Becks,” I snapped, completely unable to keep a leash on myself. She needed to leave now before *I* became the danger she needed to run from.

Hurt could turn to fury in the blink of an eye, and if I let myself go there...

“I need you to go. *Now*. Call me when you land, and again when you’re settled in the house, but don’t call from a landline. Get a burner at the airport.”

“Okay.”

I nodded, and she hesitated for only another few seconds before she pushed out the door and shut it behind her, climbing into the back of the sedan. I waited until it left the lot and then followed it, trailing it to the edge of town. Once it left the limits of Thorn Valley, I let the Rover’s engine slow and pulled onto the shoulder, my throat burning until my vision blurred with tears.

I slammed my open palms on the steering wheel, and when the sting settled something inside of me, I did it again. And *again*.

Until the tears were gone and my palms were red and throbbing. Only then did I even bother trying to slow my breathing. Only then did I do a quick sweep of the Rover for any GPS trackers and then ease off the shoulder and back onto the highway, pulling a tire-squealing U-turn to head down the side-road a few miles back the way I’d come.

Toward the Docks. Where *Vick* would no doubt already be awaiting my arrival.

I couldn’t let myself think about what I was going to do when I got there. Not about what I would say either. I’d lose my nerve.

I *couldn’t* lose my nerve.

Fresh, morning mountain air blew into my face from the open window, and I closed my eyes, thinking how easy it might be to just let the wheel go. Let the Rover drift...

The tires jerked, bumping onto the shoulder, and my eyes flew open, hands working to pull me back onto the road, my pulse thudding in my ears.

Fuck.

I jammed the radio button, twisting the volume dial to crank it. Needing to distract myself.

The host of *The Edge* came on, and I almost changed the station to something that was actually playing music when his next words made me pause.

“If you were lucky enough to catch their show in Lodi, then you might already know what all the fuss is about. Not only did The Bone Man feature a whole new song, but also a whole new *voice*. The mystery surrounding the man himself has doubled as we all try to figure out who she is.”

“That’s right, Randy,” the other host, a woman, added. “It’s such a unique voice, but one that complemented Primal Ethos so perfectly. A tall order if you ask me.”

Something in my chest tightened.

“And for him not to have even credited whoever it was...” Randy trailed off.

“Do you think we have another mystery singer?”

A laugh. “Definitely possible.”

“All right folks, here it is from Primal Ethos, the live version of his brand new song, *Sparrow!*”

The opening notes of the song flowed into the Rover, and I was thrust back in time. To that night in Lodi, and as his voice came over the air, that thing that’d been tight in my chest only a moment ago shriveled to dust.

Corvus’ brusque voice flowed through the speakers in surround sound, echoing inside of my skull. “This one’s called Sparrow.”

I jammed the off button before he could begin to sing, feeling sick and hot and freezing cold all at once.

He’d just stood there. Mute while Grey and Rook at least had the decency to speak. To try to work through what had happened, but Corvus became statuesque. A lump of useless muscle and flesh with a brooding aura. He just stood aside and told them to let me leave. I didn’t know what to think about that. The unfeeling, unflinching monster in his stare had shaken me to my core.

But Rook...

He’d wanted to come with me.

The weight of the hard black stone against my clavicle felt almost too much to bear, but still I couldn't seem to make myself take it off. I would later. When I was alone. And I would find a way to get it back to him. I wanted Diesel to suffer. On some level, I wanted the Crows to as well, but I wouldn't become the Ghost Rook named me for before returning this last memento of his mother to him.

The Docks came into view as I rounded a corner in the bending road, and I flinched as warm orange-hued light blinded me. The sun cleared the horizon, and its reflection glimmered off the rippling waters of Spirit Lake, practically burning out my fucking retinas.

My mouth went dry as I pulled into the lot, searching for another vehicle. A police vehicle. But there was nothing. Not even the standard issue undercover sedan I'd thought he might arrive in. He was smarter than I gave him credit for then, not parking anywhere near here.

I cursed myself for not having that same foresight. This was Saint property, after all. I assured myself they wouldn't be coming anywhere near here with weeks still until the next full moon party, and put the Rover in park, sitting there while it idled for a minute, letting the calm lake and the warmth of the sun on my itchy, blood-spattered skin bring me a measure of peace.

For a second, I could almost pretend the last twenty-four hours hadn't happened at all. My best friend hadn't been plotting behind my back. Diesel hadn't tried to kill her *and me*. My guys...

No, not mine.

They were never mine.

Sighing, I stepped out of the Rover, realizing I was barefoot and trying to remember when I'd lost my shoes. Back in the warehouse, no doubt. The sharp gravel bit into the soft soles of my feet as I made my way to the dock, until it was replaced by the sharp prick of splinters instead.

I couldn't bring myself to care about either. At least the sting with each step reminded me that I was still alive. And living girls could have their vengeance before they became dead girls.

The weathered barn-like door creaked and groaned as I pushed it to one side, old green paint flaking off the wood. Inside it smelled of stale liquor and regret. Across the floor stood the low stage. Atop it, discolored leather sofas languished in the shadows. Desolate. Thrones without their kings.

I could picture them there so clearly. I had been standing just over there when I noticed them watching me that night. How their dark eyes had glittered with malice and a hunger so deep it roiled in the pit of my own stomach.

Forcing myself to look away, my jaw ticked as I turned my attention to the narrow doorway at the back of the warehouse. Standing ajar, it allowed the morning sunlight to filter into the space, along with a welcome breeze off the lake that carried with it scents much less assaulting than the ones currently cloying up my nose.

The shuffle of boots over wood outside and I knew that he was already here. Had likely been waiting a while. Why else venture out into the open unless it was to get away from this stink?

Just in case, I moved with quick, careful steps to the raised stage and snagged a broken bottle, careful not to let the glass ring against the wood. I couldn't bring myself to take the gun I'd stolen from one of Diesel's men back in Nomansland. If I were being honest, I hardly knew how to use one, anyway. I'd left it in the Rover, wiped clean of my prints.

It was a small miracle I hadn't accidentally shot Corvus when I was aiming for the pavement near his feet to show him I meant business.

My throat went dry, and I methodically tried to force a burning swallow, nearly coughing.

“Ava Jade?”

Officer Vick's distinct tone filtered into the warehouse, and I managed to somehow both relax and stiffen anew at the sound of it.

My fist clenched around the bottle neck as I made my way to the back exit and out onto the narrow deck surrounding the pier. I lifted my free hand to shield my eyes from the sun as it washed me in warm bright light. Officer Vick stood against the railing, next to a hold in the rotting decking that I had on good authority was made by Bitchface Brianna's fat ass feet.

It was easier to focus on that than look Vick in the eye.

"You won't be needing that," Vick said, his index finger indicating the broken bottle clenched in my fist.

My nostrils flared as I forced my clenched fist to relax, dropping the bottle near the door, close enough that it would still be within reach if I needed it.

"Glad you came," Vick continued unprompted, turning to rest his forearms on the edge of the railing overlooking the morning lake. A foolish move if you asked me. It looked about five seconds from giving under his weight.

If he fell and smashed his thick head on one of those rocks down below at least I wouldn't have to tell him jack squat. The thought burned through my mind, and I had a sudden intense urge to push him. To force those weather-weakened boards to crack under his weight and send him toppling over to the treacherous and rocky waters below.

As though he could feel my intent, Officer Vick shifted, turning back to face me while taking a step away from the railing.

"You look like shit."

I shook my head, remembering all at once *why* I was here.

The sting of their betrayal hit me all over again, just as crushing as it had been when it was fresh, barely five hours ago.

Had it really only been five hours?

It felt like more...

And less...

I grimaced, grinding my teeth as I lifted my chin to meet the officer's stare.

He lifted a brow, and for a beat, I had to wonder how truly terrible I must look. Barefoot. Clothing torn and bloodied. Hair a rat's nest sans rats on my head. Saying I looked *like shit* was probably a compliment.

"So," Vick began again. "What do you have for me?"

I opened my mouth to reply, but a stopper in my throat made it damn near impossible to speak. I swallowed hard, wondering where exactly I should start.

I had my phone tucked into my panties. Did Officer Vick and the other shitforbrains cops down at Thorn Valley PD have the tech to recover the videos Grey deleted off my phone?

They might.

Or would my intel be enough?

Diesel had been clear that the Deadwood was full of bodies. Several he'd put there himself. They were bound to contain some of his DNA. Or at least some slugs that might match his gun.

I could come clean about the diner incident. He'd promised me immunity. I could feel Rook's phantom hands on me, holding me tight. Holding me close. Pressing the barrel of a gun to my temple as I helped him rob the joint.

No.

I squeezed my eyes shut, a wave of dizzying vertigo making me thrust a hand out to the railing myself, to find my balance.

"Ava Jade?"

"Just...just give me a minute," I said, speaking for the first time, my voice a hoarse, cracking whisper.

I cleared my throat, blinking as a wave of nausea hit me so hard I had to fight not to double over and vomit on Vick's shoes.

“Take all the time you need,” Vick crooned, and I flinched back as he moved close, a hand outstretched. I smacked it away, standing straight.

“Don’t touch me.”

He lifted his hands, eyes going round. “All right.”

His close standard-issue sport’s jacket reflected the light and I squinted to see him better. He looked a little rougher around the edges than I remembered in the daylight. Scruffier. More gaunt in the face. His hands thick and callused. Different than each time I’d seen him before. Once at night and once in the shadows of the trail just off campus at Briar Hall.

It somehow made him seem more human. Relatable. Like he was just a regular guy who might’ve seen some shit—been through some shit—himself. And I remembered he said the reason he wanted to bag the Saints so bad was personal. Did they take someone from him like they’d taken Becca’s mom?

Like the Kings took my dad?

I sighed.

“You’re doing the right thing,” he said in a low voice. “The Crows and their father are monsters. Murderers.”

My skin bristled.

“The world will be a better place without them.”

“You’re wrong.”

The words were out of my mouth before I could trap them and shove them back down my aching throat.

I shook my head, my chest hot and swelling with each breath as they became heavier.

Officer Vick narrowed his eyes at me. “I am?” he challenged, a muscle in his jaw straining.

“The Crows are fucking idiots. Total assholes. And I can’t say a single kind thing about their father except that he loves his sons more than anything in this world, but *no*. I don’t think the world would be a better place without them.”

I remembered the feel of my blade as it slit across the throat of Frank the butcher. The man who broke one daughter's arm and starved the other. *The Crows* found justice for the broken and oppressed people of Thorn Valley. Without them, those little girls would've continued to suffer. How many other pieces of trash had they cleaned from these streets?

How many lives had they saved?

Just as many as they'd taken?

More?

It didn't matter, I realized with a start.

I fell back a step.

I didn't have to do this.

They'd betrayed me. They didn't care for me the same way I had begun to care for them, but that didn't mean they deserved *this*. I could just leave. Disappear like I should've done from the start. Leave them to their nest of cruelty and vengeance. To their father.

I could still try to take Diesel down, but it would hurt them and I...

Despite everything, that was the last fucking thing I wanted to do.

Physically, I wanted to crush them. Drive over them with a fucking tank. But this?

I couldn't do this. It went against everything I stood for.

What I could do was cut a deal for my freedom with Diesel. He didn't want me anywhere near his sons; he'd made that clear as crystal. But he also couldn't risk losing his son's devotion by killing me without just cause or provocation. Hell, I'd bet the bastard would even pay me to leave, rendering Aunt Humphrey's inflated bank account completely useless to me.

I could even negotiate for Becca's life.

It would be a win-win-win.

Even if it felt more like losing everything right now.

“Do you really believe that?” Officer Vick asked, incredulous at my admission. “That the world wouldn’t be better off without men like them in it?”

“Men like them...” I trailed off, sticking a hand down a tattered hole in my dress to retrieve my cell phone from where it was pressed hard into my hip bone. “Other gang members? Maybe.”

Officer Vick eyed my phone, unable to hide his lusting after it. He was practically drooling, the dog.

He watched as I pried off the back, the metal warm to the touch from my body heat, and popped out the sim card.

“But other gang members *aren’t* like them. No one is.”

I snapped the sim. Vick’s mouth opened in a silent, horrified gasp. I pressed the busted pieces into my fist with the phone and reeled my arm back.

Vick lurched forward, but he was too late. The phone whistled through the air, dropping, dropping, until it *plunked* into the soft waves of the lake and a weight the size of fucking Texas took its boot off my chest.

I sighed.

“I’m sorry,” I told Vick as he clutched the railing, scanning the little white-capped waves for any sign of the device. “I can’t help you. And Vick?”

I waited for him to look at me, the skin between his almost unibrow pinching.

“Don’t ever contact me again. If you do, I’ll tell the Crows all about you. Where you live.”

His mouth pressed into a thin line.

“What kind of car you drive.”

“How—”

I lifted my hand to stop him. I wasn’t finished. Anyone with half a brain could use a name to search for an address.

And anyone worth their salt could have a pleasant little run past said address to scope it out, thus finding a personal vehicle, plate number, and a hot-rod red tricycle in the driveway.

“Don’t approach me again and you have nothing to worry about.”

Vick took a moment to compose himself, his gaze drifting to the open doorway at my back like he couldn’t wait to leave.

“I understand,” he replied.

A loud clap echoed within the warehouse at my back, and I whirled, dropping to the ground to snatch up the bottle and roll back, putting distance between myself and the doorway and even more space between Vick and me.

The clap came again, louder this time, followed by another, and another as the shadowy form inside the warehouse came closer, their steps awkward and stilted, until eventually he stepped into the light.

Diesel St. Crow emerged from the bowels of the Docks, inhaling deeply through his nose as a breeze brushed over us from the lake. He continued his slow clapping as he turned to face me, seeming to be completely unperturbed by the police officer at his back.

The police officer who seemed wholly unsurprised to see Diesel there. No, not just unsurprised, but like he’d been expecting him. Like he knew him.

My mind reeled at the scene before me, trying to read between lines I’d somehow missed entirely.

“Thanks, Colin,” Diesel said, jerking his head to Vick who gave a quiet nod before departing with one last glance in my direction, something like a smirk playing on his lips.

He removed his jacket as he left, revealing arms covered from shoulder to wrist in tattoos. The sharpened fleur-de-lis sign of the Saints in solid black on the back of his left biceps.

What. The. Fuck.

I held Diesel's stony gaze, trying and failing to read what was going on in that twisted head of his. Noticed how fucking pale he was. No doubt thanks to my blade work.

Before I could form the beginning of a laundry list of every curse word in the dictionary and then some, the floorboards inside the warehouse creaked again and the Crows stepped out behind their father.

My pulse skittered before pushing back to a strong, steady rhythm as tangling tendrils of guilt, fear, and murderous intent wreaked havoc on my nervous system.

Diesel stopped clapping, but it was the Crows I couldn't take my eyes off no matter how much I wished I could. Jumping from the pier myself began to sound like a pretty damn good idea. I liked my chances.

My eyes darted to the lake, judging the distance.

"Don't," Corvus said.

My teeth clenched.

He had no right to look so damned betrayed. None of them did.

They started this shit. They roped me in. Pushed me into a corner. What did they expect?

But still, the hurt in their stares stabbed into me like knives, making it harder to breathe.

"I have to admit," Diesel said, a flicker of his concealed rage crossing his face. "This wasn't how I anticipated things going down."

"We had a deal," Rook growled, his hulking form vibrating beneath his leather jacket.

Diesel's upper lip curled into a snarl before he spoke again. "So we did."

The man hobbled forward, and I worked hard to stand my ground, bottle at the ready, checking him over for anything that looked even remotely like a concealed weapon.

He lifted a hand, his face back to an unreadable mask.

One I'd like to peel from his skull with the broken edge of the bottle in my hand for what he did.

“Welcome to the Saints, Ava Jade.”

I looked at his outstretched hand. At his sons watching the exchange like they could force me to take it through sheer force of their will.

The bottle clattered to the decking at my feet, breaking.

I turned and walked away.

CHAPTER

Three

ROOK

THERE WAS NO way in hell I was going to watch her walk away from us a second time. The pit in the bottom of my stomach clenched tight, walling in the darkness growing like an electromagnetic fog there. Like fucking poison.

“Rook?” Grey asked cautiously, sensing the presence of the monster within.

I turned to meet his stare and shook my head.

No.

I wasn’t going to let her go. How could he? How could Corvus?

A muscle twitched above my lip, and I clenched my teeth, shouldering past Diesel.

“Son,” he called after me, but I was done listening. My brothers liked to joke that whatever internal meter that read what was wrong and right in my head was broken, but they were wrong. Maybe it was their meters that were broken, because letting her leave felt like the most *wrong* thing on the fucking planet.

Sure, she was talking to a cop. Or at least, she’d thought she was, but she didn’t tell him anything. And I knew that she never would’ve. No matter what. Didn’t they know that, too?

Wasn’t it us who backed her into the fucking corner?

This wasn't something she wanted to do. It was something she felt like she had to do. Probably because of what happened to her father.

It didn't mean I wasn't angry with her, of course I was, but I was willing to bet she was ten times more pissed at us.

I rounded the corner of the old pier warehouse and followed her. She was already a solid fifty paces ahead of me, but by the slight tensing of her shoulders, I knew she was fully aware someone was following her.

In fact, I was willing to bet she already pegged it was me.

Just like I could peg any singular sound at the Crow's Nest as either her or not her. The soft sure sound of her stealth silent footfalls. The way she opened cupboards, whip-quick like she expected to find a monster behind the panes of wood. Her soft sighing sounds in the shower, like she'd never had a proper one before in her life.

Ava Jade paused by where the Rover was parked looking out over the lake, but then continued, leaving it there. Her hands clenched at her sides as she started up the road, but she forced them to unclench, splaying her fingers wide. Forcing herself not to give in to what she was feeling inside.

I knew what that was like. Better than anyone.

"Ghost," I called to her, but she didn't stop, forcing me to hustle to catch up with her. She didn't bother acknowledging me when I slowed to walk alongside her, pushing my dark hair away from my face.

Her face, usually so composed, betrayed a raging hurricane of pent up emotions. Pinched, her eyes hard and jaw muscles working.

I opened my mouth to begin, but something made me pause.

She wasn't ready.

I swallowed deep and turned my attention back to the winding side road ahead, keeping pace with her. I didn't say anything, we just walked like that for a time. She didn't tell

me to fuck off, and I was taking that as a good sign, it kept me going.

That and the intermittent glint of sunlight on the black diamond bobbing against her clavicle. She hadn't taken it off.

The dead thing in my chest squeezed, almost painful. The best kind of pain.

"I should've left Thorn Valley when I had the chance."

Her voice sent a shudder racing down my spine. So hopeless. I never wanted to hear it sound like that again. "You don't really believe that, do you?"

"Was it really all bullshit?" she asked in a low voice, ignoring my question, biting her lower lip as she stared at the ground disappearing beneath our feet. "Was any of it real?"

"Hey." I pulled her to a stop, and she let me, her cut glass eyes finding mine for only a fraction of a second before she looked away, disgust twisting her mouth. "I could ask you the same fucking thing. Talking to a cop...?"

"He wasn't even a fucking cop," she spat back.

"But you thought he was, didn't you?"

She growled, tugging away from me but staying stationary. She wanted to have this out just as badly as I did, even if she wouldn't admit it.

"I don't get it. I looked him up. Found his address. He's listed and everything. He's on the force—"

"All a trick," I interrupted her. "Dies has done this before. He went by Vick, right?"

Her lips pressed tight.

"It's how he's always smoked out rats. There *is* an Officer Vick who works for Thorn Valley PD. How else could the ruse hold up. All it would take is one call to the station or one online search to find out the name was bogus. The real Vick doesn't use social media. He's a total fucking recluse. Barely leaves his big house aside from taking his kid to the park down the street. No photos of him online."

“The perfect identity.”

I nodded.

Her face darkened, and I could see how deeply this had all cut her. Ghost was someone who didn't trust easily. Fuck, probably didn't trust *ever*. But she'd trusted Becca and her friend had betrayed that trust. Lied to her. Plotted against her...whether she went through with it or not.

And Vick, he wasn't even a real cop. Damn, I applauded Dies for implanting him so quickly. I had to wonder whose eyes noticed we were getting close to Ava Jade and told him. One of the pledges trying to earn brownie points? The fucking night security guy, Mick? It could've been anyone.

But worst of all was the hurt we'd caused. I could see it in the way she wouldn't hold my stare.

In her own way, she *had* begun to trust us, and when we didn't come to her defense against our father. When we didn't defend Becca and reassure her. When we let her fucking go...

We never should have let her go.

“Did you know about Vick?”

“Hmm?”

“Did you know?” she pressed, and I came back to her from the dark place my mind had wandered.

“No.”

She looked doubtful.

“We didn't know until about four hours ago when Diesel told us and led us here to listen in during your meeting.”

She waited. Wanting more.

“He was hoping you were going to give us up.”

“So that you would kill me yourselves?”

I didn't respond. I didn't want to say it, and frankly, I didn't need to. She already knew the answer. She didn't ask the most important question though...

Would we have done it?

I didn't want to answer that either.

"What's going to happen to Becca?" she asked instead of the questions we both knew the answers to, and at least this one, I could speak to.

I inclined my head. "Diesel won't hurt her."

"Pfft." She shook her head.

"He won't, I'll make sure of it personally."

"But?" she pressed, not fully satisfied with my response, knowing there was a catch.

I wouldn't sugar coat it for her. "She'll need to answer some questions. As long as she cooperates, nothing will happen to her. She can stay here."

Though something told me Becca Hart was already long gone. Ava Jade would have seen to that.

She nodded, and even though I could see she didn't believe me, maybe didn't trust me, she wasn't going to push it. Cementing my suspicions about Becca already being gone. Maybe that was for the best.

"It wasn't all lies," I added after a minute, answering her question from before. "It was all real between us. But you already knew that. I get that it's easier to think we were all out to get you from the start."

That struck a nerve, she flinched, and my stomach soured in response.

Yes.

I knew what that was like, too.

Not being able to accept that there were people out there who cared about you. *Really cared*. Searching for hidden meaning in every word they spoke, in every gesture. Trying to untangle imaginary lies from truths. Looking for ulterior motives *always*.

"I know what you're thinking," I continued and this time she looked at me, searching my eyes to see if I was right. "You're going to leave."

The truth was clear in her eyes as she held me there, captive in her burning stare.

“You’re going to disappear. Tell me I’m wrong.”

She couldn’t.

I let out a heavy breath. “Don’t.”

“Why shouldn’t I?”

“Dies...he shouldn’t have done what he did with Becca, but even you have to understand the reason wh—”

“I do!” she countered, her shoulders rising like a cat getting its back up. “I do fucking understand and that’s the problem. I want to hate you. Them. *Him.*”

She paced back three steps before returning, her chest heaving. “But I can’t. I can’t, and it’s fucking absurd.”

I shrugged. “Then don’t.”

She laughed darkly, shaking her head at the ground.

“We need you, Ghost. I need you. Tell me you’ll consider staying. Please.”

Ava Jade stiffened, her head snapping up, the laugh dying in her throat.

I couldn’t remember the last time I’d used that word. *Please.* It tasted bitter on my tongue, full of hope that only she could smash.

“I...” she started, but didn’t finish, swallowing, her eyes glassy.

“Don’t answer now, just think about it. And...and if you decide to go, I’ll do everything in my power to make sure no one comes after you. But I’m telling you now—”

I stepped in close, sealing off the offensive gap between us to take her face into my hands. “If you leave, that’s it. You can’t come back. Not ever. I can’t do this twice.”

Her lower lip quivered, and on instinct, I pressed my mouth to hers, consuming her fear as if I could steal it from her and carry it as my own.

Her lips, soft and resistant at first, pressed harder against mine as she deepened the kiss, our tongues flicking out against each other. She tasted of salt and copper, and it made my body ignite with a need so strong my blood rushed in my ears, drained from my face to fill my cock as it thickened in my jeans.

She moaned against my mouth, and my fist found the hair at the back of her neck, twisting in and holding her hard against me as her fingers searched for something of mine to hold on to.

My Ghost ground her hips into me, and I shuddered at the contact, wanting this—her—right now, more than anything I'd ever wanted in my life. But she hadn't chosen us. Not yet.

I yanked her head back with my grip on her hair, breathing heavily as my cock throbbed in my jeans. "If you decide to stay, you know where to find us," I whispered against her mouth.

Before I could change my mind and strip her naked right there in the middle of the road, I released her and stepped back. Back again. Taking in the long shape of her body, every curve, every blemish on her skin, her face, the face of an avenging angel come to take my soul.

And then I turned and walked away, heading back in the direction I'd come, stuffing my fists deep into the pockets of my jeans.

CHAPTER

Four

AVA JADE

I COULD STILL FEEL the tingle of Rook's kiss on my lips as I entered Briar Hall, almost knocking into a student in my daze.

"Sorry," he muttered, pausing to stare before limping past me to go outside through the back door.

Judging by his small gasp, I had to assume I looked like death warmed over. Or worse. I definitely smelled worse. The trademark lemon pledge scent of these halls was almost completely covered over by it. *Ugh.*

A deep silence followed me as I made my way up the long staircase to the apartment and something about that seemed off.

Was it a school day? No.

Sunday.

It had to be Sunday.

That's why it was so quiet at this time of the morning.

Not like it mattered.

Numbly, I fumbled with the door to the apartment, shoving the key in the lock only to find that it was already open. I frowned, lifting my back straight as I twisted the handle and pushed the door in, ready for an attack.

The creak of someone shifting their weight in a chair forced me further inside, a lick of heat rolling up my spine.

My adrenaline sparking but seemingly unable to ignite, its resources utterly fucking spent.

A man, unarmed, sat at the long stone counter on the living room side of the kitchen.

My heart jumped into my throat at the thought that this could be my stalker as he lifted his gaze to mine. Lack of energy be damned, if it were him...

“Who the fuck are you and what are you doing in here?” I sneered, picking out the knife block across the other end of the kitchen, judging my ability to get to it before he could stop me.

He was a big guy. Over two hundred pounds for sure, but much of that weight looked to be muscle. He'd be strong, but slow.

The big guy followed my jerking gaze to the knife block and back again, unbothered by my question. Unbothered that I was considering carving his eyeballs out with the paring knife. His bald head, partially covered in tattoos, gleamed as though freshly polished in the light and that's when the finer details started to take shape.

There was a heavy black canvas bag on the counter next to him. Beside it sat several small plastic cups that almost appeared to be the lids off plastic bottles. Filled with blue and black ink. A tattoo gun rested next to them, and a stack of paper towels and a small container of petroleum jelly waited next to it.

“Diesel sent me,” he explained simply, indicating the stool next to him. “Depending if you want anything additional to the fleur-de-lis, this will only take about thirty minutes.”

I blinked, the reality of exactly what was happening right now dawning on me like a smack upside the head. Unable to help it, I began to laugh.

“Fucking, really?”

He didn't look like he was joking. The man watched me with a wary disdain. Fuck, he almost looked bored. And my laughter didn't seem to throw him off in the slightest.

“Sit down,” he said plainly, reaching for a pair of black plastic gloves in his bag to tug them over his large hands.

I shook my head, the laughter dying on my lips. “Get out.”

He lifted a brow.

“I said get the fuck out. *Now.*”

I couldn’t deal with this right now. When he didn’t make a move to leave, an ache formed behind my eyes and I pinched the bridge of my nose to try to ward off the frustration headache from getting stronger.

“Look, girl, I’m here to do my job, not deal with a fucking tantr—”

“If you don’t leave right now, I am going to slice off every one of your fingers and shove them up your ass.”

He had the decency to look at least a little put off by the threat, but he didn’t seem to think I would make good on it. Clearly, no one had told him about me. I was far from kidding.

He held my gaze for another moment before grimacing as he tossed his gear back into his bag, leaving the ink pots on the counter as he shouldered it and slid off the stool.

“I’m too old for this shit,” he said under his breath as he strode past me, vanishing down the hall outside with loud, echoing steps.

I waited until I was sure he’d made it outside before closing the door and locking it, going to the window across the apartment to watch him shove his shit into a shiny black truck with *Forbidden Ink* decaled on the side in sharp lettering.

I surreptitiously checked the rest of the apartment bit by bit, pausing only when it came to Becca’s bedroom door. I’d never been in her room. It’d always been firmly *her* space. I’d assumed she was just private about her things, or maybe left a bunch of vibrators lying around, but now I knew the truth.

She probably had things to hide.

Without overthinking it too much, I pushed open her door and stepped inside, quick to get eyes on every inch of the

space in case there was anyone else waiting to jab me with fucking needles.

Seemed like everyone's fetish these days.

Satisfied that I was alone after a quick scope of the walk-in closet and the bathroom, I turned in a slow circle, taking in the space.

It smelled like her. Like jasmine and something a bit musky, like old wood.

Just like the rest of the apartment, her room was done up in varying shades of black. Polished black. Matte black. Faded black.

But with pops of indigo and violet, like the canvas artwork of a girl's face painted in shadows of lavender with her eyes crossed out in black, slashes of gray painted haphazardly over the entire piece.

A bit morbid, but it sort of suited her and something about it was very feminine and pretty despite the slashed out eyes.

My fingers trailed along the top of a sleek black dresser, falling down until they reached the top of the first drawer. I pulled it open an inch before shutting it again. Unable to bring myself to snoop through her things even after what she did.

Maybe later.

I needed a nap and goddamned shower before I even started to try to pick up all the pieces and try to figure out how they all fit back together after everything that'd happened.

But first, I had a promise to keep.

Briar Hall was eerily quiet as I found my way down to the main floor after removing my tattered dress in favor of sweats and a baggy t-shirt. The phone room, a relic of a time before cell phones, was nothing more than a narrow room with a bank of old black corded phones hanging on the wall, divided with thin panes of wood for privacy.

The whole space was covered in a fine layer of dust and instead of sitting on one of the moth-eaten chairs, I leaned against the wall as I lifted a receiver.

Shit.

They weren't working.

I tried the other six, sighing when the last one in the line at the very back of the room hummed with the electronic dial tone.

I'd memorized Becca's number weeks ago, and each digit beeped in my ear as I hit the cold metal buttons. She really should've gotten rid of her phone. I should've told her to get rid of it, but I was banking on her being out of reach across the country by now, or at least soon.

The line only rang once before it went straight to voicemail.

"This is Becca Hart, make it quick or text me like a normal person."

An almost smile pulled at the edge of my mouth.

"Hey, it's me. Just checking that you got there safe. Leave a message with the office when you get this, 'kay? I, *uh*, I lost my phone so don't bother texting. Hit me up on socials, but make sure all of your location sharing is turned off on your phone. Actually, maybe just get a new one. Toss that one before you get where you're going."

I paused, not sure what else to say.

"Be safe," I said finally before hanging up, dragging my dead ass to a shower and my bed.

CHAPTER

Five

GREY

I GOT up from my desk for the fifth time in as many minutes, running a palm over my face as I circled my room.

It had been almost twenty-four hours since Ava Jade walked away from us at the Docks and still it felt wrong being back here. Here without her.

Her, alone, wherever she was. With her stalker possibly still out there.

Maybe I shouldn't have cared, but I did. Even after everything. After she protected the friend that betrayed her and could've gotten us killed. Even after finding out that she was talking to a cop. Not just talking to him, but seriously considering ratting us out.

It didn't matter that Colin wasn't a real cop. She thought he was and that was enough.

It hurt.

It hurt more than I thought I *could* hurt anymore. This was why I didn't form attachments. The reason none of us did outside of the family.

You get attached, you get burned.

And I knew from firsthand experience that those scars never fully healed.

I shouldn't care. But I do.

I still wanted her, and even though there was a loud voice shouting in my head that she could no longer be trusted, there was another voice. One that whispered how badly we'd hurt her, too.

The voice insisted I consider what she had to go through in the last forty-eight hours and view the situation through that lens. Through her eyes.

If she could forgive us, could I forgive her?

It didn't help that I'd barely slept more than a few hours since we got home, if you could call passing out head down at my desk sleeping. My rest-deprived brain throbbed with too many unknowns. I pulled at my hair, and the pain grounded me.

Blond threads drifted down to the carpet when I let go, and I inhaled deeply as I watched them fall, remembering a time when I was so malnourished you could count each one of my ribs without even needing to remove my shirt.

How my hair had begun to fall out in clumps near the end, when I was close to death. Too stupid to leave the house and get help. Naively convinced that if I just kept waiting, my mom would come home.

I growled before sweeping the contents of my desk onto the floor, breathing hard.

A sharp pain bloomed on my arm as I pressed my palms to my eyes, trying to gain control. Liquid dripped down to my elbow and I found a thumbtack jutting out of my biceps, a little pinhead of green.

Rolling my eyes, I ripped it out and went to find a paper towel to clean the damn mess.

I sat on the floor when I was finished, the room reeking of stain remover. That was when I noticed the little flick of black nail polish on the side of the spray bottle and sagged.

I needed to talk to her.

But if I were being honest, I knew the real reason I was about to march my ass down to Briar Hall. Because I still felt a

keen sense of responsibility for her safety. Or maybe that wasn't the right way to describe it. It wasn't responsibility. It was worry.

She was exhausted at the Docks. It was written all over her face. What if she went back to Briar Hall and took a nap. What if, tired as she was, she didn't hear it when someone broke in. Was too out of it to stop the stalker when he tried to inject her again.

What if...

Fuck it. I was going. Now.

I stood, and as I tossed the spray bottle and wad of paper towels onto my barren desk I noticed Corvus from my bedroom window overlooking the drive. He was wheeling his motorcycle out of the garage, looking down the road like it might grow teeth and bite him.

I leaned over my desk and hammered the side of my fist on the glass until he turned, looking up. I held up a hand, shouting at him to wait through the glass.

It took me all of two minutes to throw a clean shirt and deodorant on before I was outside.

"You going to see her?" I asked as I shut the door behind me.

His hands tightened on the handlebars as he threw a leg over the seat.

"Corv?" I pressed when he didn't answer.

"Where the fuck else would I be going?" he said, his voice the same flat monotone he'd been speaking in since last night. It reminded me of how he was when I'd first met him at eleven—before he trusted us and eventually accepted us as his brothers.

"You coming?" he added, and I swallowed hard, not giving him a reply as I got on the bike behind him and the engine rumbled to life beneath us.

I peered back at the Crow's Nest, searching Rook's black window for any sign of him, but I saw nothing. He was

probably asleep. We'd picked him up along the road on the way back from the Docks, and he'd gotten in without a word. His expression dark.

Of course I wondered what she said to him. What he might've said to her...

But it wasn't the time to ask.

The gravel road turned to pavement as we sped toward Briar Hall, Corvus barely slowing at all until we were in the actual parking lot.

"What if she isn't here?" I asked as I stepped off.

"She will be," he replied, and it sounded more like he was trying to convince himself than me.

I followed him to the front door of the academy, the words *as the crow flies* mocking me as I passed beneath them.

Mick nodded as we passed through the atrium and took the stairs up to the third floor and down the hall.

"Rook?" I asked, surprised to see him sitting against the wall three feet from her door, his elbows on his knees, a lit cigarette hanging from his lips. Ashes all over the floor between his feet.

He cocked his head, glancing up at us.

"How long have you been here?" Corvus asked, tugging the dart from Rook's mouth to stamp it out beneath his boot, his nose wrinkling.

It smelled like dirty old ashtray in here.

I dug into the inside pocket of my jacket and passed him a stick of gum.

He grudgingly snatched it from my fingers and popped it into his mouth.

In less than an hour, all the students in the building would be waking up for classes. Some probably were already awake, terrified to leave their rooms to shower because of the Crow smoking in their hall, looking out of his damned mind.

“I left after I showered,” he said, his voice rough.

But he’d showered only a few hours after we got back to the Nest yesterday. And we’d only made the one stop to drop Diesel off with the vet to have his injury looked after.

“Have you slept?” Corv demanded.

Rook shrugged. “Maybe. Might’ve dozed off.”

He was here the whole time. Making sure she was safe through the night alone.

Guilt ate at me, and I dropped my head.

“Seen her?” I asked.

He shook his head, making a chunk of black hair fall into his eyes that he swept away with a shaky hand. “No, but she’s in there. I heard her snore a bit earlier. Nothing since.”

Relief exploded through me, so strong it made spots of light dance across my eyes.

I was starting to think Corvus had been right all along, this girl was going to be the end of us.

“I’ve been waiting until she woke up to knock,” Rook added. “But I think she’s still passed out.”

I cocked my head at him. He was *waiting* for her to wake up? Rook? The guy who did literally any fucking thing he wanted, whenever he wanted?

“How long has it been?” Corv asked.

“I don’t know, but it’s been quiet for at least sixteen hours.”

“Then she can wake up now,” Corvus decided for all of us, lifting a fist to the door. He pounded the wood and it rattled in the doorframe.

No sound came from inside as we waited and Corvus’ lips pressed into a taut line as he knocked again. “Ava Jade,” he called through the wood. “It’s us.”

When no sound came still, ice crept up my arms. What if...

“Grey, open it before I kick it down,” Corvus growled, and I stepped forward, digging my pick kit from my wallet and kneeling down.

“Chill the fuck out,” came AJ’s tired voice from somewhere deep in the apartment, and I stopped, slipping the metal pieces back where they came from.

The ear-tingle sound of something heavy being dragged across the hardwood came before the sound of her bedroom door opening. She’d obviously pushed her desk in front of it while she slept. At least she wasn’t too out of it to realize she might not be safe alone in the apartment.

Her stomping footfalls approached the door before they paused and I squinted through the wrong side of the peephole, catching a flicker of movement before she opened the door.

She stood there in an oversized gray t-shirt that looked distinctly like a man’s, with nothing else but black panties poking out from beneath the hem. Her hair, usually pulled back into a messy bun or ponytail, was in messy waves of darkest brown. Like she’d showered and passed out before she had the chance to brush it.

The natural texture of it suited her. Gave her the lion’s mane she deserved.

AJ took us all in in turn, saying nothing.

She pushed the door the rest of the way open and spun on her heel, heading to the kitchen. Letting us in.

It was a better start than I thought.

“Ava Jade,” Corvus hedged as we closed the door behind us, wading into the apartment.

She held up a hand from where she stood in front of the espresso machine. “Shhh,” she hissed. “No one speaks until I have a cup of coffee in my hand.”

“We really should—”

She fingered a small paring knife from the block next to the espresso machine and tossed it. It landed three inches from my foot in the hardwood with a *thunk*.

“I throw the big one next,” she warned, searching the back of the stainless steel beast for a switch.

Corvus walked into the kitchen, nudging her out of his way despite her glaring at him. “Let me do it,” he grumbled, tugging four cups down from the warmer on top. “Move.”

Her jaw tightened, but she didn’t argue, crossing her arms to lean on the counter next to him as he filled ground beans and filled the thingy that let the creamy espresso drip out, frothing milk while it finished filling the bottoms of two mugs.

He passed one latte to AJ first, indicating Rook for the other, while he started the process over again, making two more for himself and for me.

I took the warm mug he offered, and no one said a damn word until he was finished cleaning up the machine and all its parts. Until Ava Jade had drunk at least half of her latte, trying to conceal how much she was enjoying each sip.

“Can we speak now?” he asked her, grabbing his latte and her elbow to tug her toward the living room.

She jerked away from his touch, making the latte almost slosh out of her mug, little lines of caramel liquid dripping down its side. “Look what you almost made me do,” she sneered, flicking her tongue out to lick up the lost droplets before they could fall.

And fuck if that tiny thing didn’t make me a bit hard in my jeans.

She continued into the sunken living room on her own. “Speaking of things you made me do...”

“Don’t pretend for even a second that you talking to Colin was our fault,” Corv argued.

AJ whirled on him, stopping him from following her with two fingers jabbed into his chest. He stiffened but remained in control. “It *was* your fault. All of you.”

Rook and I shared a look.

You didn’t touch Corvus James, not unless he wanted you to.

But this wasn't the first time, and I had a feeling it wouldn't be the last.

"She's not completely wrong," I said, earning myself a wicked stare from my brother. "And I think you know that."

"You know, it's funny," Ava Jade said, flopping onto the longer of the two black couches with a laugh that told me she definitely didn't think whatever she was about to say was funny. Not even a little bit. "For a split second I thought maybe you were here to apologize. But how could a *Saint* ever be wrong? Why would a *Saint* apologize for their sins?"

"It's why I came," I said. "Or at least, it's part of the reason."

She stared at me incredulously, her lips popping open in surprise. An emotion I couldn't name swimming in her eyes.

She watched me as I made my way to the couch opposite her, discarding my untouched latte on the coffee table between us. "Diesel went too far," I started, trying to remember everything I'd planned to say on the way over here if we found she hadn't skipped town.

"But he was trying to protect us."

Her lips twisted.

"And...a part of me gets that you probably felt backed into a corner. Colin is good. He probably pulled all the right strings."

"She almost fucking destroyed us," Corvus argued, standing a few feet behind AJ, halfway into the living room still.

"But she didn't," Rook said, sitting next to AJ, laying his arm over the back of the couch, not quite touching her but close enough that he could if he wanted to. "Did you, Ghost?"

She shivered, gray eyes snagging on the empty space between them before she pressed her hands together between her knees.

"I couldn't," she admitted. "It's not..." She trailed off, unable to find the right words.

“It’s not what you do,” I finished for her. “You aren’t a rat. I know you. You don’t trust law enforcement.”

She didn’t reply, and I knew I was right.

“It doesn’t mean I’m not pissed,” she clarified. “I’m still considering cutting all your balls off and keeping them in a little trophy jar on my nightstand.”

This earned her a laugh from Rook as he lifted his ass from the couch seat and drew out a blade, flipping it over in his fingers so the handle was facing her. “Here you go, love. Carve away.”

She eyed the blade, but didn’t take it, rolling her eyes at him.

“I’d like to keep my balls, *Rook*,” Corvus said, finally coming to sit with us, putting himself next to me on the couch. He was tight as a nun’s asshole. Every muscle jacked, the vein in his neck popping as he leaned over his knees, steeping his fingers. Looking at the coffee table like he wanted to hack it to kindling.

“You didn’t leave,” I pointed out, trying to get us back on track. I needed to know what she was doing. I needed to prepare myself for the worst. “Does that mean you’re staying?”

She bit her lip. “I don’t know yet.”

“Stay,” Corvus said, breaking a momentary silence. The one word drawing all of our attention to him.

AJ’s chin quivered, just once, before she got control of herself. I wondered if I was the only one who noticed just how much we’d hurt her. How much she was hurting.

“Why should I?”

“Because,” Corvus breathed, some of the tension leaking from his shoulders. “I want you to.”

“So do I,” I agreed.

“You know what I want,” Rook intoned, grazing the back of her neck with his knuckle, making her glare at him before

inching farther from him on the couch.

She considered us all for a minute, pulling her hands from between her knees to clench them into little fists. “I don’t have anywhere else to go,” she said in a low voice, and the urge to go and pull her into my arms almost dragged me from my seat. But I didn’t think she wanted that right now.

“You belong here,” Corvus said. “With us.”

Her eyes darted back and forth over the coffee table. “I’ll stay,” she decided. “But if Diesel pulls any more shit like he did the other night, I will kill him my fucking self. I don’t care who he is to you.”

Rook looked away. Corvus re-stiffened. But none of us challenged her. I didn’t know what that meant.

“And I’m not coming back to the Nest. I need...I need some space.”

Corvus looked like he was going to blow a fuse.

“Okay if one of us stays with you here, then?” I asked before Corvus could *demand* something instead. “Especially since you don’t have a phone right now?”

She nodded slowly.

I didn’t know what the next little while was going to look like for us, but one thing was startlingly clear. There was trust lost. On both sides. And I wasn’t sure yet if we could get it back. But if there was anything in this world worth fighting for, it had to be her.

CHAPTER

Six

AVA JADE

THEIR PHONES BLEW UP, and it was a welcome interruption after the conversation we'd just had. After I agreed to let one of them stay with me here, a terse quiet had fallen.

I hated it.

It felt unnatural.

Something between us all had been broken, and I didn't know if it could be fixed. Still wasn't sure I wanted it to be. But what I told them was true. I didn't have any place else to go. Lennox was the last place I wanted to go back to, but where else in this world was there a place for me?

With the so-called best friend who betrayed me?

With my female Hitler of an aunt?

This was the only place I'd felt like I'd fit in so long I had to wonder if I ever felt like I fit anywhere else before this.

"What is it?" I asked as they all read the messages on their phones, noticing how their faces had turned stony.

Rook dropped his phone into my lap and I glanced between it and him before picking it up to read the message on the screen.

Diesel: We have a meet with the Aces tonight. Sending details and location later. Be ready for 10 pm.

Diesel: Becca Hart got on a plane this morning to Europe, but we need her back here. She's our only source of intel on the piece of shit who was trying to make a move on you. Make it happen.

"I'm coming with you tonight," I decided, rising from the couch to go and discard my mug in the kitchen sink. Feeling Grey's eyes on my ass as I walked.

"I don't think that's—"

"I wasn't asking. I'm a Saint now, remember?"

Grey nudged Corvus' arm, giving his head a little shake. Telling him not to push this right now. I was willing to bet he would try to convince me to stay behind later. He wouldn't have any luck.

I needed to speak to his father. I needed to make a couple of things clear if I was going to even *try* to stay in Thorn Valley.

Corvus' nostrils flared. "Fine," he growled. "Are you coming to class?"

I lifted my head to the clock on the kitchen wall and sighed, the word *fuck* silently forming on my lips. There was already lots of noise in the hallway outside. Classes would be starting in barely twenty minutes.

"We can pick up your assignments," Grey offered, and I looked at him curiously for the second time this morning.

He was giving me this weird vibe. Like he was stepping on eggshells. Tip-toeing around me. It wasn't like him.

The air was still charged with everything said and not said. It felt fragile, like even the smallest push would send everything we'd built tumbling down to rubble and ash. I wondered if he felt it, too. If he were afraid of what might happen if he pushed too hard.

"No, I'll go," I decided. "I don't need another absence right now."

Really, I didn't need to deal with more angry texts from my psycho aunt right now. No wonder my dad never talked

about her. But more than that, I wanted the distraction.

“Rook?” Grey asked, and I watched the exchange between them, wondering why Grey was offering to pick up his assignments. Why he assumed Rook wasn’t going to class.

His dark eyes betrayed nothing, but he gave Grey a tight nod, lifting his gaze to me. “Mind if I stay here?”

“Uh...sure. I guess.”

He leaned back on the couch, lifting his legs to cover the area where I’d just been sitting, laying his head on the armrest. His forearm lifted to cover his eyes.

“I’ll meet you guys down there,” I told the other two, going to change.

“We’ll wait,” Corvus decided for them both. “Hurry up.”

Don’t stab him. Don’t stab him.

I had a mind to make them wait as long as possible, but that would only see to it that I got locked out of homeroom for being late. Though, with my new status around here, maybe I could walk in whenever I wanted. Maybe I didn’t have to ever be marked absent at all.

I’d have to see about that.

For today, though, I’d behave, if only because I wanted to save myself enough time to drop into the dining hall on the way to class and swipe a bagel.

Rook didn’t so much as stir when we left the apartment, and I found myself shutting the door quietly behind me, twisting the knob to avoid the catching sound of the metal.

“He isn’t a newborn,” Grey commented, and heat bloomed over my chest, but I didn’t give him the satisfaction of my attention or a reply.

Something told me he hadn’t slept last night after we parted ways in the road. I felt maybe just a little responsible for that.

The few students remaining in the hallways parted, scurrying to get out of our way as we made our way to the

elevator at the end of the hall, who jabbed the button, and stepped inside.

Funny how barely a month ago I had to sneak into the thing to use it. Now it was as much mine as it was theirs.

Perks: they were the silver lining holding everything together right now.

When the doors opened with a solemn chime, the three of us froze.

Heads turned, eyes latching on. Whispers dying on parted lips.

The main atrium was filled with students, but they weren't what we couldn't stop staring at.

Pasted to every available surface in the entire space were photographs. On the banister. On the walls. Scattered over the floor.

I wasn't sure what I was seeing at first, until I knelt to lift one to inspect it more closely.

They were photographs of Rook...

And...

"Is that the vice principal?" I asked, turning the photo of their entangled naked bodies in what appeared to be the unused academy chapel. In this shot, Rook had his fist around Mrs. June's throat while he drove into her from behind, her face the picture of bliss. Her tits spilling out of her blouse over the back of a pew.

I scanned the others on the floor close to us, finding at least ten other pornographic images. I couldn't help but notice the different bits of clothing they wore. The different lighting. Proving that this wasn't a one-time thing but a *very* regular occurrence.

Corvus lifted his phone to his ear and growled down the line. "Get down here. Now."

We stepped out of the elevator, and it closed behind us.

Numbly, I lifted another two photographs to look at them more closely, hating how my stomach was twisting into knots.

“What the fuck are you staring at?” Corvus demanded, eyeing the gape mouthed students still hovering all around the atrium. He reached behind him, lifting the edge of his jacket, where the distinct shape of a gun was pressed between his jeans and his lower back.

I dropped the photos, grabbing his hand before he could draw it.

“Get the fuck out of here,” I yelled, and the ones who hadn’t already fled, raced to follow their wiser peers, dispersing within seconds.

Behind us, the elevator chimed again and Rook appeared, leaning lazily against the door with dark circles beneath his eyes.

Corvus bent and scooped a handful of photographs from the floor, shoving them into his stomach, putting him off balance as he grabbed them.

“The fuck, man?” he groaned, lifting them.

His surprise quickly turned to an approving smirk, his brows lifting. “Damn. Some of these are really good. I told you that camera was a good investment.”

“Did you do this?” Corvus hissed, pushing Rook into the elevator to give them some privacy as the bravest of the students still lingered in the archways leading out the classrooms.

“Why the fuck would I?” Rook shoved Corvus back, tossing the photos unceremoniously on the floor. “She was useful in my back pocket. She won’t be now.”

“It was a power play, then?” I found myself asking aloud, needing to know.

Rook tipped his head slightly to one side as he considered me. “You worried, Ghost?”

My blood pulsed with electricity at his words, and I was wholly unable to stop myself as I reentered the elevator with

them, shouldering Corvus out of my way. Making the doors chime loudly as they were kept from closing again.

“If it was a power play, then I’m impressed.”

He frowned.

“But if you ever touch her again I’ll have to kill her. And cut your balls off.”

That frown vanished, his eyes sparking with amusement.

I could hardly believe I’d said it, but I realized I meant every word. He was mine and no one else’s.

He licked his lips. “Understood.”

“Good.”

A bang outside the elevator made the three of us exit to where Grey still stood, watching the scene playing by the office.

The principal, a man I’d only ever seen once besides now, tried to maintain order among his staff as Mrs. June was escorted out of the office between two police officers.

She caught sight of Rook and paused, her chin beginning to quiver.

Rook pressed two fingers to his lips in a silent salute to her, not a care in the world. Mrs. June spat onto the floor in his general direction, her face going red despite the thick coating of makeup covering it. “Fuck you,” she shouted. “You sick bastard!”

“You loved it,” Rook called after her as the officers moved in to restrain her, dragging her from the building now as she struggled, cursing and kicking all the way.

Another officer exited the office, leaving the principal’s side with his sights set on Rook. And wouldn’t you fucking know it, his name badge read *Vick*.

I snorted.

He looked nothing like his phony counterpart. Round through the middle with a saucer sized bald spot on his crown

that he was trying to cover with a midlife crisis toupee that looked more like roadkill.

“Sawyer Clayton,” the officer said, and I sensed more than saw Rook stiffen beside me. “We have a few questions if you wouldn’t mind coming down to the—”

“I would mind,” he hissed. “And it’s *Rook*.”

“Mr. Clayton—”

But Rook was already gone, vanishing down the north hall, likely headed straight for the exit.

Officer Vick cleared the gap between us with uneasy steps, fumbling to get a card from his pocket.

He held it out to me instead of the two guys at both of my sides.

It wasn’t so long ago another Officer Vick was handing me a card. I wasn’t going to fuck this up twice.

“Would you give me a call when he’s ready to talk?”

I took the card he offered with a smile and tore it into four equal pieces, letting them fall to the floor to join the photographs when I was finished.

“If that’s all?” I prodded when he just stared, his face going a little green around the edges.

He left without another word and a rush of pure ecstasy rushed through me, making me almost cringe at its intensity. Man, if you could bottle up that feeling and sell it...

The PA system crackled to life as the principal made an announcement to the academy from the front office.

“Good morning students, please be advised that all classes for the day have been canceled. Any due assignments are to be submitted through the online portal unless otherwise instructed by your professor. The computer lab, cafeteria, and library will remain open for your use. Thank you.”

“Well, *shit*.”

Corvus and Grey were staring at me, I realized. Looking more than slightly impressed by my little spectacle with the real Vick.

I gave myself a spiritual pat on the back and shrugged. “What? I wasn’t about to fuck that up twice.”

Grey smirked, clearing his throat as he went back to studying the picture in his hand. The obvious question in his eyes likely the same one we were all thinking.

“These are definitely from Rook’s hidden camera,” Grey mused. “But if he didn’t do this, then who did?”

CHAPTER

Seven

CORVUS

THE ROAD to the old outpost north of Thorn Valley could be a bitch in bad weather, and right now? Right now it was absolutely *pissing* down.

I cursed Diesel for picking it as the meeting point tonight, not just for the crap location, down thirty miles of gravel road, but because there wasn't a secondary way out.

It was a dead-end at the outpost. Nowhere to go but back the way we came.

A great tactic if you didn't think you'd need to make a hasty getaway, but tonight, all bets were off. If Lenny Ace admitted the little bitch who'd been grooming Becca was doing so at his command, Diesel would put two pieces of lead between his eyes.

It would either be them leaving here tonight, or us.

Maybe Diesel was counting on that.

But if Lenny Ace had half a fucking brain, he wouldn't even come here tonight unless it was because he thought we could part ways without bloodshed. He had to know if it came to blood, they wouldn't stand a chance. Their larger numbers be damned.

No one fucked with the Saints and lived. Not after Mom died. And especially not when the supposed target this go 'round was Diesel St. Crow's sons.

The wipers slashed across the windshield, and I squinted to see through them, getting tense on Grey's behalf even though he looked calm as ever as he maneuvered us toward the meet point. Deftly avoiding potholes and sections of washed out road as the rain beat out a pelting rhythm on the roof of the Rover.

"Does anyone have a phone I can use?" Ava Jade asked from the backseat.

"What for?"

Behind me, the whiskey in Rook's flash sloshed for the eighth time since we'd left Briar Hall, signaling another swig. He didn't bother answering Ava Jade, and I had a feeling he was still on the edge from earlier.

No one called Rook Clayton by his given name.

No one except his bastard uncle and the people at the sanatorium where they'd stuck him when they couldn't handle him at the group home.

There was a reason he couldn't stand the sound of it.

Much like certain words and symbols triggered memories from my past, and an empty refrigerator triggered Grey, it was Rook's own name that triggered him.

"I don't have a phone," Ava Jade reminded me. "I just want to check socials and my email."

"Becca?" I asked, not really expecting a response. I'd tried to talk to her about it earlier, but she'd shut me down. Diesel was right though, we needed the intel only Becca could give us. Like what the guy looked like, and whether he had any discernible tattoos. And everything he'd ever said to her.

"You can use mine," Grey offered, but I was already lifting my ass from the seat to pull mine from my back pocket.

I slipped it to her between the seats, taking in her narrowed eyes.

She didn't think it would be me who offered.

Why not?

It wasn't like there was anything to find.

"Two, Seven, Four, One," I told her as she took it. "That's the code. Don't forget to sign out and wipe the history."

"No shit."

I watched her in the rearview as her thumbs tapped over the screen, the blue light deepening the shadows of her sharply angled features.

Ava Jade Mason.

My Sparrow.

My undoing.

I couldn't believe what went on with her and Diesel's cop bait, and the only thing that kept me half-sane was thinking that she never would've gone through with it. That she knew she wouldn't from the very fucking start, but needed to feel in control.

Like me.

Having that option in her back pocket and knowing that she *could* use it if she wanted to was what she needed to get through the rest of it all.

She chose us, I reminded myself, the sick feeling turning my stomach again.

I cracked the window, making Rook snort behind me, annoyed when some rain flung back at him without warning. But he didn't tell me to roll it up.

Good, because I needed it.

It helped to distract myself with other thoughts. Like whether or not I should install some form of tracking device on the new cell phone I ordered for her late last night.

If I could get away with it, I probably wouldn't have given it a second thought, but I knew she would strip the thing and search it inside and out. That was, if she even agreed to take it from me in the first place. It was a healthy step up from the usual burners. The newest model, actually.

Better even than my own phone.

At least now her stalker would have no access whatsoever to her number.

My teeth clamped tight at the reminder, and I breathed deeply through my nose of the rain-scented air to regain the calm I needed to get through this fucking meeting.

With any luck, the motherfucker who'd tried to inject her was already dead, but something told me it wasn't that simple. Especially after what happened at Briar Hall this morning.

It could've been the Aces, sure. But that didn't sit right.

Ava Jade slipped the phone back to me over the seat, our fingers brushing before she pulled back from the contact.

"Anything interesting?" I prodded.

"Wouldn't you like to know."

"*Sparrow...*"

She sighed, exasperated as she leaned back in her seat, swiping Rook's flask away for a little swig. He didn't seem bothered, but took it back from her as soon as she was finished. "Nothing from creepy stalker fucker if that's what you're wondering. He was a text guy though, remember?"

"*Was,*" I emphasized. "Not sure he's going to like not being able to communicate with you anymore."

"If he's even alive," Grey grumbled from the driver's seat.

"Good," Ava Jade said. "Either way I won't have to deal with being skeeved out every fucking time my phone chimes."

"This is it," Grey said as he pulled us around the last bend in the road to the sleepy little building nestled in the woods. It was a ranger's cabin once, before they built a more modern one thirty miles south.

No one used this one now except hikers looking for a night's refuge or someplace warm and dry to escape a storm. The shit brown siding was riddled with graffiti, but no gang tags. None that mattered anyway. This was just as neutral as

Nomansland and a meeting place we'd used on other occasions several times over the last two years.

Diesel was already there, sitting in a plateless black truck idling in the wide drive. It looked like Tiny was beside him in the passenger seat, though it was hard to tell in the rain, and as Grey pulled us around to the other side, we saw the nondescript dark green van next to him.

No doubt filled with at least five more Saints if not more than that.

This location made me uneasy. Unlike usual, we didn't get the details ahead of time. Didn't have a say. We got jack shit from Diesel, actually, besides the time and location at the last minute.

He didn't want help setting it up, and he didn't even reply to my text cautioning him against meeting right now. This soon after finding out about the snake.

We'd be showing them our cards instead of trying to use what we knew to figure out what cards they were trying to play. Not to mention we had a dead Saint to bury, and I had it on good authority from Pinkie that Dies was told he should stay off his feet for at least ten days to let the knife wound to his Achilles heal.

I knew he wasn't thrilled with what happened back at the Docks, but I had to wonder how long he intended to punish us.

I bent my head, grimacing as an ache formed in my skull.

"I still can't believe you insisted on coming tonight," I found myself saying out loud.

Diesel wasn't going to like this, but he hadn't said *not* to bring her. What he did say was to watch her. How else were we supposed to do that if he asked us all to come out here?

"This is what you wanted," Ava Jade said plainly. "Remember?"

Grey flinched at that, but none of us contradicted her. Whether it was Grey who did the asking or not for her to take

the trials, it was a fact that every single one of us wanted that same thing. It was better than the alternative.

“Get out,” I told her. “I have something for you in the back.”

I stepped out into the rain, bristling as the chilled droplets snaked through my hair, dripping down the back of my neck, bringing my focus back.

Her door opened, and she rushed to the trunk, squinting through the rain, her arms wrapped around herself as the rain soaked through her black long sleeve shirt.

I took out the vest I’d purchased for her more than a week ago, though it only just arrived this morning. It was the closest one to her size I could find. The adjustable straps should ensure it was a snug fit.

“Put this on.”

She looked between me and the bulletproof vest. She hadn’t been expecting this.

Her hesitation was making me grind my teeth again. They’d be worn down to stumps in no time if she kept being so damned stubborn about every little thing.

I lifted the edge of my grey t-shirt, showing her mine beneath it. Everyone here would be wearing one tonight. Except for Rook, who never wore one no matter how much we tried to push him into it. He had the bullet holes to prove it, but not even those could persuade him. He wore each one like a trophy. A time where death could’ve come for him but didn’t.

“Just put it on, Sparrow.”

She relented, stripping off her shirt without another word to lay it in the trunk, her skin reflecting the moonlight, bathed in rainwater. The tops of her breasts prickled with gooseflesh.

I adjusted my stance to block her from the view of the van as she turned around to slide her arms through. I helped her get it on and adjusted and then tugged her damp shirt back on over top of it.

Though nearly everyone here would be wearing one, it was bad form to show it. This was a courtesy meeting after all. Wearing a bulletproof vest meant you expected blood. And if you expected blood, you would often find it.

“It’s still visible,” she said, trying to adjust her shirt so it would cover the top part of the vest covering her perfect tits, but it was no use. I slipped off my leather jacket and flicked off the rain before settling it around her shoulders.

“Zip it up. No one will know.”

She touched the collar delicately for a second, like she wasn’t quite sure what to do, and the urge to push her up against the Rover and punish her for everything she’d put us through almost took me. But then she zipped it up like I told her to do and gave me a taut nod. She looked amazing in it.

“Good girl.”

She bit her lip.

Jesus fuck.

The rain started to let up, and I heard the truck door open, instinctively stepping forward to put myself in front of Ava Jade. She made a sound of annoyance at my tiny shove but didn’t fight me.

No. She just stepped back around me to put herself directly at my side as Diesel appeared outside the truck, shrugging his worn jacket to pop the collar as a defense against what remained of the rain.

Grey and Rook got out of the Rover, coming to stand with us.

Diesel didn’t seem the least bit surprised to see Ava Jade there as he pulled a long stick from the truck seat and set it on the ground.

A cane.

I felt Ava Jade stiffen beside me as Diesel approached us, using the sleek black cane to hold the majority of his weight.

He stopped a few feet away.

“What’s the—” I started, but he interrupted me.

“You’re here,” he said, sniffing, his icy gaze fixed on my Sparrow. “Good.”

Good?

What?

“After you threatened Rick, I wasn’t sure you were with us.”

She’d done what? Rick was our tattoo guy, owned a local shop in town. Had Dies already sent him to her? And she’d clearly refused the ink. It wasn’t negotiable.

Ava Jade jutted out her chin, offering no explanation.

“You must’ve been very tired,” Diesel said, looking at her as though she were a wounded little girl in need of coddling. I wanted to tell him if he looked at her like that for even another second, she was going to attempt to gouge his eyeballs out but that would only make matters worse.

Instead, I covertly wound my fingers around her wrist, feeling her tendons taut as a whip with her hand balled into a fist.

“Not tired enough not to make good on what I promised him.”

Diesel’s jaw ticked. “You need to be inked next time, or you won’t be welcome.”

I squeezed her wrist tighter. *Calm down.*

“Anyway,” Diesel said, inhaling deeply, the moment past. Time for a subject change. He jerked his head at Pinkie, who stepped forward to hand Ava Jade a white cloth.

More like dumped it into her hands.

The clatter of metal told us what was inside.

She unwrapped her blades, the ones she’d lost back at the warehouse. “Thought you’d be wanting those back.”

Her fingers curled protectively around them. She offered Diesel nothing, just a strained nod by way of thanks even

though they appeared to have been cleaned and sharpened by our blade guy.

I doubted the gesture would have the effect he hoped for with Ava Jade, though. I doubted she liked other people touching her blades, never mind honing them for her.

The others from the van exited now, forming a semi-circle of six behind Diesel and Tiny.

I didn't like the way they were looking at Ava Jade. Like she was an outsider. Like they wanted to...

If Garrett hadn't been a newer implant into the gang, Ava Jade would've been in for a lot more than some hateful stares for killing him.

It's a truth universally known among us that people died during the trials, but usually it was the ones taking the trials, not the ones administering them. It wasn't the first time it'd happened, but it definitely wasn't common.

There was a reason we'd told Ava Jade to try not to kill anyone.

It would take her twice as long to earn their trust—their respect—now, if she ever got it. There was also the matter of her having a different set of *parts* to consider. There were only two female gang members I'd ever heard of besides Ava Jade and it'd taken them years to earn their places.

“What's the plan?” I asked when the silence stretched on.

Diesel tipped his head to the cabin. “You four inside. Pinkie and Tiny, you're with me inside, too. Axel, I want you in the driver's seat of the van, don't budge. Derrik, Crowley, Shane, and Lee, you're in the woods. Watch their entry, warn us if they're packing more than they should be. If Lenny Ace leaves the cabin before me, light him the fuck up.”

So it was like that.

Ava Jade snatched her wrist back from me while everyone's attention was elsewhere, sending me a scathing glare.

“Everyone got it?”

A chorus of *yeah boss*, and *let's get it done* rising up all around as the rain finally let up.

Four of our men dispersed into the tree line, vanishing into the shadows, careful of where they stepped to leave no boot prints in the muddy roadway. Axel went back to the van, seeming unhappy with his assignment, but they all respected Diesel. Each one knew that if they followed his orders as he spoke them with no room for interpretation, their chances of surviving until another sunrise were a lot fucking better than if they didn't.

The graves of the outliers proved that, without the need for Dies to throw his weight around.

“Arm up if you aren't already,” he told us, and Ava Jade made a show of slipping her blades into the empty places on her ankle sheath and into the new knife slot at the top of her bulletproof vest beneath her shirt.

Diesel watched with a raised brow, and I knew what he was thinking, but he wouldn't say it. She needed a gun. He was only half right about that.

“Let's head inside. They'll be here soon.”

We fell into step behind Dies and Tiny, but there was something else bothering me about this whole thing. Probably because he didn't bother to give details about anything to do with tonight's meet even though he knew how it would drive me to the brink of fucking insanity to not know.

“What exactly do you expect to get out of tonight?” I asked, making Diesel pause briefly at the bottom of the short staircase leading up to the front door of the old cabin.

He turned, just enough for me to see the twisted side profile of his face.

“The truth. Either they give it to me, or they live *and die* with the consequences of that choice.”

CHAPTER

Eight

AVA JADE

HEADLIGHTS POURED across the weatherworn floor of the cabin as the Aces approached the meet point.

Three cars, I counted as their headlights passed over the front window one by one. Heavy vehicles. Trucks and vans like the ones Dies and the others drove in on by the sounds of their tires as they hit deep potholes and drove over sections of puddled road.

Diesel rolled his shoulders back and lengthened his spine, hiding a wince as he passed the cane to Tiny.

“Boss, you heard what the vet said—”

“Get rid of it.”

Without another word of protest, the Saint took two steps to his right and chucked the cane out the shattered back window of the cabin.

Diesel adjusted his footing before taking two steps forward and then three steps back. Testing his ability to appear uninjured.

He did a damn good job of it, but I knew it wouldn't be without a monstrous amount of effort that his face stayed placid as a lake. I'd done a damn good job of fucking up his Achilles, and if he kept walking on it, it wouldn't ever heal properly. I was no doctor, but I was pretty sure he'd wind up with a limp for the rest of his life doing that.

Though, I understood his need to appear strong. Especially now.

I caught his gaze flick to me as he returned back to his place, standing elbow to elbow with the rest of us to the far right side of the cabin. This side had the only window other than the one next to the front door and therefore the only side with an alternate means of escape.

Though the other side was more heavily strewn with old discarded furniture that could prove useful as cover if it came to a gunfight.

With Rook and Grey beside me, I felt an odd sense of responsibility for them. Like, if something happened to them it would be at least partially my fault as the person who was at their side. Meant to have their back. Meant to cover them from fire.

From their tension and the way they both inched ever so slightly nearer to my sides as the sounds of heavy thudding footfalls ascended the stairs outside, I knew they felt similarly.

I counted the footsteps.

Eight of them coming inside. Another five? Maybe six waiting outside by the idling vehicles.

We were six in here.

Eleven in total.

Decent odds for normal people.

Fucking amazing odds for us. I knew I could take at least four before they saw me coming. And my guys? They could easily handle the rest, Diesel or no Diesel.

My own certainty surprised me, but I felt it like a truth carved into my bones, and lifted my chin as the Aces entered.

I clocked weapons as they came in. Finding the tactical edges of bulletproof vests poking out from under collars and sleeves. They were ready for this to go south, too.

Nothing bigger than a handgun, though, unless someone had a particularly deep anal cavity.

I searched the faces of the Aces here tonight, trying to decide which one could've been Becca's beau. The man who'd manipulated and conned her. The one who was after my Crows.

Their eyes betrayed nothing.

The man from that night in the yard of the warehouse emerged from the group, putting himself at a slight lead from the others at his back. Diesel did the same.

I recognized him easily enough. He had a distinct look about him. A thin, angular face with coiffed hair that made him appear taller than he was. And suddenly I was back there, knelt down in the shadows of the trees, watching as Lenny Ace and Diesel St. Crow spoke. As the Ace on the end of the row eyed Corvus, his trigger finger twitching.

It was that one thing that sealed my fate. If that other Ace hadn't tried to kill Corvus... If I hadn't saved his life.

I might not be here right now.

"Lenny," Diesel said.

"Diesel. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

Lenny sounded bored. Almost annoyed. It was clear from his tone he wasn't happy to be here. That it was a major inconvenience.

Not the sort of tone Diesel St. Crow would take kindly to.

"Have you nothing for me, then?" Diesel pressed, his hard stare unwavering on Lenny Ace.

Lenny had the decency to look confused at the question. "Should I?"

Diesel bristled, and I thought he was going to end this meeting right here and now in a hail of gunfire, but then the atmosphere around him shifted. The switch reminded me of something—someone—else, and I glanced at Corvus, finding the same practiced restraint in his features and stature.

"You have nothing to prove your man's death is on us," Lenny continued when Diesel didn't give him the courtesy of

a reply.

“And you have nothing to prove it wasn’t,” Diesel continued, and it took me a moment to realize they were continuing the conversation from all that time ago at the warehouse. About the guy The Crows found dead in Thorn Valley...with an A carved into his chest?

I didn’t know the particulars. Only what I picked up on from my bug and what I’d heard since.

“It was probably Devon,” someone else behind Lenny piped up. “He was always a loose cannon.”

Lenny turned his head slowly, and the look in his eyes promised a slow death to the man who spoke if he said another word.

He shut up.

“Convenient then, since he’s buried on the spot where he tried to shoot Corvus and can’t defend himself,” I couldn’t help saying.

Lenny’s blue-eyed gaze found me for the first time since they entered, analyzing me from the top down.

“Who the fuck is this?”

“That’s not your concern,” Diesel replied. “And I didn’t ask you here tonight to talk about Randy, though I still think there’s something to be spoken to about his death.”

“Then what *did* you ask me here for?”

The Aces tensed behind their leader, anticipating a fight.

I could feel it, too. Like electricity in the air that I could taste if I just flicked my tongue out to touch it. My blood hummed with it. With the possibility that tonight, I might kill a man. And fuck if I wasn’t looking forward to it. That inner darkness thirsting for violence.

Rook made a low sound in his throat next to me, and I inched my hand to move to the side, brushing my knuckles with his, feeling a static shock. His dark eyes gleamed in the low light, and I knew he was feeling it, too.

“One of your men is out to get my boys.”

A dark laugh rattled out of Lenny’s chest as he shook his head, dropping it to pinch the bridge of his nose like something Diesel said was funny.

I didn’t find it fucking funny.

My fingers flinched, pulling away from Rook’s to hover at my side, ready to spring for a blade.

“You’re paranoid, old man,” Lenny said, sighing. “No one is messing with you. No one is after your sons. At least, not *my* crew. I’d start looking to your enemies, there is where you’ll find—”

“Maybe you didn’t hear me,” Diesel interrupted Lenny. “*One of your men is out to get my fucking sons*. It wasn’t a question. It isn’t a suspicion. It’s a fact.”

Lenny’s lips pressed tight. “If you truly believed that, we wouldn’t be talking right now.”

“The only reason we are is because I’m giving you the benefit of the doubt, Lenny. I’m not making your insides your outsides right now because I recognize it might be one of your men acting independently and not on your command.”

“Diesel—”

“I’m not finished. Either you have something to do with it and you have a death wish, or one of your men, someone you trust, is working an angle without your knowledge.”

Lenny’s face was growing redder by the second. Unlike Diesel, he was wholly unable to keep his emotions from playing on his face. And right now, he was angry. Feeling disrespected. I had an urge to push him a little more to see how he might react.

I opened my mouth to do just that, but Grey stepped on my foot. The slight shake of his head the only hint he knew what I’d been about to do.

“You’re wrong, Dies,” Lenny said.

“I’m not. I have the proof I need; what I don’t have is a name.”

“I can’t give you what I don’t have.”

“You have ten days to give me that name,” Diesel continued, ignoring Lenny completely. “Give him up and declare peace or you renounce your territory claim and *leave*.”

“Excuse me?” Lenny scoffed. “We’ve held that territory since my grandfather—”

“I don’t care if you’ve held it since the dawn of time. You give him up, or you better get as far away from northern Cali as you can go.”

Lenny stepped forward, cinching the gap between himself and Diesel. To Diesel’s credit, he didn’t so much as balk at the advance. Actually, he smiled.

It was worse than when he was expressionless. Much worse.

“And if we don’t?” Lenny asked, a muscle in his upper lip twitching as he snarled.

“Then you have chosen the path of violence, and we will not hold back.”

Diesel lifted his hand in a circular motion, and Grey tugged me to follow him from the cabin.

My head pounded with the throb of unspent adrenaline in my veins as we exited back out into the damp night. I stayed by the door until Rook was outside. Diesel and Corvus were the last ones to leave, and I didn’t fall back into step until Corvus tugged me to him, making me follow beside him instead of behind.

I didn’t trust them.

There was a vibe there. I couldn’t explain it, but I knew there was something more to this feud than what it appeared on the surface. If I was right, it wasn’t going to take much more for the tenuous truce to snap.

Before there was all out war on the streets.

A sharp whistle and Diesel's other men exited the tree line, surprising the small gathering of Aces waiting by the idling vehicles on the left side of the parking lot.

They strode past them like wraiths and the Aces watched as they hopped into the van with Axel, silent.

"Get back to Sanctum. I want you combing over those tapes for *anything* we can use," Diesel told Pinkie. "Go with the others."

Pinkie nodded before going to the van.

"I want the rest of you ready. Wait for my orders at Sanctum."

"Where you going, boss?" one of them asked as Corvus continued to drag me slowly to the Rover.

Diesel's eyes found mine, and I stopped short, dragging Corvus to a stop with me.

"I'm following my sons back to the Nest," Diesel told him. "I need to have a little chat with our newest member."

The van door slammed and the engine turned.

Diesel held my stare for another moment before his eyes flicked to Corvus and then to Rook and Grey. "You make no stops. We don't need to give them any advantage or opportunity. Got it?"

"Yeah," Corvus replied gruffly. "I got it."

THERE WERE no surprises on the route home, though I half expected an ambush, and by midnight, we were pulling up alongside the Nest with Diesel's headlights bouncing behind us.

"He's going to want the intel only Becca can give us," Grey said solemnly as he shut off the engine. "He'll want you to get it."

"I know."

Grey twisted in his seat to see me in the back, trying to gauge something from my stare. Perhaps whether or not I would comply. I wasn't yet sure if I would either, so it was anyone's guess.

Depended on how Diesel did the asking and whether or not he would agree to certain...*stipulations*.

I knew from the email Becca sent six hours ago that she landed, was safe, and had gotten rid of her phone like I told her to. It put me at least moderately at ease to know she was so far away. Out of his reach. Well, maybe not entirely, I didn't know how large his web of contacts expanded, but I was counting on it not being large enough to reach her there. At least not this quickly.

Diesel's headlights behind us blinked off, and we all stepped out of the Rover, meeting him outside.

"Here," Grey said, going to Diesel's side to try to take his arm, take some of the weight off his injured ankle. "Come on, I think we might have something you can use for a—"

"I'm good." Diesel waved him off, walking alone unassisted instead, though he was no longer trying to hide his limp. "It's splinted."

"You still shouldn't be walking on it," Corvus said, agreeing with Grey, but Diesel ignored both of them as he passed, making for the front door.

"You want to help? Stop yapping and let me in so I can sit down."

Corvus opened the door for Diesel, and we all followed him through the dark house to the living room, flicking light switches as we went. All of us on edge as the rooms each lit up in turn, as though there might be monsters waiting in the shadows. Because...there might be. Not the kind with big scary teeth and claws, but the kind with guns, or in my case, syringes full of fucking sedatives.

I only allowed myself to partially relax once we were all seated in the living room. I thought about trying to get out of

joining this little chat, but knew Diesel would only insist if I tried.

Awkward didn't even begin to describe the atmosphere in the living room in the minute between sitting down and when someone decided to break the silence.

"Want a whiskey?" Grey offered Diesel, pushing the low coffee table nearer to him so that he could lift his leg to rest on its edge.

"No."

"Fuck yes."

Diesel and Rook said at the same time.

Grey's face screwed up into a sneer at his brother. "Dude. Get it yourself."

Rook huffed as he pushed off from the sofa next to me and went to the kitchen, the sound of rattling glass and tinkling ice the only thing to be heard until he returned.

"No need for small talk then," Diesel said, his eyes roving over each of his boys with a flicker of disappointment before they settled on me. "We need intel only Rebecca Hart can give us. I know she skipped town. I have a rough idea where she is and the area gets narrowed down by the hour. I have no interest in sending my people in to get her, but I need her back here. Now."

I rolled around his words in my mouth, contemplating spitting each one back in his face.

"I won't tell her to come back here, if that's what you're asking. Not without guarantees."

Diesel sat back on his cushion, extending his arms wide over the back of the couch so his reach nearly touched Corvus and Grey spread out far at his sides near the edges of the sofa. "What kind of guarantees?"

"Her safety, for one."

"Is that all?"

"No."

He waited.

“You want to speak to her at all? You have questions for her? They go through me. You’ve traumatized her enough.”

A muscle in his temple bulged.

“And I can ask said questions on your behalf while she’s away. There’s no need for her to come back here.”

Not until I’m certain I can trust you, I wanted to add, but didn’t. We both knew that was unlikely to happen. Ever.

“And if I need her to ID a face?”

“I’ll send her a pic.”

Fucking obviously.

“When the heat’s died down and whoever this fucker is, is six feet under *then* I’ll tell Becca it’s safe to come back to Thorn Valley. She shouldn’t be here right now. The man who was using her for intel knows just as well as we do that she is the only person who can ID him. Who has information that could lead to us finding him.”

I let him fill in the blanks. If Becca came back here, it wasn’t just Diesel she had to be afraid of but also *him*.

“I won’t bring her back here to die. You can’t ask me to do that. No matter the reason why.”

He held my stare for a long moment. “You care for this girl? Even after what she did to you? Could’ve done to them?”

He indicated his sons.

“I didn’t say I forgave her,” I corrected him. “But there’s a difference between making a mistake and a calculated move.”

He nodded quietly to himself, and I knew he had to see some reason in what I’d said. What good would Becca be to him if the man who was grooming her got to her before we did? Before she could ID him?

“All right.”

“All right?”

“We do it your way. She have good security where she is?”

A vivid image of the man whose voice played over the tapes in the warehouse attacking Becca in her European flat flashed in my mind. “I’ll make sure she does.”

Another nod. “I want an established line of contact between you and her by tomorrow, and I’ll have a list of questions by morning.”

Had we just come to an agreement without blood spilling?

Damn.

I’d be more surprised if it weren’t for knowing the ultimate—and mutual—goal here was the assured safety of his sons. It was the one thing I thought that could force us to work together.

“Want me to drive you back?” Grey asked, pushing up from his knees. “We can get rid of the truck for you.”

Grey’s face had remained impassive all night, and I got the distinct feeling that a war was waging beneath his carefully painted mask. He wasn’t just walking on eggshells with me. He was doing the same with his adoptive father.

It made my heart hurt to watch him.

“We aren’t finished,” Diesel said, staring at Grey until he sat back down. “There’s something else, and I wanted to bring it to you three before I put it to a vote with the others.”

Three.

So, not me then.

Noted.

This had Rook sitting up, his whiskey dangling from his fingers between his legs, forgotten for the moment. “Total annihilation?”

Diesel faced him with the smallest of smirks at the edge of his mouth. “No, Son, not yet.”

Rook grunted and sat back again. His excitement gone.

“I want to ally with the Kings.”

“What?” Corvus roared, his head whipping around to face his father. “Why the fuck would we do that? We’ve never allied with anyone and there’s a fucking reason for that.”

“We trust our own,” Rook added. “No one else.”

“That’s what you taught us,” Grey echoed their opinion.

Diesel’s light eyes found mine for an instant, and I wondered if he waited for my opinion. I couldn’t give it.

The Kings.

They were the reigning gang on the streets of Lennox, my hometown.

I suspected they were also to blame for the death of my father. He was borrowing money from someone. He’d told me as much in so many words. I knew he was in over his head. I just wished I’d acted sooner.

I wished I tried harder to break him of the habit that killed him.

Wishing never got me anywhere.

They continued to argue, and I felt the tension in my shoulders wind until it was close to snapping, every muscle across my back burning like I was standing on a pyre instead of sitting in a living room discussing a treaty with the enemy.

Huh.

Keep your enemies close...

If the Kings allied with the Saints then I might get the chance to find out what happened to my father. Who killed him. And return the favor.

I’d always known that vengeance would be mine someday, but this? This could be the opportunity I needed to follow through.

My stomach fluttered at the thought of King’s blood all over my hands.

“He’s right,” I interrupted something Grey was saying. “If the Saints don’t ally with the Kings then the Aces might.”

It was what Diesel was trying to tell them if what I heard in pieces while plotting my own revenge was any indication. But I needed to put it to them plainer.

This needed to happen.

“If the Aces and Kings join together it’ll be a lot worse for us. A much, *much* bigger mess to clean up if things go south, and I think we all know that’s exactly where this is headed. There will be more loss of life. It’s the logical move.”

I focused my attention squarely on Diesel now. “You should do it. Now. Before the Aces do.”

He considered me as though seeing me in a new light. Maybe one he didn’t particularly loathe. I had to wonder why he didn’t shut me up. He clearly had no desire to hear my take.

He’s learning, I thought. Watching and learning. Seeing how my addition to this threesome would affect his future with his sons. How he could use it to his advantage. Weighing the risk versus the potential rewards.

This man was far more cunning than I gave him credit for. He knew when to speak. When to throw his weight. And when to be quiet; a thing most men in positions of power never quite learned.

Diesel looked around the room at his sons. “Boys?”

“I don’t like it,” Rook said, sneering as he finished his whiskey. It wasn’t a clear cut opposition.

“Neither do I,” Corvus agreed, but he, too, was already nodding, his sights on me. “But they have a point.”

“Grey?” Diesel pushed. “I need the green light on this from all three of you before I’ll move on it.”

Grey’s brows knotted.

“We form the alliance,” Grey said, casting the deciding vote. “But as a means to prevent them from joining with the Aces. I don’t want to work with them. Not unless we have to.”

That would make my plans more difficult, but I’d still take the win.

“Agreed,” Diesel said, and winced as he brought his leg down from the table. The bandage poking out from beneath the hem of his jeans was soaked through with crimson.

I guess we really weren’t going to talk about *that*. Or the million other things still left unsaid between us over the past weeks. It was probably for the best. If we started talking, I wasn’t sure I’d be able to keep talking from becoming *stabbing*.

He hopped to his feet, and Grey got up to follow him.

“Stay,” he told Grey, and his son obediently sat back down.

Diesel paused in the doorway to the kitchen. “Oh. There was just one last thing.”

There was more?

“That business at Briar Hall this morning? What was that about?”

Of course he would know about that, though it didn’t keep me from wondering exactly *how* he knew.

“Just some cunt fucking around. Probably a prank. Doesn’t seem like the Ace’s style.”

Diesel shook his head. “No. Not their usual MO, but my guys are looking into it anyway.”

“I got this,” Corvus said, his shoulders flexing.

“Do you?” Diesel asked him. “Remember who runs those halls, son. Things like that can’t go unpunished. Clean it up.”

Corv nodded, and Diesel’s gaze strayed to me. To the blade I was unconsciously twirling between my fingers as I thought of brutal ways to use it against our mutual enemies and some of my own.

“And for the love of god, someone teach her how to use a fucking gun.”

Diesel left, but it did little to fix the knots in my stomach or the ones still burning across my back.

I stood.

“Where are you going?” Corvus demanded.

“Back to Briar Hall.”

“For what? It’ll be dawn in a couple hours. Not like you’re going to sleep.”

He wasn’t wrong.

“I have an idea,” Rook said, licking his lips as he rose from the couch, trying to dump the last few drops of his whiskey down his throat.

Corvus blanched, and I got the sense that when Rook had an *idea* it didn’t always end well.

“Let’s blow off some steam, yeah?”

He brushed past my shoulder on his way to the kitchen, his warmth and scent flooding all my senses.

“You coming?” he called from the front door, and the rest of us shared a look before following him from the Nest.

Anything was better than staring at the ceiling for the next four hours, right?

CHAPTER

Nine

ROOK

“*FUUUUCKK*,” Ava Jade screamed with a smile as Grey cranked the wheel, whipping the old Volvo around a stack of tires in the middle of the massive field. Making her press hard into my side in the backseat, sucked close from the g-force as we spun out.

Grey didn’t let the car stop for even a second, turning the wheel hard and gunning it until we fishtailed out of the spin and were barreling over the dry dirt and patchy grass again.

“Why didn’t you take me here before?” Ghost called over the roar of the engine and the music blasting from the speakers, completely at ease without a seatbelt in the middle of the backseat as Grey drove us at double the legal limit over uneven terrain. She held herself from being sucked back with hands gripping the edges of the front seat, legs spread wide like she was riding a bull instead of a backseat.

I licked my lips. “Crank it!” I ordered Grey, and he cut the wheel, throwing Ava Jade back into my lap before she could adjust her hold. I caught her before she could smash her head into the window, running a possessive hand down her side to grip the inside of her thigh.

She looked up at me in the dark, eyes gleaming with danger, and smiled.

I knew this was a good idea. We hadn’t been up here to rally the cars in ages. Not since the night we found Randy’s

body.

“Shit, Grey,” Corvus hissed from the front seat, and I realized he wasn’t as lucky as Ava Jade, his head having knocked into the window.

He rolled it down, letting a blast of cool wind into the car as Grey kept going, taking hard turns and speeding so fast it made Ava Jade squeal.

I didn’t think I’d ever seen her so alive. So blissfully empty of all her darkness if only for just a moment.

She pushed away from me and tipped her head back, howling like a wolf, her back arched to the wind, arms spread wide, eyes shut. Either she trusted Grey’s control of the vehicle implicitly or she didn’t care if we crashed.

I knew I didn’t.

Sometimes I craved it.

Imagining the press of cold steel as it fed through my flesh, twisted with my bones. If it weren’t for my brothers in the car, I just might give in to that tiny voice whispering *what if you just let go of the wheel*. I supposed it was a good thing they didn’t let me drive.

“What is that?” Ava Jade shouted, leaning over the center console to point out the windshield, far into the distance at the jump we built last summer. The old property Diesel bought three years back was nearly a hundred acres of empty fields with nothing in any direction for miles. We’d been making it into our playground every chance we got. And that jump was one of three that were complete. The others, not so much.

It was the smallest of the three, but still a rush at fifteen feet.

Grey jerked his gaze to Corvus, and my eldest brother nodded, giving him permission. A small grin pinning up one edge of his mouth.

“You should hold on to something, Sparrow.”

She braced herself on the seats again, widening her legs as she planted her feet firm against the floor.

Grey switched gears and pushed the Volvo to its max, the night time landscape rushing by in a blur of dark shapes. I let the pull of danger wake and tame the black thing rumbling deep within. Tipping my head back as the cold wind stroked it. As the g-force made it quiver.

My hand found the inside of Ava Jade's thigh and skated higher.

Her eyes found mine as Grey sped us to the ramp, shifting gears every second. She held my gaze there as I pressed my hand flat against her cunt through her jeans, feeling her warmth.

She shuddered as my fingers began to rub and the ramp came into full view in the dim headlights out the front windshield.

"Hold on!" Grey shouted, and I took it literally, squeezing her juicy little cunt hard so she tried to squeeze her thighs closed, her lips popping open in surprise as the Volvo hit the base of the ramp, thrusting us into the air.

For one blissful, weightless second, we floated, the dark becoming an ocean, the wind its waves.

Ava Jade's hair lifted from her shoulders as the car dropped, and there was that one second of complete silence before the front tires hit the ground. The Volvo jerked and Ava Jade was violently tossed to one side of the car, her cunt slipping free of my grasp as she barreled into the opposite door *hard* and came up laughing like a maniac as the tires spat dirt until we were at a stop.

I could see her pulse thudding in her neck, quick and steady. Not frantic.

Just like mine.

She caught me staring and licked her lips, her gaze alighting on the hand that'd been firmly attached to her just a second ago.

I grinned at her wickedly.

“We have to do that again,” she said, breathless, shouting over the spluttering radio.

She perked up, spinning away from me to push out of the Volvo. She opened the driver’s side door next. “Get out,” she told Grey. “I want to drive.”

Hairline cracks formed in Grey’s confident smile.

“Fuck no,” Corvus said, turning down the music. “Get back in.”

She planted her hands on her hips and continued to stare at Grey. I kicked his seat. “You heard the woman, get the fuck out and let her drive.”

I dug my whiskey bottle from the bottom of Corvus’ seat, happy to find it still intact, and took a pull, relishing the burn.

“Not tonight,” Corvus said, giving me a pointed look through the cracked side mirror, but Grey was already getting out of the car, spreading his arms wide with a flourish.

“Your chariot?”

“Why, thank you,” she replied, slipping into the seat, her hands caressing the wheel. I could see the goosebumps on her arms from here. Each peachy blonde hair raised like she was brimming with electricity—energy that needed an outlet. Right now, this was it.

“Come on, Corv,” she said, nudging him with her elbow. “I think you kind of owe me. Live a little with us, please?”

He inhaled, face pinching. “Fine. No hero shit, though. I mean it. Leave that to the professionals.”

Grey smirked at the insinuation as he slid into the back with me. He seemed out of place in the seat, and I could honestly say I couldn’t remember a time I’d ever seen him not up front.

He seemed just as weirded out by it as me, looking around and trying to find a place to put his feet comfortably.

“Put your fucking seatbelts on.”

I rolled my eyes at Corvus, shaking my head at Grey as he and Corvus buckled themselves in.

“Where’s the faith?” Ava Jade asked, rolling her eyes when Corvus reached across her body to yank down her seatbelt, notching it in despite her protest.

“You can drive stick, right?” Grey asked as Ava Jade adjusted her seat.

She shrugged. “Guess we’ll find out.”

“Are you fucking ser—”

Whatever Corvus had been about to say was cut short as Ghost gunned the engine, the tires spinning on the spot for a second before she threw it into second gear and tore off downfield with a holler, turning the music back up between shifting gears.

The Volvo bumped over the uneven terrain as she leaned forward in her seat, squinting out the windshield to see as the night sky began to brighten, bruised by the purples and pinks of a new day.

The engine groaned as she pushed it to its limits, axels near snapping as she cut hard corners and nearly hit the fucking shed where the other old beaters and some guns and ammunition were stored.

Corv gripped the holy shit handle like his life depended on. Grey’s face turned ashen after barely five minutes.

I elbowed him. “Corv is the one with control issues. Relax. Enjoy the motherfuckin’ ride, Brother.”

He swallowed, taking the bottle of whiskey when I offered it for a quick swig. He shook his head, grimacing, but it did the trick to help ease the tension through his shoulders, and I polished off the last of it before chucking the bottle through the window as far as she would go.

The car dragged to a stop as Ghost finished a round of doughnuts that left a massive circular tread in the field. But the look in her eyes told me she was far from finished.

Her breath caught.

“What?” Corvus growled. “What the fuck are you looking at?”

He tried to follow her line of sight through the dim, but couldn't find whatever it was.

I didn't have to see it to know.

It was ramp numero three.

The largest of the set we completed last summer.

One Grey had only jumped with me once and we'd busted the whole chassis of the car we used.

It was at that moment that the song on the radio switched to a new, familiar beat. The opening line of Primal Ethos' *On The Edge* the spark she needed to light her fire.

She cranked it as high as it would go and threw the Volvo into gear, speeding over the earth like a bullet.

“*AJ, no,*” Grey yelled. “It's too high!”

“*Sparrow, stop.*”

But she was beyond hearing us and inside my heart beat to a mantra of *yes, yes, yes.*

“Punch it!” I called as she neared the base of the ramp. This one jumped over a pond, and if she didn't hit it hard enough, we'd never clear it.

She did as I bid her.

Corvus grabbed the brake.

Fuck.

It broke off in his hand, and he chucked it from the window, cursing.

“Ava Jade!”

The ramp was only milliseconds away now.

I shut my eyes.

Blinding yellow light shocked the backs of my eyelids and Ava Jade screamed, blinded by the dawn.

I acted without thinking as the car's perfect trajectory wobbled. We weren't going to hit it right. She couldn't see.

I was through the seats in a second, curling a fist around the wheel to jerk it to the right as the tires hit the base of the ramp.

The world tipped up, and my head cracked against something hard as the Volvo rolled, my stomach in my throat as the metal contracted all around us and dirt and broken glass pattered against my face and neck, burying themselves in my skin.

The rolling stopped. Or my head stopped spinning. The Volvo balanced precariously on two wheels at the end of its spin before falling back to all four, the cloying smell of engine smoke and dry dirt filling my nose.

Someone coughed, and I reached for Grey, jerking his arm.

He tapped my hand as he continued to cough, letting me know he was all right as *On The Edge* continued to play intermittently on the busted radio.

The light made it hard to see through the dust cloud as Ava Jade grunted, disentangling her leg from where it was trapped beneath the wheel well with Corvus' help to lift the gnarled metal.

My stomach clenched, but then she was free and Corvus was inspecting her leg, the only injury he sported a shallow cut in his temple leaking crimson down into his eye.

That's when she started laughing.

A dull chuckle at first, morphing quickly into a full belly laugh, her eyes leaking as she clutched her stomach. Tears clearing tracks through the dirt coating her face.

I couldn't help laughing too, a lightness taking shape in my chest so wide and all-consuming that it blotted out the dark.

Grey chuckled too, slapping me on the leg as he shook his head, incredulous that we were somehow still alive.

Corvus' door opened with a creaking groan as he stepped outside, kicking it shut behind him. The dawn light covering

him in its vivid orange hue as he stalked away.

“Corvus!” Ava Jade called after him between fits of laughter. “Where the fuck are you going?”

He didn’t answer her, just kept walking, shoving his hands into his pockets, his back up. And I knew he needed to leave. It wasn’t a matter of choice. He was going to lose himself if he stayed, and Corvus James never lost himself. Never lost his control.

Too bad.

It would set him free.

CHAPTER

Ten

AVA JADE

“WHAT CRAWLED UP HIS ASS?” I asked as we continued to laugh, my legs pulled up to avoid the smashed footwell, twisted in my seat to see the guys.

I was met with the steady eyes of Grey, staring at me with a hot intensity that curled my toes as his laughter faded. His Adam’s apple bobbed, lips parting to let out a shaky breath.

Lips that looked pillow soft in the dawning light.

He bit his lower one and something tightened in my belly, the adrenaline still pumping blood through my veins making my fingers twitch.

A slight curl at the corner of his mouth sent me over the edge with a wild lust that swallowed me whole.

I was through the seats, a fist in the short hair at the nape of his neck to crush his mouth to mine. An animal sound ricocheted through my chest as his hands came up to hold me there, tight on either side of my jaw.

“*Mmmm,*” Rook groaned somewhere to my right, and I reached a blind hand out for him, finding a fistful of shirt to grab hold of. I yanked him close, tearing myself from Grey to find Rook’s lips.

He tasted strongly of whiskey, and it sent a spike of surprise sparking in my eyes like starbursts. His tongue flicked into my mouth, and I moaned, but a strong hand gripped my

neck, hauling me back. Hot and urgent. Until I was kissing Grey again, their intermingled scents driving me to a hazy delirium.

A sound of surprise squeaked up my throat as Rook grabbed hold of my legs, hard fingers working the button and zipper of my jeans.

I moaned loudly into Grey's mouth as Rook violently undressed me and Grey ravished my mouth with his tongue. My breasts with his greedy hands. Their touches almost frantic in their intensity.

Like they were afraid at any moment I would stop them.

I should.

I really should.

But right now? I'd rather die than have them stop for even a fucking second.

I was high off the moment. Wanting to keep living fast, ready to die hard if that's what this demanded of me.

"*Fuck,*" I croaked as Grey's mouth trailed kisses down my cheek to my neck, suckling lightly on the tender flesh there. Marking me.

Rook grunted as he struggled with my pants, finally kicking the warped door open to get out and rip them from my legs. Yanking me down to lay me across the seat in the process. Bits of chunky glass and dirt biting into my skin.

My panties went next, the distinct sound of steel cutting through cotton making me shiver as he sliced them from me.

I tried to heave myself up to see what Rook was doing, but Grey kept me locked to him, jerking my chin until our mouths met again in an upside down kiss.

My back arched, breath hitching as Rook buried his face in my pussy.

I whimpered into Grey's mouth, and he ripped the top of my shirt, exposing my breasts to the cool morning air, making my nipples pebble.

He groaned into my mouth as he twisted one, rolling the sensitive top between his rough fingers until I was convulsing against the seat at all the sensations rebounding through my body.

Rook feasted on my greedy cunt like a man starved until I wrapped my legs tight around his shoulders, crying out when Grey finally released my mouth to lean over and suck one of my nipples into his warm mouth.

This was...

Fuck, this was the most incredible...

A blade dragged up my inner thigh. I would know the feeling anywhere.

I pressed into it, hungry for more.

“*Fuck, Rook,*” I choked out, squirming so much now in the seat that he had to move his free arm over my waist like a bar, holding me down.

Cold metal brushed my opening beneath where his tongue was setting a quick, flicking pace.

I pushed against it, the cold making me suck a breath in through my teeth as I felt the blunt edge of the tang thrust slowly inside of me.

Holy. Fucking. Shit.

“You like that?” Rook asked, sounding almost incredulous as he pushed the blade further inside of me. I found a fistful of his dark hair and dragged his mouth back to my pussy.

“Yes,” I said. “Don’t fucking stop.”

He didn’t.

My nipple popped out of Grey’s mouth, and I reached my other hand above me, feeling down the length of his torso until I found what I was looking for. The solid bulge beneath his jeans. The perfect cock I knew was bound beneath it and begging to be set free.

I tried to undo the button, but the angle made it almost impossible. I whimpered, shuddering as Rook fucked me with

the handle of the blade.

“Take these off,” I demanded breathily, tugging on Grey’s jeans. “*Now.*”

I didn’t have to tell him twice. He got his door to open and stepped out to remove them, coming back with his cock fisted in his hand.

I opened wide, salivating at the sight of it, looping my fingers around his thigh to force him to move faster. He knelt on the edge of the seat and fed his thick cock into my mouth. I stretched my neck, taking it in, using my grip on his thigh to bring him closer.

The salty taste of him slid down my throat and I moaned against his cock as he withdrew it, letting me circle the tip with my tongue.

“I want you to fuck my mouth,” I told him, breathless, readjusting myself on the seat so my head was flat and he stood behind me. I wanted him to fuck my mouth while Rook fucked my pussy with his knife.

I didn’t think I’d ever wanted anything as much as I wanted this.

“Do as the woman says,” Rook growled from between my legs and Grey obliged, pushed past my lips to slide his cock over my tongue, all the way to the back of my throat.

I relaxed my gag reflex as he grunted, fucking my tight little throat until I could hardly breathe. It only turned me on more.

An orgasm began to build, coming on faster than a jet, with just as much power.

My pussy clenched around the hilt of the blade.

Grey, sensing my closeness, reached down and rubbed my nipples with wetted fingers until I came. The orgasm ripping through me like a thousand tiny explosions. Like a car crash I wanted to relive over and over again. The bruises and bumps and scrapes forgotten in favor of the *release*.

If I believed in souls, I'd say mine just left my fucking body.

I screamed around Grey's cock as the orgasm came to a head, my vision blurring, fingernails biting into flesh.

It continued for what felt like minutes, and just when I thought it was finally going to release me, the blade and Rook's tongue vanished from between my legs and I gasped as he lifted my ass end high, plowing into my pussy with his pierced cock.

Grey's cock was knocked from my mouth, and I dragged in a breath.

"Don't lose it," Rook told me, breathless, the gleam of my wetness still on his lips as his dark eyes watched me. "I want another one."

He thrust into me, holding my legs locked around his neck, making Grey have to climb into the backseat to reach my mouth. I took him back in as he braced himself on the seats, nudging the back of my throat again.

"Come on, Ghost," Rook demanded, and as if on cue, I began to spiral into another orgasm. The feel of his Jacob's ladder rubbing over my sweet spots driving me fucking insane.

"Choke her," Rook roared, and Grey gave me a chance to catch my breath before his fingers curled around my throat, tightening the channel his cock ruthlessly fucked.

My fingers clutched the worn seat beneath me until it tore, the lack of air priming my body as one orgasm began to roll into the next.

Teeth bit into my calf, and I cried out as they broke the skin, the pain mixed with the pleasure bringing me a release so absolute it made tears sting in my eyes. Grey cried out as his warm heat spilled down my throat, and Rook stiffened between my legs, giving himself over to his own release, filling me.

I swallowed, utterly spent with the orange glow of sunrise staining the backs of my eyelids. The only sound besides our heavy breaths and the chirp of the sparrows in the trees.



THE HUM of the tattoo gun filled the apartment as I leaned over the back of one of the kitchen stools. I wasn't sure what I expected for a pain level, but this definitely wasn't it. It was kind of nice, actually.

I didn't know what that said about me, but the heavy handed path of the needle working its way down my spine felt almost therapeutic. Fuck, it would've been if it weren't for *what* Tattoo Guy was inking into the flesh between my shoulder blades.

"You sure this is all you want?" Tattoo Guy grunted as he completed the tattoo and set down the gun on the counter. "Dies pays well in case his men want additional ink to compliment the tag. Pinkie got his in the eye of a tiger, and you might've noticed all The Crow's tags are woven through with their other ink."

My face screwed up at that as I pulled my tank top back down to cover the fresh ink.

"Hey, hold up. I need to bandage it."

Groaning, I lifted my shirt back up as Rook wandered from my bedroom, a towel hanging low on his hips. His body glistening with fresh droplets from the shower, flushed red.

My jaw tightened. If Tattoo Guy could've waited just another twenty fucking minutes to show up at my door, I could've joined him.

Judging by his cheeky smirk, he knew what I was thinking.

Rook tugged my shirt the rest of the way out of Tattoo Guy's way as he cleaned the tattoo, wiping it down before applying a thin clear bandage to it, pressing it down tight, making the fresh needle wounds sting.

"That's it?" Rook asked, echoing Tattoo Guy's question.

I shrugged his hand from my back. "I didn't exactly have time to think about it."

He frowned, and Tattoo Guy finally finished with my bandage, starting to pack up.

“If you want anything added, just give me a call. I’ll make time.” He flipped a card from his wallet, pressing it flat to the countertop. “Rook,” he added, nodding in his direction. “We still on for next month.”

“Pending my demise,” Rook replied with a wink, making my stomach clench.

“Any idea what you’ll have yet or are you going to make me draw it up same day again?”

Rook shrugged, pursing his lips. “You’ll know when I do.”

“So yes then.”

“See you, Rick.”

Tattoo Guy shook his head, slinging his back over his shoulder as he left.

Rook didn’t speak again until the door shut behind him. He put a hand on my shoulder and squeezed, his name flexing over his knuckles. “You good?”

“Feels like a betrayal,” I found myself saying, the honesty almost too heavy.

“Because of what happened to your dad?”

I nodded. It wasn’t the only reason, but it was the biggest one. The fact my mom got the drugs that drove her half mad from the Kings didn’t help. They were also the reason she became an addict. And the reason the collector came knocking for money she didn’t have. Why he decided to take what was owed from my flesh instead of her empty purse. Why he gave me no choice but to end him. Awakening my darkness and changing me forever.

Rook nodded solemnly to himself, brooding.

“It’s fine,” I muttered. “It needed to be done. Now Diesel will stop bitching at me. Worth it for that alone.”

My attempt to lighten the mood seemed to work only halfway, but I’d take it.

Rook had spent the last two nights with me at Briar Hall, in my bed, and somehow I'd managed to keep my hands to myself after the slight setback at the rally field.

It wasn't without herculean effort though, and seeing him now, naked save for the towel and dripping wet...

I want to lick him.

My skin bristled at the traitorous thought and I cleared my throat as I went through the motions of making two shitty lattes, my skill at frothing the milk seeming to only get worse day by day.

I'd made it clear to Grey and Rook after the fiasco in the smashed car that what happened between us didn't mean I'd forgiven them or that I trusted them. They didn't say it, but I could see in their eyes that it didn't mean I'd gained their trust back yet, either.

And Corvus...

Well, Corvus barely said two words to me since rally night. He showed up for classes and threw himself into finding out more about whoever set up the art display in the school atrium last week, doing everything he could to ignore me.

I knew he was pissed because someone could've been hurt in the crash, or, you know, if I'd actually managed to take the thirty foot jump, but we were all still alive, weren't we?

In hindsight, *maybe* I was being reckless, but fuck if it wasn't fun. We'd needed that.

I slid one of the latte's to him on the counter. "You should go get dressed or we'll be late."

"Does it matter?"

My brows drew. Did it?

"Corv has already spoken to administration."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"You're exempt."

"From?"

He grinned mischievously behind his mug as he took a sip. “From everything. Being marked late. Absent. Using your phone during class, if you still had one. And a myriad of other fun things.”

“Like not getting expelled for fucking the vice principal?”

He lifted his mug in a salute. “Exactly.”

“Well, if it’s all the same to you, I’m hungry as fuck and have absolutely no desire to cook.”

“Cafeteria?”

“Please.”

He strode back to the bedroom to get dressed, standing in such a way that he damn well knew I could see him as he let his towel fall to the floor and pulled on his jeans.

His back tats extended down to cover part of his magnificent glutes and the urge came again. To taste him. To bite him like he bit me on rally night. The twin crescents of his teeth marks in my calf were crusted over now, but I fully planned to scrub the scabs off in the shower later, ensuring the markings would scar.

“You talk to Becca any more this morning?”

“With what?” I asked. “I don’t have a phone, remember?”

“As if you couldn’t break into mine.”

I pursed my lips, nodding.

“No. I haven’t. Not since our calls Tuesday and yesterday.”

I’d done as Diesel had asked and set up a call with Becca. Her on a payphone and me on Grey’s burner cell. We now had a good idea of what the creep looked like. Brown hair long enough on top to show it was wavy. Blue eyes. A pale complexion. Slim, but muscular. About six feet tall. She had no photos of him since he wouldn’t let her take any, smart fucker, but the description was good. So was the other intel.

Diesel already knew where they were meeting since he’d bugged the place. It was a little bunkhouse on the edge of Thorn Valley that Ace had been renting in cash for several

months. But Becca's intel also told us that he sometimes asked her to meet him in other places. Or rather, to pick him up in other places. Which explained why the passenger seat of her car was always set for someone much taller than I was.

Specifically, from a Quickie Mart just inside Ace territory.

It cemented the theory that he was an Ace, but on the next call, when I'd asked Becca Diesel's new question about his gang ink, she'd said he didn't have any. No ink at all.

She'd been fucking this guy for months, so I wanted to believe she had an intimate knowledge of every inch of his flesh, but... that may not have been the case.

The guys I slept with before the Crows never saw my scars and there were six inches of them cuffing both my upper thighs. They didn't see them because I didn't want them to see them. If I could hide that, this guy could hide a little 'A.'

"Is it getting any easier?"

"What?"

"Talking to her."

My chest tightened. "Not really."

I got off the phone as fast as I could each time we spoke even though Becca was brimming with questions of her own. Was I okay? Was I in any trouble because of her? Did I need her to come back?

The questions were only put on hold for the apologies.

I knew she meant them, but I wasn't ready yet. Trust was a fragile thing, a *new* thing for me. I didn't know how she could earn it back or else I'd tell her.

"You guys'll work it out," Rook assured me, sounding so sure.

"How do you know that?"

"You think the guys and I haven't gone through shit? Man, I could tell you stories... This one time Grey—"

"Grey what?"

“Nah. It was a long time ago. We were younger. Still learning how to trust each other. It wasn’t always easy, you know. It won’t be for you and Becks, either, but she’s your sister. Maybe not by blood, but by choice. You don’t throw that shit away for one mistake.”

I must’ve pulled a face because he snorted, coming over to tug the empty mug from my fingers. “Come on, Ghost. Let’s eat.”

CHAPTER

Eleven

CORVUS

I CHECKED my phone again for a reply from Rook as I waited in the atrium, but none came, and I scrubbed a hand over my face, feeling the prickle of day-old stubble. I needed a shave, and probably a fucking shower, but after we discovered the security guard, Mick, was missing, I needed to figure out why.

All security footage of Monday morning last week had been scrubbed from the drives. It went black around three in the morning and then flicked back to life around seven, when the first of the students began to wander downstairs to find the pornographic photos.

It drove me to madness thinking there was someone else in the academy, just a couple floors below where Ava Jade slept. She'd been alone. It didn't matter if it was an Ace or her stalker. In either case, the person had wanted to hurt us, and I couldn't think of anything that would hurt us more than something happening to that girl.

Groaning, I texted Rook again.

Corvus: Where are you guys? The bell rang five minutes ago.

I punched the elevator button and waited, giving in to the urge to go up there and see for myself, even though I knew damn well what I could be walking into. Imagining their bodies tangled together, flushed and violent, made me almost crack a tooth.

I knew when Grey wandered home several hours after I left the rally field exactly what happened when I left. He had that *rocks off* glow. The one he rarely got from fucking Brianna, but I knew the face. Nail marks all over his neck and shoulders told me the rest.

I didn't ask because I knew it would only stoke the internal flames to know whether or not they had her at the same time. Without me.

It had become something of an unwritten rule from the start with Ava Jade; that she wasn't interested in choosing. That she would take her pleasure from each of us as she wanted, without asking permission. Without guilt.

The guys and I had shared before. A handful of times. But those women never mattered to us. Not like her. And my inner beast roared that she belonged to me even though the still rational part of my brain was almost *glad* she'd found a home in my brothers' hearts, too.

It was the only way she could be one of us.

It couldn't work any other way.

I jerked back as the doors to the elevators opened and Ava Jade and Rook stepped out.

"Hey, Bro," Rook said nonchalantly, his hair damp from a shower. Ava Jade's was dry and styled in a high ponytail with little pieces left out to frame her face. Either she blow dried it or they didn't share a shower.

I stuffed the need to know down deep, burying it.

It didn't matter.

"Lose your phone?" I found myself growling back at him.

He tapped his pocket. "Nope."

"I texted you."

"I saw. We were on our way down. I knew you'd be waiting here."

"Where's Grey?" Ava Jade asked, peering around the atrium for any sign of him.

Grey entered through the front door five minutes later than he said he'd be and came over to us, a curious knot in his brows. "Thought you'd be in class, didn't the bell—?"

"I was waiting for them," I interrupted him, indicating Rook and Ava Jade. "You get those books handled?"

Grey nodded. "Yeah. All taken care of. I have more news, too."

"What?" Sparrow asked.

"The alliance with the Kings is official. Dies made the move last night."

I didn't miss how Ava Jade's fists clenched at her sides, at odds with the next words to leave her lips. "That's good, right?"

Grey's lips pressed together. There was something more.

"Apparently they weren't satisfied with an alliance in name only. Victor asked Dies for our crews to meet in good faith." He paused. "So, Dies has welcomed them to join us for the next fight night."

"*Fuck.*"

"It's not like we didn't think this might happen."

"I didn't know you were fighting again," Ava Jade said to Rook. "When?"

She didn't seem the slightest bit surprised or perturbed at the new turn of events.

Rook shrugged at her. "I fight when Dies tells me to."

"He hasn't found an opponent for you yet," Grey explained to Rook. "No one wants to take their shot since how badly you beat Conor Jones last month."

"Pussies."

Sparrow laughed at that.

Now was as good a time as any.

I tugged the slim box free of my back pocket and passed it to her.

Her laughter ceased as she took it, taken aback by the brand emblem on the cover.

“What’s this?”

“Your new phone,” I told her. “It was supposed to get here days ago, but it was late.”

When she opened the box to see the slim silver cell inside and said nothing, I continued. “You haven’t bought yourself a new one, and we need to be able to get ahold of you. I, *uh*, I hope you don’t mind. If you don’t like it, I can order something different.”

Jesus Christ, I sounded pathetic. I could feel my brothers watching me.

“Well?” I gritted out, trying to force a reply from her.

Despite my change in tone, she smiled up at me, shaking her head and the heat that’d been crawling up my neck died out.

“Thanks, Corv,” she said, taking the phone out to hand the box back, powering it on. “Guess this means you’re done being mad at me?”

“Depends. Are you done trying to get us all killed?”

“For now.”

A smile stained my lips to match hers, and I wasn’t sure where to put my hands. What was this girl doing to me?

“*Ava Jade Mason*,” a woman’s voice shrieked as the door to the main office burst open. Standing there in the doorway with a hat twice the size of Texas wrapped in a dead thing instead of a bow, was Ava Jade’s aunt. The Humphrey widow who lived across town in the big secluded mansion all alone.

Fuck if she wasn’t a terrifying creature. With a botched face lift and droopy lips painted a dark red. A cashmere coat draping all the way to the floor, baggy on her five foot nothing frame.

I could smell the mothballs from here.

“Fuck my life,” Ava Jade breathed, sighing heavily as the woman waddled over to us.

“You guys should scram,” she muttered to us.

“No way in hell I’m missing this,” Rook replied, standing up straighter as though he were a fine upstanding citizen of Thorn Valley and not a fucking shark in human skin.

In the black sweater he wore, with his tatted hands behind his back, he could almost pull it off, too.

Grey and I followed suit.

I inclined my head to the woman as she approached. “Madam Humphrey,” I said graciously, stepping between her and Ava Jade. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m Corvus James.”

She balked at my extended hand, taking in my too perfect smile and towering height.

“Oh!” she exclaimed. “Who?”

“Corvus,” I repeated, taking her frail hand in mine to shake it, hearing Ava Jade grumble something unintelligible at my back. She should’ve been thanking me. Thanking all of us. There were non-violent ways of getting what we wanted, and though they were less fun, we used them often.

Grey cranked up the charm to eleven and took my place in front of the woman. “And I’m Grey Winters. Your niece and I share AP calculus. I was the top of the class before she dethroned me.”

Humphrey blinked rapidly, taking us in like her puny little brain couldn’t compute what was happening. She was trying hard to maintain her frustration, but it was waning fast.

Rook put the last nail in that coffin.

He swept forward, taking her veiny hand up to his lips for a kiss. “Rook,” he said simply. “A pleasure.”

“What are you doing here, Aunt Humphrey?” Ava Jade asked, shoving Rook out of the way with a little more force than she needed to, giving him a pointed look.

“I...well I was...”

Well shit, we broke her.

Her face reddened, and she cleared her throat. “I came to see you.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean, *why*?” Humphrey demanded, coming back to herself. “You’ve been ignoring all my calls. My text messages. I thought you’d left.”

“I lost my phone.”

Humphrey’s gaze alighted on the brand new cell phone in Ava Jade’s hand. “Just like your father, always telling lies.”

Ava Jade trembled with rage at her aunt’s comment, and I winced, anticipating a number of things that could leave her mouth now.

“It’s a new phone,” she said through gritted teeth. “And I’d *appreciate* it if you didn’t talk about Dad like that.”

She waved away Ava Jade’s words like they were coils of a particularly odorous smoke wafting near her face. “Yes, well, it’s true, but never mind that. You never replied about Thanksgiving.”

Ava Jade cocked her head, staring with open incredulity at her aunt. “You’re not serious.”

“Why shouldn’t I be? We’re the only family we have now, dear. I should like for you to join me at the house for dinner.”

It didn’t sound like a request, and I wondered why Ava Jade put up with the old cow. Was it truly just because she paid her tuition here at the academy? Fuck, I’d pay it myself to get the hag off her back.

“I don’t do Thanksgiving,” she replied in a careful monotone. “Haven’t since I was, like, four.”

“That’s just sad, Ava Jade. Your parents should’ve—”

The woman cut herself short, clearly not completely immune to my Sparrow’s murderous stares.

Humphrey turned her attention to me. “Well, just ask your friends. You boys must have Thanksgiving plans? Would you rather sit alone at the school?”

“Actually,” Grey interjected. “We don’t. Our father lost his wife the day before Thanksgiving, so we don’t celebrate it.”

Humphrey’s hand went to her chest, fingers clutching the pearl necklace around her throat. “Oh, how very unfortunate. Should you like to, you’d be welcome to attend Thanksgiving dinner at my home with Ava Jade. Everyone should have somewhere to go for Thanksgiving.”

Ava Jade’s eyes went wide at the offer, her mouth dropping open. “They wouldn’t—”

“We’d love to join you, madame,” Rook said, making me choke. I had to cover the sound with a cough and a smile. “What a gracious offer.”

“It’s settled then. I’ll send you the details, Ava Jade, dear. Mind your phone. I don’t want to have to come all the way across town again.”

Ava Jade seemed temporarily mute, glaring at Rook so vehemently that I was surprised she didn’t reduce him to ash with the look alone.

“It’s a new phone,” I reminded her aunt, making her pause before departing. “But I’ll be sure to have Ava Jade text you so you have the new number.”

Her mouth opened into a tiny ‘o.’ She didn’t like the insinuation that she’d wrongly accused Ava Jade of lying. But she only nodded. “Thank you, dear.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Now get to class, the lot of you. I don’t want my niece getting you into trouble for being late.”

Ava Jade stared after her aunt red-faced, her little fists tight balls at her sides until the front door closed behind the old woman.

“You’re not coming to Thanksgiving.” She seethed at all of us.

Rook put a hand to his chest, a fake look of hurt crossing his face. “But, Ava Jade,” he said in a terrible Madame Humphrey impression. “We were invited.”

“I’m going to murder all of you.”

CHAPTER Twelve

AVA JADE

MY SKIN ITCHED. I had to wonder if just being near my aunt had caused some sort of allergic reaction. She reeked of mothballs and that awful old lady perfume she always wore to try to cover it up. My eyes felt puffy from it. Definitely allergic to her.

“Why do you put up with her?” Grey asked, following behind me to grab a tray and fill it up with what remained of the breakfast buffet and the start of lunch items being brought out in the cafeteria.

Ahead of me in line, Brianna picked at a bowl of grapes, sneaking glances at me from the cover of her lashes. I wanted to stuff her face into the potato soup, but that would only render it inedible, and it was my favorite.

“AJ?” Grey hedged when I didn’t reply right away, drawing my attention back to him.

“Because her aunt is paying for her tuition here,” Corvus replied for me, and I rolled my eyes at him. Not even a little bit surprised that he would know that. He’d done his homework. I’d done mine too. At least as much of it as I could. His history had been the most unattainable of the three. With almost no information whatsoever anywhere in the state or the neighboring ones.

“Is that it?” Grey asked, confused. “You’re a Saint now, AJ. If you want to go to school here, we’ll cover it.”

I didn't know how to explain it to them: the deal I had with my aunt. Maybe the whole thing was a moot point now.

My aunt promised me tuition to a good college or university plus my own apartment in the city and a monthly stipend. I could have all of it if I graduated Briar Hall with good grades and got accepted into college. It was her guilt-wrapped gift to me for not being around when my dad was still alive.

But what did any of that matter now?

I'm a Saint.

No matter how many times I repeated that to myself, it didn't ever sound any more true. But it was a fact. And I couldn't see Diesel St. Crow being chill with me going away to college and renting an apartment in the city. What good was my aunt's money now?

I couldn't explain it to them because it didn't make sense why I was still dealing with her bullshit other than the one thing she said that struck a nerve; we're the only family we have now.

It was true.

Mom was gone, and I hoped she never came back. Dad was gone now, too. Mom's family was never around and Dad's sister, Viola Humphrey, was the only living relative he had left.

The only one *I* had left now that he was gone.

They didn't get along, but he mentioned her sometimes. How he worried about his older sister alone in her big house after her wealthy husband passed away.

How he wished he could've seen eye to eye with her so that I could have grown up with a rich aunt to spoil me.

It felt like spitting in his face to say to her what I really wanted to: to fuck off and never contact me again.

She's right, Dad would tell me. I was a shitty dad. A liar. Always gambling our money away.

My dad was a lot of things, but he knew exactly who he was and what he was doing to us. He was just powerless to stop himself. Like my darkness, something greedy and morally gray writhed within him that he couldn't purge.

I knew I wouldn't be able to purge mine, so how could I be angry that he couldn't do the same?

"You going to ladle that?" Grey asked, and I blinked, realizing I was standing with the soup ladle poised over my bowl. Empty.

I shook my head.

"Sorry," Grey muttered as I went back to filling a bowl of soup. "You don't have to explain yourself to me. Family's...a tough subject. I get it."

Something told me he really did get it, and I was glad at least one of us did.

We went to join Rook and Corvus at the table, one of only three still occupied by students this late in the morning.

I knew Brianna transferred out of homeroom sometime last week, the fucking coward, so I wasn't totally surprised to see she'd opted for an open period instead of enrolling in a new class this late in the term. But the others, her little posse, seemed to have joined her, and I knew for a fact they were still in homeroom with us.

The other table was just two guys studying. More students with an open first period.

Fuck, if I had an open first period, I'd be spending it sleeping.

I slid into a seat at the table beside Rook, and Grey slid in next to me. Corvus drank a smoothie, scowling at his phone. Rook drank a glass of orange juice that suspiciously didn't look or smell to be spiked. Surprising.

Grey started with his glass of water as I munched on a stick of celery and set about getting my new phone operational. I added all the necessary apps, checking for any Corvus may have added before giving it to me, and signed into

my email and all socials. I needed to keep that shit open in case Becca needed me.

I checked the phone's system settings to get the number and pushed through an email to Becca containing it. Telling her to only text from a burner, and change burners every few days. Better safe than sorry.

Corv set his phone down with a clatter on the table.

"Max again?" Grey asked him.

"Yeah."

"She still pissed you canceled those shows?"

"She's threatening to fire me as a client."

Grey laughed. "Yeah, right."

"She won't. You're her number one, Bro," Rook agreed.

Corvus' brows drew together. He looked so tired, I realized. The hollows beneath his eyes dark and purple hued. When was the last time he'd slept?

"Why did you cancel the shows?" I asked. "You only had two others lined up this season, and they weren't far. All in NorCal, right?"

He shook his head. "Too much heat right now. I need to be here."

Not for the first time, I wondered how he'd managed to juggle his gang life and a secret music career. But the answer was staring me right in the face the entire time. He *wasn't* juggling it. Either one suffered or the other did. Right now, his alter ego of *The Bone Man* needed to take a back seat so Corvus James could do what his father expected of him. What his makeshift family needed.

Was it what he wanted?

His steely gaze flicked up to meet mine, lips tight as he considered saying something else.

I lifted a brow. "What?"

“I might’ve promised Max you’d work on a new track with me, and we could unveil it at the next show after Christmas.”

“*You did what?*”

Corvus lifted his hands in a placating gesture. “Before you say no—”

“Yes.”

“What?”

“I’ll do it. But I want fifty percent of all royalties earned on it *plus* a cut of the ticket sales from the Lodi show. Only fair since you recorded me without my knowledge and used said recording on stage.”

He stared at me dumbfounded.

“What? A girl’s gotta earn a living and... I didn’t sound half bad.”

“*Ha!*” Grey balked. “You were incredible, AJ. There’s a reason every music blogger on the West coast is trying to figure out who you are.”

I flushed and tried to hide it by taking a bite of bacon. “I want vocal training too, though.”

“Done.” Corvus grunted. “I’ll train you myself. Best I can do. We can’t take you to a professional vocal coach. It’ll draw too much attention.”

“What do you think my name should be? I’m thinking something epic like...”

“Sparrow,” Corvus interrupted before I could finish my train of thought. “Obviously.”

“Bone Man and *Sparrow*?” I groaned. “That’s lame.”

“How about *Ghost*?” Rook interjected, sipping his OJ.

“The Bone Man and The Ghost.” I rolled the titles around in my mouth. “Has a better ring to it, don’t you think? More... ominous?”

“So you think Rook’s nickname is better than mine?” Corvus asked, a slight curl at the edge of his lips. He was

playing.

I didn't know if I wanted to join the game just yet, though.

"Maybe," I acquiesced, putting an end to the conversation for now as I got ready to dig into the food that was going cold on my tray.

Grey's tray rivaled my own in terms of how full it was, and he smirked at me as he set into eating a massive pile of scrambled eggs, eyeing my tray right back.

"There's no way you're going to finish all that," he said between mouthfuls, indicating my mountain of food.

"Wanna bet?"

"Fifty."

"Make it a hundred," I replied cheerfully, ditching the spoon for my soul to lift the bowl to my lips instead.

"You're on.

Rook snatched the bowl before it reached my lips and hot soup sloshed over my hands and the rest of the food on my plate.

"The fuck, Rook?" I hissed, shaking soup off my hands.

He held the bowl to his nose, smelling it.

"If you wanted some you could've just got your own."

He didn't reply, and something in his dark eyes made my frustration wane. He dipped his index finger into the soup and put it in his mouth, tasting it.

A growl ripped from his lips.

"What is it?" Corvus demanded.

"It's been tainted," Rook spat back. "Drugged."

Um...what?

"Are you sure?" Grey asked.

Corvus' hand curled around his smoothie cup until his knuckles turned white. "What's in it?"

“I can’t tell, but it’s something. Pills. Crushed up. I know that smell. I know the taste.”

The sanatorium...

What the fuck had those people done to him there?

Without another word, Grey shoved his tray away and lifted the dripping bowl of soup from the table as he stood, walking away.

“Grey, where are you...” Corvus started, but trailed off, and I spun on the bench seat to see that he was carrying the soup to Brianna’s table.

My food-deprived brain caught up to where his had already gone, and I remembered Brianna ahead of me in line. How she kept peering back at me. The fucking cunt.

I followed Grey, the others rising from the table with me as I stood, my vision tinted with crimson.

I thought I’d made myself fucking crystal clear. I warned her.

Grey dropped the bowl in front of Brianna and what remained of it slashed over her shirt, splattering the two other girls crowded in at her sides, making them squeal.

“What the fuck did you put in this?”

Brianna went a shade of sickly white, but kept her expression impressively neutral.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Grey,” Brianna said, her brown eyes following me as I approached with a raised chin. “But you just ruined a three hundred dollar shirt and—”

Brianna gasped as I grabbed hold of her blonde ponytail, dragging her from her seat. She screamed, manicured nails scratching at my arm as I hauled her from the cafeteria. Not even feeling the shallow cuts she was digging into my forearm.

She tripped, screeching like a banshee all the way to the kitchen.

My spine tingled as I entered, a rush of power going straight to my head.

“Get out,” I barked at the cooking staff, and they hesitated before seeing my entourage follow inside behind me and scattered like rats.

“*Stupid bitch,*” Brianna was shrieking between some very unattractive sounds as I hauled her size-two ass to the row of gas burners and switched the closest one on.

I put her face to it. So close the peach fuzz on her cheeks would be singed off. “What did you put in the soup?” I demanded.

She screamed.

“*What did you put in it?*” I repeated, my darkness surging in full now. Demanding blood. Demanding pain. My arm holding her to the burner shook with it.

Soon, I wouldn’t be in control anymore. Any second now.

I pushed her closer still, and she let out a cry. Her hair came loose from the ponytail, and I curled a fist into it, the long strands almost in the fire now.

“*Laxatives,*” she managed and I brought her back an inch. “They were just laxatives! I was trying to make you shit yourself. Fuck!”

My face screwed up.

Laxatives?

That was the best she could do?

Christ.

So pathetic.

“P-Please, I won’t ever—”

The smell of burnt hair reached me and I recoiled from it, releasing her a second too late as her head burst into orange flame. Her hairspray drawing the fire to her like spilled gasoline.

She howled like a dying cat as she stood there, rooted to the spot in shock as the flames engulfed her head in a golden crown. Not the kind she wanted, but the kind she deserved.

“B!” someone cried, and I saw blondie numero uno rushing past the guys and into the kitchen, the other one hot on her tail. Blondie numero dos fumbled to get the extinguisher loose from the wall as the other one slapped uselessly at her friend’s fiery hair.

Brianna continued to blare like an air raid siren until she passed out, slumping to the floor. Blondie doused her with the fire extinguisher, covering her in plumes of white until she came to again, coughing and rubbing at the chalky residue on her face. Struggling to sit up.

I pushed the blonde on the floor away to kneel next to Brianna, grabbing her by the shirt to haul her to her ass. Her hair was gone, all except for a few tufts of blonde still clinging to her scalp. Mild red burns crisscrossed over her flesh, but they would heal. Probably wouldn’t even scar. Too bad.

Brianna clutched my hands holding her shirt, blinking past tears to stare into my eyes. *Fear*. She reeked of it. She was so terrified I was sure she’d piss herself. I’d be impressed if she didn’t.

“P-please,” she started, her lips quivering, but I didn’t want to hear another word out of her mouth. She needed to shut up before my darkness clawed its way up my throat and ate her for fucking breakfast.

“If you ever come after me again, I’ll end you, bitch.”

She began to shake.

“Nod that you understand.”

She nodded.

I released her shirt, throwing her to her friends. “Get her out of my sight.”

They dragged her pathetic ass from the cafeteria and my darkness snarled, rebelling at my mercy. But she wasn’t worth it. Fucking laxatives? What a joke.

I closed my eyes, cracked my neck, and rolled my shoulders back, inviting a foul smelling breath into my lungs.

When I opened my eyes again it was to see the guys standing near the entrance to the kitchen.

Corvus stared openly, analyzing my loss of control.

Grey's mouth was gaping.

Rook had his ringed fingers clasped to his mouth, dark eyes glittering. He looked like a deranged kid with fifty bucks in a candy store.

"Dibs," he said, biting on his lip ring as he strolled forward, tugging the plain silver ring from his pinkie finger.

"*Rook*," I warned as he bent to one knee.

"Marry me?"

I shook my head, ignoring the way my belly flipped.

"You're an idiot," I said, but I plucked the ring from his fingertips as I walked past him, slipping it onto my index finger since it was the only one it'd fit. "But thanks for the ring."

I got three steps past them before my phone chimed, making my darkness make a resurgence to the surface. It could only be Becca. I'd just emailed her. She must've replied to...

"Fuck," I said on an exhale, my insides twisting as I stared at the blemish on my very new phone.

An email gleamed on the screen in vivid color.

To: Ava Jade Mason

From: gh380xc@gmail.com

Subject: Miss me?

Why'd you let them put her out? You should've let her burn, my love. She deserved it.

P.S. I see you haven't been listening. Perhaps you thought my warnings were only idle threats. That was your mistake.

Now you've forced me to do what you should've from the start. Say your goodbyes, Ava Jade.

ICE SKATED DOWN MY SPINE.

A hand on my shoulder had me tensing up, dropping low, widening my stance, on the offensive.

“Whoa, AJ, it's me,” Grey said, his eyes searching my face. Falling to the phone clenched tight in my hand. “Is it him?”

Slowly, I scanned the kitchen, finding what I was looking for. The blinking red light of a security camera in the corner across the room. I'd thrown a blade before I was even consciously aware I'd drawn one. It embedded in the glass lens of the camera and sparks dripped down to the tile floor as a little puff of smoke curled up from the ruin.

“He has access to the cameras,” I spat, my skin crawling so badly I wanted to soak in boiling water.

Grey took the phone from my hand, and I didn't stop him as Corvus and Rook rushed to crowd him, reading the email with murderous stares.

“He's alive,” Rook growled while Corvus stormed out of the kitchen with his face set in a myriad of hard lines, pale, with a vein pulsing in his neck.

“Grey,” Corvus hollered back over his shoulder. “*With me. Now.*”

“Stay with her,” Grey told Rook before handing my phone back and rushing to follow Corvus. Likely to interrogate the office staff and fingerprint the security office.

“Come here, Ghost,” Rook said, but I didn't want his comfort.

“He needs to fucking die,” I gritted out past clenched teeth. I wanted to stay angry at the Crows, but I wouldn't just sit here and let this piece of shit threaten them. They were *mine* to be angry at. And I protected what belonged to me.

Rook nodded solemnly, his dark eyes looking almost black now. He curled a hand over my shoulder, and the small contact made me flinch and sag, needing more. No matter how much I didn't want to admit it.

I let him pull me close, closing my eyes against the hollow of his throat as he trapped me in his arms. "I know," he told me, squeezing tight. His scent filled my nose, setting my soul alight and soothing it all at once. I couldn't get enough of it. "He will. I promise you that."

CHAPTER

Thirteen

GREY

“AGAIN,” Corvus ordered, kicking Ava Jade’s feet wider apart. “Stop overthinking it.”

AJ grumbled something unintelligible through her teeth as she stared down the short length of the barrel, aiming at the glass bottles downfield. She fired, and the M9 kicked back into her palm.

“Fuck,” she hissed when the shot went wide again, missing all six glass bottles entirely.

I whistled low, drawing her eye. “I have to say, AJ, I thought you’d be better at this.”

It was meant to be teasing. To bring a smile to her lips, but it only deepened the grooves between her pinched brows. She’d looked like that since yesterday’s email. Up all through the night pacing, opening the fridge just to close it again, standing by the window like at any moment her stalker might appear outside of it and she could end him.

At four in the morning when she gave up and showered for the day, I joined her. Truth be told, I thought she might ask me to get out, but she turned as I stepped in with her, sighing under the stream of insanely hot water.

“I’m not in the mood,” she’d said, exhausted, but that wasn’t why I joined her. AJ let me wash her hair and scrub wide soapy circles over her back. By the time she got out, she couldn’t fall into bed fast enough. We’d only managed two

hours of sleep, but it was more than I thought either of us would have after Corvus and I found *nothing*.

Nothing in the security office at Briar Hall.

The email traced back to an IP location in Lodi. It took a lot of ultimately useless sleuthing to find the exact pin. An alley where a piece of crap old laptop was stuffed in a dumpster, wiped clean of prints.

We had jack shit.

And it was taking its toll on all of us.

Rook chain-smoked as he leaned against a tree several feet away, his gaze unfocused as he watched Ava Jade try to hit a bottle and miss for at least the tenth time since we started.

She dropped her arm, rolling her shoulder, which was no doubt starting to get sore at this point. “This is useless. I’m just as lethal with my blades as you are with a gun. I don’t see the point to—”

“Diesel said—”

“*Diesel said,*” AJ mocked Corvus before he could finish. “I could’ve killed Diesel five times over by now with my blades, but I didn’t.”

Corvus pinched the bridge of his nose, inhaling long and slow. If we weren’t sleeping much, I knew that he wasn’t sleeping *at all*. From experience, we all knew that could only go on so long before he got so grouchy none of us would be able to stand to be around him. Or worse, it could get as bad as it used to when Rook and I were first adopted.

When his insomnia was so relentless he’d start hearing voices. Seeing things that weren’t there. His mind playing tricks on him.

If I thought I could get away with it, I’d drug his ass asleep, but I knew neither of my brothers would be chill with that as a tactic here.

“Sparrow,” Corvus warned.

She huffed.

“I have a thought,” I said, squinting into the distance to see the old barn and shed where we kept the rally cars and our backup arsenal. “We still have that sniper out here?”

Corvus looked up, considering where I was going with the question.

“Maybe this,” I said, plucking the handgun from her grasp. “Is not her thing. Maybe we try something else. If she shows promise with a sniper, we work on that and then circle back to close range arms later.”

Corvus bit the inside of his cheek. “Okay. Yeah. We’ll try it.”

AJ perked up at the mention of *sniper*; her eyes alight. “Are any of you any good with one?”

Rook dropped a cigarette to stomp out on the patchy grass with its friends. “Grey isn’t bad,” he said, speaking for me. “But Axel is our sharpshooter.”

AJ lifted a brow at me. “He’s right. I’m competent, but none of us are much good with one. I feel like you would be though. A lot of the same principles apply as with blade throwing. Distance perception. Wind speed and direction. Timing.”

She pursed her lips, unsure, but clearly excited to give it a shot.

“Then Rook should be decent at it,” she said. “I’ve seen him with a blade, too. He’s good.”

I nodded, but she was forgetting one thing.

“I don’t have the patience,” Rook admitted. “Who wants to sit on some perch half a fucking mile away from the all the fun, waiting for the perfect shot.”

“Not you?” AJ asked, her tone dripping sarcasm.

“No, Ghost. Not me.”

“If we climb up onto the roof of the shed, we should be able to get a good line of sight down the field,” I said, pointing toward the barn and the smashed up Volvo we’d parked up

beside it. “I’ll grab a can of paint. We can put a few targets on the high jump.”

“You don’t need us then?” Corvus said, a tick in his upper lip as he read something on his phone.

I frowned.

He indicated the phone in his hand. “Dies. Wants two of us to deal with another client upstairs at Sanctum. He and the others are busy keeping tabs on the Aces.”

“It’s three in the afternoon,” AJ protested.

“What?” I asked. “Is three too early to get laid? I didn’t know a good fuck had time constraints.”

She rolled her eyes.

“Yeah, we’re good,” I told Corv, gaze tracking to Rook, who looked torn between staying and going. Not wanting to leave AJ’s side and needing to vent some of his pent up rage before he exploded. “Go,” I added, jerking my head for Rook to follow Corv. “We’ll be here when you get back.”

He nodded, rolling his shoulders back with a sneer as he left.

“So,” AJ singsonged, the happiest I’d seen her since yesterday morning. “Show me the big gun?”

I laughed. “Let’s paint the targets first, and *then* I’ll show you the big gun.”

She made a little growly sound that went straight to my cock, biting her lower lip as she brushed past me, heading for the shed. I grabbed my sketchpad from the stump next to me and followed her, tucking the graphite pencil behind my ear.

I’d promised Max I’d come up with a few new merch designs by next week and with everything going on, I hadn’t had the time to even start.



“JUST LIKE I SHOWED YOU,” I whispered, lying next to AJ on the uneven roof of the shed, binoculars pressed to my eyes, watching the three ringed target dripping red a quarter mile downfield. “Don’t hold your breath. Breathe evenly. Fire on the exhale. Slow.”

She hesitated another moment before firing, and I had the satisfaction of watching the bullet *crack* into the wood of the jump just a few inches outside the widest ring.

AJ grinned, readying another shot, licking her lips.

I said nothing, smirking at her focus face as she leveled her left eye with the sight. It was the best focus face.

She readjusted her position, just slightly, pinkie up to feel the breeze, and fired again.

I was almost too slow to press the binoculars to my eyes, catching only the little burst of wood where her bullet buried itself into the red line of the second inner ring.

“*Damn*,” I said on a breath, pulling the binoculars down, twisting to face her. “Was that really only your second shot?”

She peered at me over the barrel, a Cheshire smile on her mouth.

I reached over and shoved the gun, messing up her aim.

“Hey!”

“I have to know if it’s beginner’s luck. Start again.”

She groaned wordlessly to herself, but did as I said, finding the correct position all over again, feeling out the wind.

This time her bullet sank into the target just an inch outside of where my bullet went in when I was showing her how to shoot, grazing the inner ring of the target.

I set the binoculars down. “Well. I think we found your weapon, AJ.”

“Secondary,” she whispered, correcting me as she patted the blades on her belt. “It’s okay, babies, I would never replace you.”

I snorted as she lined up for another shot.

“Keep practicing,” I encouraged her, getting off my belly to sit against the short wall behind us where the barn attached to the shed. I checked my phone again, waiting for word from the guys. It would be getting dark soon and they still weren’t back.

Sighing, I lifted a knee, snatching up my sketchpad to try to get some other work done while I could.

She fired, and I watched her readjusting again. The long weapon at home butted against her shoulder. Fuck, she was more than I ever dreamed a woman could be. She was how I imagined Diesel’s wife to have been before she was taken from him.

Before I knew it, I was drawing AJ instead of sketching new merch designs. It happened more often than not.

When she was finally ready for a break more than thirty minutes later, having put a good dent in Diesel’s good quality lead, I was finished.

She fell against the wall next to me, rubbing out a kink in her neck, but she froze when she saw what was lying in my lap, her lips parting.

“Is that me?”

She leaned over me to get a better look.

It wasn’t anything special. Just a series of dark and light lines, but they were unmistakably *her* lines. The cruel curve of her mouth. The angle of her face. Her delicate ears. Long fingers curled around the trigger of the sniper rifle.

“It’s amazing.”

I tore it off the pad and handed it to her. “Keep it.”

She took it, staring at her likeness like she couldn’t believe it was her.

“Wait, is that me, too?” she asked, tapping the pad in my lap with a black fingernail.

I barked a laugh, seeing what ripping the page off had revealed.

Another drawing of her. This one of her ass.

Specifically, her bare ass, peachy and lifted as she bent over a bank of sinks in the girls washroom at Briar Hall. The mirror over the mountainous peaks of her ass and dripping cunt broken to reflect back a busted up image of me.

She snatched the pad from my hands before I could stop her, flipping quickly through the pages.

There was no point in stopping her.

Besides, maybe she should know. How irrevocably she was burnt into my thoughts.

She flipped past images of herself. Her side profile. Her hands. Her breasts dripping with water in the shower. The arch of her back, artfully covered in a wave of dark hair.

She flipped to the last page and icy dread threaded through my veins at the image on the page. An old drawing. Of another woman.

Older. With short waxen hair and a small face. Her eyes scratched out with heavy black strokes. I could never get my mother's eyes right. Couldn't remember what they looked like. Probably because she never looked at me. Not even when I was right in front of her.

My stomach soured.

I took the sketchpad back from AJ and flipped all the leaves back over until it was closed.

"Who is she?" AJ asked.

"My mom."

She squinted at me. "How long since she..." she trailed off. "I mean, how old were you when..."

"She isn't dead," I found myself saying, muscles in my arms and across my upper back tensing. "At least, I don't think she is."

AJ squinted at the rough wood roof beneath us, trying to understand. I wondered if she could and a sudden burning urge to come clean seared through me.

“I look her up sometimes,” I admitted. “Type her name into search engines or social media. Just to see...”

She cocked her head, a sadness in her eyes that made my chest ache, and I wasn't sure if I wanted to say any more. If I wanted her to know.

“She starved you,” she said, not a question.

“Left me,” I corrected her. “Alone in my dead stepdad's house. For weeks at a time.”

“So you were taken away from her, then? That's how you ended up at Barrett's Home for Boys with Rook?”

I wasn't surprised she knew about that. I'd have been lying if I said I hadn't scoured Corvus' room for her files last month, trying to understand her. Who she was.

“Yeah. My teacher found me. I was almost dead. She never came back.”

“That's why you look for her,” AJ mused. “Because you want to see if she's still out there, living her life, free of you. If she forgot about you.”

I cleared my throat, shifting uncomfortably. “It's pathetic. I know.”

She grabbed my arm, making me look at her as she shook her head. “No,” she said. “No, it's not. It's okay to wonder. To care. You can hate her and still care to know. I'd want to know why, too. Why she couldn't take care of you.”

That was part of it. The itching need to know *how* she could do it. But there was another reason I couldn't help myself from typing her name into the search bar. The other part of me, the darker part, wanted her to suffer. Wanted to see what she would look like with her bones showing through her skin. With her eyes jaundiced and teeth falling from her mouth.

I was afraid of what I would do to her if I did find her. As if the precious few good memories of her somehow made all the fucking brutal ones tolerable.

“This doesn’t make you weak,” AJ continued. “You hear me?”

I smirked. “Yeah, AJ. I hear you.”

I lifted a hand to cup the side of her face, her cheek cold against my palm. She pushed into my touch, offering me a small sad smile before she pulled away.

“So, you draw me. Like, a lot. When did that start?”

She rolled her shoulders, the heavy vibe tumbling off. Forgotten.

“Since the first time I saw you.”

Her cheeks pinkened before she scraped to her feet. “The guys should be here soon, and it’s getting late. I’m going to go pack this shit away.”

“I’ll be right behind you.”

I breathed in the sunset, closing my eyes to feel the last of its dying rays warm my face and tint the back of my eyelids brilliant orange.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I tugged it loose. It was about time Corv answered me. For a guy who always expected an immediate response from us, he sure didn’t seem to feel like he needed to abide by the same.

My thoughts cleared at the sight of the message waiting for me when I unlocked my phone. It wasn’t from Corv. Or Dies or Rook. Not even Julia, though it boasted her trademark *Unknown* tag.

How the fuck...?

I swallowed, my teeth clenching as I reread the message, my stomach twisting.

Unknown: Hello, Grey. How far would you go to protect your brothers?

Another message came through before the first had a chance to settle in my mind.

Unknown: Let's find out, shall we?

CHAPTER

Fourteen

AVA JADE

THE TEN DAY deadline Diesel gave the Aces was dwindling fast. They now had three. It was Monday, which meant by Thursday, fight night, their time would be up.

Each morning that came and went felt like another nail in their coffins. If Lenny Ace really had nothing to do with the douche canoe who'd conned Becca to get closer to The Crows, then why not just turn the bastard over?

He didn't have that big of a crew, it wouldn't be hard to narrow down the suspects. Find the culprit. Or fuck, choose one to use as a scapegoat to get out of the mess. Though, I was sure Diesel would see through a scheme like that.

"What are you thinking about?" Corvus asked, falling into step next to me as I made my way down to the cafeteria for lunch.

"What?"

"You had a face."

I shrugged. "The Aces. Their time is almost up."

His face darkened, gaze lifting away from me as we continued to walk. "You worried?"

I thought about it. Worried wasn't the right word. I didn't want anything to happen to them. To me. There was a modicum of discomfort simply because I couldn't predict the future—see what was going to happen. But that discomfort

was entirely overshadowed by the clawing need to put bodies into shallow graves.

Erase the threat before it could erase us.

I wanted to *act* before we were acted upon.

The waiting was killing me.

Corvus let out a little snort, shaking his head. “You’re fucking excited, aren’t you?”

I licked my lips. It wasn’t quite the right word, either. “Impatient,” I said, correcting him. “If something’s going to go down, I just wish it would happen already. I don’t like waiting. Not knowing—”

“When?” Corvus supplemented for me. “Not knowing what they are going to do and when and how they intend to do it.”

I nodded and Corvus scrubbed a palm over his mouth, sighing.

“It’s fucking exhausting being prepared for every scenario.”

“That why you’re not sleeping again?”

His expression soured, and he didn’t reply.

“If you need me to, I can—”

“I’m good,” he rushed to say, his back up, brows down. “Don’t worry about it.”

I pressed my lips together, muttering, “If you say so,” as we walked through the doors to the cafeteria to find the others.

A little sizzle of anticipation went through me at the memory of Brianna with her golden hair up in flames. The phantom smell of burnt hair still lingered in the air.

The guys had assured me nothing would come of what I’d done, and it turned out they were right. I didn’t hear a single word from the office about it. Nothing from Brianna’s father. Not his lawyers. The cops. No one.

If I wasn't careful, it would go straight to my motherfucking head—this new position I'd fallen into. One with the kind of power I'd only ever dared to dream I could have.

I paused before following Corvus to the serving line, shocked still by the girl sitting three tables away. Alone.

A girl in an oversized sweater and sheer black tights, with beat up leather boots on her feet and a shaved head.

Brianna must've felt my eyes on her because she turned her head just enough to catch sight of me in her periphery, and stiffened. Her makeup was darker than usual. Heavy coal lined her eyes, winged out at the edges. Damn good falsies fringed her brown eyes, and somehow, even with the slightly reddened patches of healing skin showing through her buzzcut, she rocked the look.

Her upper lip curled as she turned back to her mostly empty tray, tapping something violently on her phone until I could hear the music blaring through her Bluetooth earbuds from here.

Brianna's friends were sitting across the cafeteria, I noticed, with another girl I sometimes saw with them. It seemed that girl was the new queen. And Brianna Moore was the newest outcast.

A dark laugh escaped my mouth. "Welcome to the club, bitch," I muttered to myself, snatching up a tray to catch up to Corvus at the end of the serving line. Barely paying any attention to what I was putting on my tray. I'd have Rook give it all a good sniff before I ate any of it, though I didn't expect a repeat offense from the *former* queen of Briar Hall.

On a whim, I filled a bowl of the potato soup, slipping it onto Brianna's table as I passed. "You should try it," I told her. "It's not half bad when it's laxative free."

Rook smirked at me as I slid into the table, but I couldn't smile back, sensing something that was majorly off.

I couldn't place it for a minute, but a glance at Grey made it pretty obvious. He sat across from me next to Rook, his tray

stacked high with completely untouched food.

“Grey?” I asked, and he blinked, taken aback as though he hadn’t even noticed us sitting down.

“Everything good?”

“What? Oh. Yeah. Just...” he pushed his tray away, grimacing. “Stomach’s bugging me.”

“Never stopped you before,” Rook said, leaning forward to rest his forearms on the table, getting a better look at his brother. “What’s up, Bro?”

“I said I have a fucking stomachache, Rook. Leave it.”

Rook lifted his hands in truce, reaching into his jacket for a quick nip of whatever was in his flask this morning.

Grey’s gaze tracked above our heads, to the big round clock on the wall, and his jaw clenched.

A girly shriek rose above the din of lunchtime conversation, forcing all other sound to hush. I spun, ready to launch off the bench. Rook and Corv were primed, too, but Grey...

He didn’t seem surprised.

I searched the crowd, finding the girl standing at the edge of the room like she’d just jumped from her seat. She pointed animatedly at our table. “Oh my god. Oh my god!” she squealed, practically fucking vibrating.

“It’s him! You guys, it’s him!”

The girl next to her got up, snatching the phone from the vibrating chick’s hand to look at what set her off. She gasped, her hand flying to her mouth, eyes flitting between us and the phone.

No. Between *Corvus* and the phone.

The girl pointed straight at Corvus, her face tainted with a scarlet flush. “It’s Primal Ethos! Corvus James is The Bone Man!”

Somehow, I found Corvus' hand on the bench next to me. His cold as stone under my touch. If he got any paler, he'd turn into the skeleton he'd worked so hard to hide from the world.

"Corv," I hedged, my pulse racing as the cafeteria exploded in a raucous outcry of sound. Students rushed to see what the girls were talking about. Phones chimed under tapping fingers, searching. Eyes watching, wide and incredulous. All of them on Corvus.

On The Bone Man.

Fuck.

"Oh my god, can I, like, have your autograph," a brunette asked, hurrying over with a sharpie while she pulled down the neck of her shirt to expose the tops of her round breasts. An eager gleam in her eyes that had my darkness roaring to the surface.

I was on my feet in a second, shoving her until her fat ass hit the tile. "Get the fuck back," I hissed.

Corvus rose behind me, the entire bench scraping over the floor as he pushed free of the table, the screeching sound sending the cafeteria back into a buzzing silence.

"*Wait,*" the girl on the floor whined, but Corvus was already gone. Storming from the cafeteria in a wake of a hundred whispering voices.

CHAPTER

Fifteen

CORVUS

“OKAY, so I know this isn’t exactly what you wanted, but—”

“How the fuck did this get out, Max?” I growled down the line, pacing the floor of my bedroom, trying not to lose my fucking mind. My thoughts already racing through every possibility. Everything that would be completely *fucked* now that this was out. Whether there was a way to claw it back. Make it go away before it was too late.

“We’re looking into it, but it looks like it was leaked by a blogger.”

“Someone we know?”

“No. It’s a ghost account. No posts before this one. Are you near a computer?”

I went to my desk and punched the power button on my monitor, but couldn’t bring myself to sit. “Yeah.”

“Kay, the first post was made as a comment on that forum, oh shit, what’s it called, *um...*”

“*Maxine.*”

“Oh right, the ‘music is my medicine’ one. You know where they have all those fan theories about your identity and —”

“Yeah. I’m there,” I said, the website coming up on the monitor. “Where is it?”

“It should be at the top of the forum page. It has about twenty-thousand comments on it now.”

The post at the top of the forum was titled *Who is the Bone Man?*

It was made by a user months ago and had a shit-ton of people following it, but I was looking for *one* particular user. The one who somehow figured out who I was. If I could find them, trace them, then I could have them take this shit back.

Maybe Grey could...

“Do you see it?” Max asked on the other end of the line as my fingers hovered over the mouse, re-reading the user name who’d posted not one but five comments on the post. Images. Facial mapping comparisons. Street cam footage of me getting off my bike and entering backstage at the Lodi show. And a signed NDA. The one I made Maxine sign when she expressed interest in managing me.

It was irrefutable.

“You see the blogger tag?”

I did, but I was still trying to process it. Knowing what it meant, but not wanting it to be true.

CrowKiller321.

The final comment uploaded at 11:25am this morning was signed off with a simple moniker. *Anonymous*.

The monitor cord ripped from the wall with a *snap*, sparks flying from the outlet as I chucked it against the wall. The sharp edge of it embedding in the drywall so it stayed there, half in the wall and half out of it like a demented form of artwork.

It brought me no fucking relief as I fought to level out my breathing, my skin cold and coated in an icy sweat.

Somewhere in the room, Maxine was calling to me, her voice broken by dead sound. I fell into the chair at my desk and lifted my phone from the floor, seeing a new call coming in on the screen. The one I’d been dreading since this afternoon.

Diesel.

“Corvus?” Maxine shouted. “Are you there, is everything ___”

I ended the call with Max and answered the one from my father, inhaling shakily through my nose.

“Yeah?”

A heavy silence filled the other end of the call before Diesel finally replied. “It seems you’ve been keeping secrets from me, Son.”

He let the statement hang between us for a moment, maybe expecting me to fill the void for him, but I couldn’t. I didn’t have time to plan a response. Better not to speak at all.

“I’ll be expecting you at the house in the next thirty minutes.”

The line went dead.

I bent over my knees, pushing tense fingers through my hair to grip it tightly at my scalp. Downstairs the front door opened, and I heard Ava Jade and the guys rush inside, locked in heated conversation.

“Corvus,” Sparrow crowed up the stairs. “Are you up there?”

Fuck.

I’d been so careful with this secret.

More than any other.

There were no leaks. None save Ava Jade and Becca fucking Hart.

Then again, the fucker had sealed documents from Maxine’s office. Maybe it was her who’d sold me out. Though that didn’t seem likely either since the mystery of The Bone Man was half the fucking allure. No mystery, no cold hard cash in her wallet. Or mine. Not anymore.

My door swept open, and Ava Jade stood there, framed on both sides by my brothers.

“We can fix this,” Ava Jade said, the promise gleaming like hard stone in her eyes. “We just have to—”

“It’s too late,” I replied, detached from the words. “Diesel knows. It’s over.”

My Sparrow shook her head, gaze snagging on the monitor still protruding from my wall. “It doesn’t have to be. Why shouldn’t you be able to have both? It’s fucking stupid. Being The Bone Man never stopped you from fulfilling your duties to your family before, why should it now?”

“Dies won’t see it that way.” Grey grimaced, his face pale and ashen like it was his secret that’d been put on stage for the whole world to see. It was a mite too close to looking like pity for my fucking taste.

I got to my feet and snatched my leather jacket from the floor. “Dies is expecting me. I have to go.”

Ava Jade stepped out of my doorway for me to pass, reaching out to me before thinking better of it to claw her hand back to her side. Smart girl.

“Grey,” I said, pausing in the hall. “The fucker who leaked the intel—I think it’s the same bastard who’s been messing with Ava Jade. I doubt you’ll be able to trace him since we haven’t had a break with anything leading up to now, but it’s worth a shot. Max has the details you’ll need to try the trace.”

He nodded solemnly.

“Are you sure it’s him?” Sparrow asked, horror plain on her paling face. “It could be—”

“I’m not sure,” I told her, mostly because I didn’t want her to blame herself for this. I didn’t know why, but I *was* sure. I knew it was him. Either it was that fucker or it was the Ace Becca had been dating. He might’ve gleaned enough information from her to piece it together before Becca broke things off.

“Regardless,” I added. “We need to find out who it is. Either it’s a nobody who got lucky with a guess, or it’s someone with a vendetta that needs to be crushed to fucking dust.”

“I’m on it,” Grey promised, turning to stalk toward his bedroom.

“Wait,” Ava Jade called after me. “Maybe I could come with you? I could help Diesel understand—”

“You being there won’t help, Sparrow. If anything, it’ll just make it worse.”

I couldn’t bear to see how that comment hit, grinding my teeth as I stormed down the stairs. It was the truth. And sometimes, the truth wasn’t kind.

The blacktop vanished beneath the tires of my Ducati as I sped across town, ignoring every road sign and light along the way. I tried to come up with a way to explain this shit to my father without breaking the fragile bond still healing from the cracks formed over the past weeks during Ava Jade’s trials.

I’d own my shit. I always did. But a part of me wanted to chew his fucking head off. Tell him that I didn’t have a choice but to lie about it. He never would have supported it, and I wouldn’t have had the outlet I needed to keep myself his perfect soldier all this time.

My engine barked as I revved around the corner leading to his street, slowing to a static purr.

Diesel’s car sat parked up in the drive of the house where I lived with him up until two years ago.

A modest charcoal gray house with a double car garage. Two-stories. A rose garden Diesel’s wife started before we came into the picture bloomed with crimson flowers beneath the tall windows next to the door. Pristine. He would settle for no less.

I bowed my head, stepping off the bike. My thirty minutes were nearly up.

I pushed into the house, the overwhelming scent of my prepubescent years filling my lungs. Cigar smoke, hot cast iron, and coffee. All of it cut with the smell that was uniquely Diesel’s. It clung to the place.

I remembered when I first entered this house, an angry, scared boy with no place left in the world to go. It smelled like

a mother then. The lingering scent of Dies' late wife had brought me comfort those first few weeks, before it inevitably began to fade. It reminded me of my own mother.

"In here," came Diesel's deep baritone from the living room down the hall to the right. I kicked off my shoes before going in, trying to cling to a singular racing thought so I could figure out how I wanted to handle this. But the truth of it was, I had no fucking idea what was about to come out of my mouth.

Diesel lifted his head from the laptop screen he was scowling at on the coffee table. His elbows on his knees, hands clasped tight.

He turned the screen to face me without a word.

On it was a webpage that read in massive white font on a black background *The Bone Man*. Below was the comparative images of mine and my alter-ego's faces, showing all the marker matches that confirmed our identities were one and the same. How this fucker had access to that sort of software was beyond me. But it wasn't the worst of the evidence. The signed NDA was what really made it undeniable. I was just glad I always signed as *Corvus James*, excluding my true surname.

A prickle of unease festered in my gut as I racked my brain trying to remember if that name was anywhere on that document. I remembered Maxine saying it wouldn't be binding without my full name, but had I used it? Had I given her...

"Is this accurate?" Diesel asked, and I pulled myself back to the here and now, forcing myself to stand straighter. "Your face is all over the internet, son. They were talking about you on The Edge this morning."

Fuck.

Of course he found out through the fucking radio. He always had that station playing.

"It's true," I confirmed, and Diesel's eyes glimmered with malice as he stared at me from his seat on the couch, jerking

his gaze away as he stood, showing me his back. Just long enough for him to get control back.

He popped his knuckles, lifting his head to stare out the window, past the roses, onto the quiet street outside. “You kept this from me...”

“I did.”

“For how long?”

“I signed with my manager a little over two years ago,” I found myself saying. There was no point in lying about any of it. Not anymore. “But I’ve been uploading my music anonymously to different sites for longer.”

He took a shaky breath.

“You’ve always been so good at keeping your secrets, Son,” Dies trailed off. “You thought you were keeping your little humanitarian project from me too, but I’ve had Julia on my payroll longer than you have.”

My teeth clenched.

“You knew? This whole time?”

“Of course I fucking knew. This is *my* city. I know everything that happens here.”

...but I never had a show in Thorn Valley. And that was *very* purposeful. Which was why he never figured it out.

He turned back to face me, hard lines in his forehead. “But *this*? How could you keep this from me?”

A muscle in my jaw popped as I held back a thousand words I wouldn’t be able to take back if I spoke them aloud.

“You must know,” Diesel continued. “How *stupid* this is.”

Heat flooded my chest.

“This gives our enemies a time and place where you’re going to be. Show dates and times. Locations.”

“Which was *why* I hid my identity.”

“Oh? So it wasn’t just to keep it from me, then?”

Breathe.

“For all you know, Son, it *was* our enemies who outed you.”

“There’s nothing I can do about it now. It’s over.”

Without the mystery of The Bone Man, the allure was gone. Max would probably fire me by the end of the week. He had nothing to worry about.

“Is it?” Diesel pressed. “Or is this what you want? Are you leaving? Do you want out? Is that what this is?”

“What?” I cocked my head at him. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Are you leaving the Saints? To become this... this *Bone Man*? Do your brothers know?”

He could see the answer on my face.

“So you’ve all been lying to me, then.” He ran his tongue along his teeth, baring them in a small growl.

“I’m not leaving,” I said, realizing what it was I needed to say. The only thing he wanted to hear. “It was an outlet. One I needed. But my loyalty, my *family* is here.”

Diesel shook his head, clearing the distance between us with a stiff hand raised like he wished he could rip me apart with his bare hands. I didn’t budge, and he stopped mere inches from my face.

“Family doesn’t lie to one another,” he spat. “I taught you better.”

His words stung, and I recoiled from the truth in them. Guilt over the selfish need for him to accept this part of me made the anger fizzle out, sending the beast back to its cage. Leaving me hollow.

“There’s only three more days until time’s up for our enemies in Edgewood,” he said. “I expect this mess to be cleaned up by then.”

I nodded, turning to leave.

“And Corvus?”

I waited.

“Don’t ever lie to me again.”

CHAPTER

Sixteen

AVA JADE

THE THRUM of bass and loud conversation filtered through the heavy black steel door leading to the underbelly of Sanctum. Corvus thudded his closed fist on the door twice before Pinkie opened it for us, stepping aside to allow us through.

“Good luck tonight, Rook,” he said as we entered.

“As if he’ll need it,” I replied sweetly, throwing Rook a wink behind me.

I already figured as much, but it seemed the rules about being armed in Sanctum did *not* apply to Saints. We went down to the private fight club without so much as a second glance, never mind a pat down the likes of which I had endured last time.

Though if you had half a brain cell, you could see that we were all armed to the teeth. Tonight was *the* night. In a precious few hours, the deadline Diesel gave the Aces would be up, and as far as we were aware, there had been no word from them. The guys had contacts on Ace turf, though, and word was the streets of Edgewood were getting hella tense these past few days.

Arms passing hands.

Meetings held in private locations not usually used by the gang.

Security around Lenny Ace's place tripled in the last forty-eight hours.

They weren't running. They were getting ready to weather the storm.

Unless a miracle happened and they realized how very outmatched they were, there would be blood before the end of the night was through.

"Hey," Corvus said, his fingers touching my wrist to prod me to stop once we reached the bottom of the stairs. He jerked his head for the others to go ahead, holding only me back with him in the shadows.

"What's up?" I asked, trying not to let the tension I was feeling creep into my voice.

I was worried about him. About what happened on Monday. I could only imagine how it went with Diesel. He'd been ignoring all of Maxine's attempts to get ahold of him. Refusing to so much as look at any of the online commentary. He wouldn't talk to any of us about it. Or anyone else, either.

If anyone so much as looked at him funny at Briar Hall, he would growl in their direction like a poked bear, and they'd scatter. It didn't stop the fangirls from attaching notes to the windshield of the Rover or in his desk at homeroom.

Most were smart enough not to include their names. The ones who weren't... well two had already completely unenrolled from Briar Hall after barely five words from my mouth.

"Corv?" I hedged when he didn't continue straight away. I knew he was worried about me, too, but for an entirely different reason.

His jaw flexed. "Look, I know you think it was the Kings who took out your dad—"

"I won't kill anyone," I said before he could finish. "Not tonight, anyway."

"Sparrow..." he warned.

“You can’t ask me not to nail the motherfucker to the wall and rip out his intestines if I find him. Tell me you wouldn’t do the same if it had been Dies who was taken out?”

It was still a sore spot, I could tell. But regardless of what happened between them, I could tell that Corvus would still raise the entire city of Edgewood to ash if an Ace took Diesel down.

He made a low sound of agreement in his throat, and I nodded. “Look, I know Diesel needs this alliance right now, but there will come a time when he no longer does. And when that time comes, I want to have a name. I want to be ready.”

He nodded quietly to himself.

“I’ll help you,” he said, surprising me. “When the time comes. But we keep this between us. I’m sure Grey and Rook know exactly what you’re doing too, but the others don’t need to know.”

“What? You think I don’t know how to not draw attention?”

That brought a small smirk to his mouth. “You? Draw attention? Never.”

I punched his arm. “Jackass.”

“Wait, Sparrow. One more thing.”

I rolled my eyes. “Come on, Corv, I want to get a look at the other fighter.”

He held my gaze for a few seconds before asking me for the one thing I couldn’t give him. “I don’t want you talking to Diesel.”

“About?” I asked innocently.

“You know exactly what about.”

I shrugged, adopting an innocent expression, batting my lashes. “Sorry, no idea what you’re talking about, Bones.”

“*Ava Jade*,” Corvus called after me, but I was already gone, weaving through the crowd toward the bar, where I

knew Rook would be having one of the three ounces of whiskey he was ‘allowed’ before a fight.

I kept a vigilant eye on every face in attendance, easily discerning the Saints from the Kings, and the bloodthirsty rich citizens of NorCal from the gang members.

Soft hands, clean fingernails, unlined faces—definitely the bankers, lawyers, and corrupt high ranking officers.

Unarmed with callused hands and taut jaws—the Kings.

Armed, ready, and wary—our people.

I saw the guy whose eye I took during the hunt trial sneering at me from across the room. I gave him an apologetic shrug, and he looked away as I caught up with Grey and Rook.

“So,” I said, glancing around to the other side of the ring and the drawn curtain set into the wall beyond it. “Where’s the other guy?”

I had to shout to be heard over the din of conversation and music, the smell of whiskey rolling off Rook much stronger than three ounces worth. I didn’t worry about *him* fighting wasted, but I did worry about the survival of the other guy.

“Not here yet,” he muttered.

I took the shot glass poised between his fingers and slung it back, grimacing as it burned a path down to my stomach.

Rook lifted a brow at me. “Sorry, I needed that.”

He turned to the little bar window cut out, tapping the shot glass on the polished cement bar top to signal he wanted another.

“How much have you had?”

He lifted his replacement to his mouth, but paused to shoot me a dark glare. “Not nearly enough,” he said before slamming it back and I made myself shut up about it.

The guys hadn’t had a call from Julia in weeks, and I was beginning to see just how much Rook needed them to stay sane. His darkness was so close to the surface that in the right

light I could almost see it. Surrounding him like an inky aura with claws and teeth. Demanding to be sated.

This fight wasn't a good idea tonight, but there was nothing I could do to stop it now. Rook would never back down, and I'd never expect him to.

The Kings might've been in for more of a show than they bargained for...

I stepped past Rook to slap my palm on the bar, getting the bartender's attention. He was a slender guy with a shock of green hair in a black Sanctum t-shirt. I didn't think I'd seen him here the last time. It had been one of the girls from upstairs bartending if I remembered correctly. His nametag read *Johnny*.

"A water," I told him. "And a Guinness."

"Who's the Guinness for?" Grey asked as the bartender turned to get my order ready.

"Me."

He looked at me askance, with a knot between his brows.

I took the frothy black gold from the bartender and pushed the water into Rook's hand. "We were broke a lot," I found myself telling him. "But Dad always kept a few Guinness stashed away from Mom in the kitchen. It's filling and the taste isn't half bad. It grew on me."

Grey frowned, his brows drawing to cloak his eyes in shadow.

I hadn't meant to trigger him.

I took a long swallow and passed it to him. "Want some?" I asked with the closest thing to a smile I could muster, trying to erase the sour mood I'd just brought on.

For as often as we didn't have food, unlike Grey, I didn't starve. Not much, anyway, and not often. We lived close enough to several stores with poor security, which meant that if it got bad enough, I could pretty easily lift a few Twinkies from the low shelves to keep us fed for a day or two.

I'd had options.

By the sound of it, Grey hadn't.

Grey took the proffered beer and sipped it, still brooding. And shockingly, Rook was also sipping his water, even though the look on his face told me he thought it tasted more like donkey piss.

I laughed quietly to myself, still gauging our surroundings as Corvus finally made his way over to us, his cold stare passing over the faces in the private club.

"He's in the back," Grey told him. "On the phone. Sounds like there might be a problem with Rook's opponent."

Corvus nodded.

It would be the first time he'd seen Dies since Monday. The guys had been sent on a few errands and were still getting updates on shit with the Aces and what our game plan was, but as far as I knew they hadn't spoken.

Grey passed me back my Guinness, and I wrapped both hands around it, gulping down another few mouthfuls to quell the hunger pangs in my stomach. Rook had been with me at Briar Hall earlier, and we wound up doing some 'light' sparring in the living room to get ready for tonight. Once we were both sweaty, eating was the furthest thing from our minds.

Besides, we had a huge fucking mess to clean up by the time we were done. It was a good thing Becca wasn't around because I was sure she'd have something to say about the cracked TV screen and the half of the sofa that was now concave, the legs busted off.

I couldn't even remember how it happened or whose fault it was.

"Whoa," Grey warned, taking the Guinness back before I could finish it. "Slow down, babe."

I licked my lips, knowing he was right. Tonight wasn't the night to get tipsy. I didn't think we had anything to worry about on our turf, but Diesel could give the order to attack the

Aces any time after the deadline was up. And right now, I didn't think he had a proclivity for patience.

My gaze hooked on a man hovering near the entrance, watching us.

I squinted at him, giving him an annoyed sneer until he looked away, crossing his arms over his chest.

The guys chatted about the fight, but I couldn't seem to focus on the conversation anymore. Something about the guy was bugging me.

He was pale. Tall. Broad through the shoulders but lean, with brown hair and narrowed blue eyes.

"AJ?" I heard Grey say, realizing it wasn't the first time.

"Hmm?"

"I was asking if you'd—"

"Who is that?" I asked, inclining my head to the guy across the room. Something about him seemed so familiar, but I just couldn't place it.

"One of the Kings," Corvus answered, and I should've known he'd do his homework on them, especially since making the alliance. "Don't have a name for him, though. I only managed to get intel on the major players. He's likely low on the food chain."

"Does something about him..."

"Seem familiar?" Grey finished for me, and I sensed him growing nearer to my side, trying to covertly get a better look at the guy.

And then it hit me.

"He fits the description," I said in a low voice.

"What description?"

"Becca's. He's about six feet. Brown hair, long on top. Pale. I don't see any ink."

"Becca's guy was an Ace," Rook said, bored.

I shook my head. He was right. I was probably just seeing things that weren't there. But I had a right to be on edge.

I shivered. "Whatever, the guy gives me the creeps."

"Me too."

I spun at the unfamiliar voice, finding a guy standing a couple feet away from us, a pint of golden beer in his right hand. The jeweled crown tattoo around the base of his index finger giving away his status as a King. He looked... familiar, but then again he also looked like half the male students at Briar Hall. Great cheekbones, even better skin. With sandy blond hair cut short, a chin dimple, and a classic Cali tan.

But overshadowing it all was the weathered veneer of a man who'd already seen some shit in his short life.

Truly though, if it weren't for the roughness of his hands, the wicked gleam to his eyes, and the style of his clothes, the guy could've passed for the son of one of the bluebloods in attendance here tonight, too.

But he *wasn't* that. He was a King.

"WHAT?" I cocked my head at him.

"He's creepy as fuck," the guy repeated.

"Isn't he one of yours?" I asked, a rhetorical question, really.

The guy nodded. "Yup."

He turned, feeling the unanswered query still lingering between us.

His brown eyes roved the length of me before continuing. He leaned in closer, conspiratorially, making Rook growl low from behind him. Guy had balls, I'd give him that.

"His name's Aries," the King whispered to me, the smell of his grapefruit and sandalwood cologne strong in my nose. "He's always been kind of a loner. But he's lethal when Maverick needs him to be. He's the one we use when there's a

message that needs sending if you catch my meaning. He's also our one man *cleanup* crew."

My stomach churned.

The guy they sent in when they needed to send a message...

Could that fuck be the one who took out my dad?

Unconsciously, my hands balled at my sides. I only realized when Rook dropped a heavy palm on my shoulder, shocking me back to the present. He dragged me back a step, pulling the King's attention.

"And you are?" Rook asked, his smile all teeth.

The guy stretched out a hand to Rook, inclining his head respectfully. Clearly he already knew who they were. "Drake."

Rook's upper lip twitched, but he took Drake's hand.

"And you must be Rook Clayton."

Drake nodded to Corvus and Grey. "Greyson Winters. And Corvus James. Your reps precede you."

"Afraid yours doesn't," Corvus said gruffly, staring openly at the guy.

Drake frowned, but there was still a smile lingering at the edge of his mouth. He wasn't offended, or at least he was doing his best to appear like he wasn't. "Well, shit, man. Way to call me out. We can't all be the sons of a veritable street god."

"Touché," Grey put in, throwing a covert elbow into Corvus' ribs. Reminding him that we were trying to make friends here, not enemies.

The guy snorted a laugh.

Corvus gave the guy a nod. "Enjoy the fight, man," he said before stalking away, likely gone to scope out the competition for Rook.

"What crawled up his ass," Drake whispered playfully, tossing me a wink before he turned to the bar for another

drink.

Rook eyed him as he turned away, and I gave him a hard look. *Play nice*, I mouthed to him. The guy had paid me barely an ounce of attention. I pitied the fool who one day tried to actually pick me up in front of them. That guy barely flirted and Rook looked close to smash mode. Grey too, actually.

“What are you smiling at?” Grey asked me, confused.

I shook my head, clearing my throat. “Nothing.”

He narrowed his eyes on me, as if he just looked hard enough he could see straight through skin, muscle, and bone to see exactly what I was thinking.

I heard Diesel over the music and peered to my left from the corner of my eye, finding him walking toward the high top table where he usually sat during the fights. Either the injury to his ankle was healing really well or he’d just gotten hella fucking good at hiding it. I detected almost no limp whatsoever.

He stopped, turning to bark something at Pinkie, who was following him. Pinkie nodded before taking off in the other direction, leaving Diesel to sit alone, adjusting his battered leather jacket with a sneer on his lips.

Now was my chance.

I rolled my shoulders back, wishing Grey had let me finish my beer. “I’ll be right back,” I told them, not waiting for the protests I knew would surely follow before picking my way through the crowd.

Diesel’s gaze snagged on me as I approached, watching with a wary distaste as I dragged the tall stool opposite him out from beneath the table and plunked my ass atop it.

“Ava Jade,” he said, cold blue eyes burning into me. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

I leaned over the table so he would hear me without the need to raise my voice. It was one thing saying what I was about to say to him, it would be another thing if he thought people could overhear us.

“You’re being a dick,” I told him, careful to keep my voice even, watching his face for changes in his expression.

He managed to keep a level of neutrality, but the slight downturn of his lips gave him away, even concealed by his beard as they were.

“I think I misheard you,” he said.

I shook my head slowly. “You didn’t.”

“If you think—”

“Hear me out, and then I’ll fuck off.”

A vein throbbed in Diesel’s neck, but he said nothing else. Probably just wanted to get rid of me as quickly as possible. I was banking on that.

“I don’t know what you said to him on Monday—”

“That’s between me and my son.”

I waited, not letting his defense wake the dark within. This needed to be said. And it needed to be said in a way that he might actually listen.

“I know it is,” I replied coolly. “Which is why I don’t know what you said. What I do know is that he’s been a shell of himself since then.”

That seemed to strike a nerve. Good. Maybe I was on the right track, then.

“He won’t return any of his manager’s calls. He’s completely given up on an entire part of himself. An entire chunk of his soul.”

“That’s fucking dramatic.” Diesel scoffed.

“You don’t get it, but that isn’t a good enough reason for you to take it from him.”

“He *lied* to me. I’m not having this conversation.”

He jerked his head toward a Saint nearby. Axel, I thought his name was. *Get her out of my sight* written in his stare.

I lifted my leg, letting my black skirt fall up my thigh to reveal the blades strapped there. I held Axel’s gaze, daring him

to interrupt.

He glanced between Diesel and me, hesitating.

“Let me finish,” I told Diesel. “And you’ll never hear another word about it from me.”

His jaw tightened, but Diesel gave Axel a little nod, rolling his eyes.

“Corvus lied to you because he knew you wouldn’t understand. He knew you wouldn’t condone him spending his time doing something that could take him away from all of this, regardless of how important it is to him.”

“What’s your point?”

I swallowed down the frustrated rage trying to claw to the surface, clutching the bottom of the table to keep from flying over it at him. For a guy who clearly cared so much about his sons, he was being so fucking dense about this.

“My point is that he’s been The Bone Man for *years*.”

I let that sink in.

“And has he ever once shirked his duties to his family? To the Saints?”

He didn’t like being reasoned with.

“He’ll resent you for this,” I continued. “Whether he understands your reasoning or not. His music is a part of him.”

There was so much of him, of his soul, his heart, in every word he sang. It would be a fucking crime to stop him from creating.

“You wouldn’t chop off his arm, would you?”

“You don’t understand our ways.”

“I don’t?” It was my turn to scoff.

Diesel’s attention wandered, catching on something to our left, and I followed his line of sight to where Corvus was standing with the guys again near the bar. Grey pointed at us, and Corvus lifted his head, going white at the sight of me sitting across from his father.

“He asked me not to do this,” I added. “But I care about him. I care that he’s hurting.”

Diesel looked doubtfully at me but said nothing.

This was the part my body physically fought against me saying, but Corvus and the shit with Primal Ethos was only part of the problem.

There was a rift between this father and his sons. And a large part of it was my fault.

A bigger part of his was his own damned fault, but regardless of who was to blame, I wouldn’t take sons away from a father who would do literally anything in this world to keep them safe.

If only I’d been so lucky.

“All I’m asking is for you to consider what forcing him to stop might do *to him*. He *can* have both.”

“If that’s all—”

“I also know that *I* have been the cause of a lot of tension between you and them.”

He lifted a brow.

“Even though the vast majority of that shit is your own fucking fault,” I added, completely unable to help myself, then I sighed. “I don’t want to carve a rift between you.”

“Oh?”

“Which is why, I’m...”

He tipped his head slightly to one side, light eyes glinting with triumph.

“You know what, I’m not going to fucking say it,” I decided. “I’m not sorry. I know you don’t trust me. You don’t like me. And frankly, I don’t give a shit. I don’t need you to like me. But I *will* try harder to not want to slit your throat... for them.”

A slow smile spread on his mouth. “All right.”

“All right?”

A Saint approached the table, clearly drunk, with two shots held between his fingers. He set them on the table in front of Diesel, sloshing half their contents over the wooden top. “Hey, Dies,” he said. “Happy Birthday man! Have a shot with me.”

“It’s not my birthday,” he told the Saint. “Not for a while yet.”

“Oh shit man, I thought it was today. Gives me time to get you something; though, eh?”

Diesel shook his head, getting annoyed. “Crowley,” he said, eyes indicating me across the table. “I’m in the middle of a chat with our newest member. Do you mind?”

“Oh fuck, yeah man. Sorry.”

The Saint left both shots untouched on the table and left, giving me a wicked side eye as he went.

“Where were we?” Diesel said, pushing the shots away. But before I could open my mouth to say anything else, we were interrupted a second time.

Pinkie returned, leaning down to whisper something in Diesel’s ear. His jaw tightened, and he cursed between clenched teeth.

My pulse raced in my chest, adrenaline spiking in my blood as my hand unconsciously went to my thigh, assessing the immediate area for threats.

“Relax,” Diesel told me, sensing where my mind had gone. Then his stare deepened, considering me in a new light.

“You still have a line on Alpha?” Diesel asked Pinkie without taking his eyes off me.

“Yeah. You have someone for her?”

He nodded toward me. “We promised our new comrades a show. Make the call.”

Pinkie turned, vanishing back the way he came, cell phone to his ear.

“Am I missing something?” I asked, skin still tingling as the burst of adrenaline began to fade.

“It seems the fighter we lined up for Rook soiled his big boy pants and took the first bus out of town.”

I lifted my brows, scowling.

What a pussy.

Diesel nodded, agreeing to my unvoiced sentiment.

“But our new friends,” he said, sweeping an arm over the gathering of Kings, Saints, lawyers and bankers. “Still expect a show.”

“So you’re replacing the fighter?”

“*Fighters*,” he corrected me, and the smile crawling across his mouth made my insides shudder.

“Looks like you have a chance to prove that you meant what you said,” he continued, running his tongue over his teeth. “You are now tonight’s fighter, Ava Jade. I suggest you go get ready.”

CHAPTER

Seventeen

ROOK

FUCKING COWARD.

It wasn't the first time some big talker failed to live up to the noise, backing down at the last second because of some bullshit excuse.

I finished my whiskey and hollered around the curtain for another, tapping my empty glass on the cement wall as I swiped the back of my hand over my mouth.

Lighting my last cigarette, I went back to the benches in the private room, inhaling deeply until my lungs were filled with the sweet tarry taste of tobacco.

Grey held up his phone, showing Ava Jade a video of Alpha; the female fighter Diesel had wanted to acquire for a fight here since we started the events.

"See how she uses her legs," Grey was saying, pointing to the screen, and Ava Jade nodded. "She weakens your stability like that so when she strikes up top you go down harder. She's good on the mat, too. Don't let her bring you down. If she does, you won't be able to get out of it."

Her cheekbones flared. She disagreed.

I couldn't say whether she was right or wrong about her ability to take Alpha. I'd only seen her fight once, but she was a lethal combination of speed and size. The other girl, even one in the same weight class as her, didn't stand a chance.

And Ava Jade was at least a full weight class down. Possibly two weight classes. But then again, she'd almost had *me* that night out behind the apartment buildings. She hadn't needed her blades then, just the incentive of getting her winnings from betting on me in the fight and the rush of a challenge.

As twitchy as I was that I wouldn't be smashing heads tonight after all, at least I got to watch this fight. It was the best alternative, and maybe I'd get a second hand release from watching her take Alpha down.

It wouldn't lift the heavy burden pressing down on my soul, but it might soothe it. For another day. Another hour. Another minute at least.

If Julia didn't call soon...

I finished off my cigarette and stomped it out beneath my boot.

"How are you on the ground?" Grey asked my Ghost, and her lips pressed together tight.

He took her silence and expression to mean something they didn't. It wasn't that she wasn't good on the ground, it was that if she got stuck in a hold, unable to move with someone on top of her, she panicked. It was that panic that would be her undoing someday.

It was a scar that we needed to help her heal. It could save her life.

"Focus on what you're good at," I found myself saying.

Her gaze flicked up to meet mine, burning eyes boring into me. "Too bad I can't use my blades," she said with a smirk that didn't reach her eyes.

"You don't need them," Corvus said, entering through the curtain with my fresh whiskey in his hand. He passed it to me, going to kneel in front of Ava Jade with thin strips of torn cloth to wrap her knuckles. "She might have more skill than you, but it's at a professional level. She won't fight dirty, and she won't be expecting you to."

“She also won’t expect you to be able to take a hit as well as you can,” Grey added. “You need to outlast her and wait for your opening.”

“She’s weak in the knees,” I put in. “During the fight I saw last year in Lodi, she took a hit to her inner right knee, not even a hard one, and it almost put her flat on her ass.”

Ghost nodded, taking it all in.

The noise and light from the main floor pushed into the private space as Diesel and Pinkie entered, throwing the curtain back shut behind them. “Alpha’s here,” he announced. “Fight’s in fifteen. Is she prepped?”

“Almost,” Corvus growled.

“Put this on,” Pinkie said, and I noticed the tiny ass top and shorts in his mammoth fingers. He tossed it to Ava Jade, and she caught it in the fist Corvus wasn’t currently wrapping.

Corvus snatched them from her fingers before she could get a good look at them. He pushed to his feet, holding them out to Diesel with murder in his eyes. A smile found my lips.

“The fuck is this, Dies?” he asked, holding the tiny shorts and sports bra between his fingers like they personally offended him. He shoved them back at Pinkie. “She isn’t wearing that.”

Ava Jade didn’t hide her amusement at the exchange, calmly offering her hand to Grey for him to finish the job Corvus started.

“She is,” Diesel said. “She can’t fight in a skirt and a baggy band tee, son.”

“That’s fucking lingerie,” he argued, jabbing two fingers to the outfit lying on Pinkie’s palm.

“It’s sport shorts and a sports bra,” Diesel corrected him.

“Her tits and ass will be all over the place in that. She *isn’t* wearing it.”

Diesel took the outfit from Pinkie and strolled over to Ava Jade, holding out the bits of dark cloth for her. “Ava Jade,” he

said, making a spectacle of asking her permission. “Would you mind wearing this for your fight. Not only will you be able to move more easily, but its effect on many of the dimwitted rich in attendance will make for a better monetary gain.”

She looked between Corvus’ quickly reddening face and our father’s, taking the skimpy outfit with a tip of her head. “If it’ll help,” she said, sharing a meaningful look with Diesel that I wanted to deconstruct. If my brain wasn’t swimming in whiskey, I’d have been doing just that.

One thing was clear though, she was behaving. Doing as she was told. She agreed to this fight at the very last minute. Agreed to fight someone well above her weight class. Agreed to wear *that*.

And I got the sense she wasn’t doing it for herself.

Corvus wiped a palm over his mouth, physically holding back whatever else he wanted to say.

Ava Jade sent him a wink. “Let them look,” she said. “That’s all they’ll ever do.”

“If any of them touch you, I’ll fucking kill them.”

Diesel raised a brow at his eldest son, but Corvus’ hard gaze never left Ava Jade.

She smiled sweetly at him. “I would expect nothing less, Bones.”

In a move not even I could’ve predicted, Corvus sidestepped closer to me and took the whiskey from my hand, draining it in one long swallow, a sneering grimace on his lips as he stared down Diesel.

“The match is five, five-minute rounds,” Diesel told Ava Jade. “It’s best if you can last at least until the third.”

“So you’re betting against me?” she asked him.

He didn’t reply.

It was the wrong move. Even more so to let on that he had. It would only push Ava Jade that much harder to win. And win she would. Not without injury. But I felt bad for Alpha, she

wouldn't have a soul left once my Ghost sucked it clean from her bones.

“Winner will be determined by submission or knock out.”

She nodded her understanding.

“Or by climbing to the top of the cage.”

The room went collectively still.

“You're dropping the cage?” I asked, something churning beneath my ribcage. “I thought we weren't doing that anymore since—”

“Since you killed your opponent?” he finished for me. “I don't think there's any risk of that happening tonight, and it adds something extra to the excitement.”

“You okay with this?” I asked my Ghost. If she wasn't, Diesel wouldn't be dropping the cage. Period.

She shrugged. “At least she won't be able to get away.”

She flexed her fingers, feeling out the wraps as she stood, holding my stare with a wicked gleam in her eyes. My cock thickened in my jeans as I realized what I was seeing in her stare. She was excited.

No. Not just excited.

She hungered for this.

Lusted after it.

An opportunity for her to quell the same darkness that lingered deep inside of her. A darkness that no doubt was on the verge of chaos with all the shit she'd had to go through, and continued having to go through, since she first arrived in Thorn Valley.

She wouldn't be getting what we knew she wanted out of tonight—to find the King who took out her father and start planning how she would take him apart—but this was a good consolation prize.

Corvus pushed my empty glass back at me before turning to Diesel. “I don't think the cage is—”

“She’s got this,” I interrupted, biting my lip ring as I looked over Ava Jade, seeing the readiness in every one of her muscles.

I nodded to Diesel. “We’re good here.”

“We’ll give you some privacy to change,” Diesel offered, pausing before he and Pinkie left. “And Ava Jade?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for filling in. The income from this match will be much needed in the weeks to come.”

For the war to come, he might as well have said. I expected we’d be meeting as soon as this match was through to go over the plan.

Ava Jade inclined her head, and he was gone, back out through the curtain with Pinkie on his heels.

“This is bullshit,” Corvus groaned, turning to pace a short stretch of concrete floor. “She hasn’t had enough time to train. Even after all that shit, he clearly *still* wants her dead.”

I stopped him, slapping a hand down on his shoulder, gripping tight. His nostrils flared. “She has this. She wouldn’t have agreed to it if she didn’t.”

“She didn’t know who she was up against.”

“Doesn’t matter, Brother. You can’t beat a ghost.”

The sound of Ava Jade’s knife belt clattering against the bench drew our attention back to her. She removed her t-shirt and bra without a second’s hesitation, wiggling her hips as she worked to get the skirt over her round ass to let it slip down her thighs to the ground.

The mark of my teeth in her flesh from rally night made my hard on jump in my jeans, and I pawed it, the phantom taste of her on my tongue.

Her nipples pebbled in the cool air under Sanctum, and here, under the lights, it was easier to see the evidence of all the shit she’d endured during the trials. Her body was riddled with bruises in all stages of healing. Some a purple so deep

they bordered on black. Others so pale yellow they were hard to discern from her unmarked flesh. And cuts.

The ones in her hips, nearly healed now, put there by me, didn't bother me. The other did.

More than I ever thought I could be bothered by seeing a wound.

She was mine to mark. To mark in the ways she *wanted me* to mark her. In the ways the dark, deprived part of her craved.

No one else was allowed to mark her.

The darkness I'd been working to drown in whiskey and tobacco came back with a violent resurgence, making a heat lick up my back like flames.

Ava Jade pulled on the black shorts and the sports bra before pulling her hair back to twist it into a tight donut shape on the top of her head, securing it with an elastic.

She squatted, rolling her shoulders back and then jumping to get limbered up, her tits bouncing. No fucks given that we were all drooling in her direction with unconcealed chubs.

She widened her stance, striking an invisible opponent, light on her feet.

This was going to be good.

She'd already gone through some drills with Grey and a full body stretch. She was as ready as she was going to be.

Outside, the volume of the crowd turned up, and the sound of a mic turning on marked the start of the event.

"Shit, did someone pick me an entrance song?" she asked.

Corvus and Grey shared a look.

"Don't worry, Ghost. I got you."

Pinkie cleared his throat into the mic before starting the opening of the show, using his best Rogan copycat voice.

Ava Jade jumped on the spot, loosening up, and as the opening tone of Primal Ethos' Gravedigger came over the speaker and Pinkie shouted her name, I yanked her in for a

viscous kiss, biting her bottom lip *hard*. She grunted into my mouth before pulling away, licking the small droplet of blood there with a malicious gleam in her eyes and a smile making the tiny cut open more.

“We’re right behind you,” Grey assured her, and she stepped out of the curtain, and all proof of her excitement or nerves gone in the blink of an eye. She stalked through the crowd, dead-eyed and with her chin raised. I wished I could’ve seen her face.

Not a single man in attendance dared reach out to touch her. Instead, they backed away as she walked, parting like the red sea. Going silent as the song I chose grew to a loud crescendo of violence all around us. Promising blood. Promising violence. Promising the show of their fucking lives.

Ava Jade. My ghost. Tonight’s *gravedigger*.

Distantly, I could hear Corvus cursing at my back. Could see the distaste on Diesel’s expression as he watched from his high top table near to the bar. Didn’t give two flying fucks about either. It was the perfect song for her entry. And now that everyone knew it was Corvus, why hide it?

He needed to own that shit.

Take control of it before it suffocated him.

Ava Jade stepped through the ropes, the long line of her body bending in the most delicious way until she stood next to Pinkie, waiting, entirely immobile even though I could sense the latent power pulsing beneath her flesh and muscle.

“And in the opposite corner,” Pinkie hollered. “*Andrea ‘Alpha’ Stone!*”

Gravedigger faded into another song, one I didn’t recognize, but had to admit was pretty badass.

She swaggered out from the opposite curtain, and I watched her approach as I took the petroleum from Grey. I was always the one on the other side of these ropes. I wanted to be the face she saw when she got through her first round. Her second. Her third.

I would take care of her.

Alpha stepped up through the ropes, unfurling to her full height, and a sour taste filled my mouth. It'd been a minute since I'd seen her in the flesh, and she'd clearly gone up a weight class since then. Standing at about six-two with a frame damn near as wide as Grey's, she looked like a monster beside my Ghost. Her thighs roughly the size of Ava Jade's waist. Her blonde hair pulled back into a low bun at the nape of her neck.

Her lips twisted. Every muscle flexed.

"This is so fucking lopsided," Corvus growled, throwing a clawed hand through his mussed hair.

"She can handle it," I reminded him. "And Diesel knows it. It's why he set it up."

"He bet *against* her," Grey reminded me.

"Did he?" I challenged him, slipping a curious eye his way. "Or did it only make it seem that way to light a fire under her ass? Because he knows exactly what she's capable of."

Grey's brows drew, considering that.

I didn't even realize I'd be considering it until the words left my mouth, but there it was. And I'd be fucking shocked if it weren't the truth. She'd bested everything Diesel had thrown at her. If he thought she'd be taken down by this bitch, he wasn't the wise man I always thought him to be.

"...winner by submission or knockout," Pinkie was saying as the lights in the underbelly of Sanctum went low, all save for the ones above the ring. "Fighters, *ready!*"

My stomach fluttered, and I clenched my teeth against the sensation as it went straight to my cock.

Pinkie stepped back as Alpha's entrance song quieted and the metallic groan of the cage overhead sounded. Pinkie exited the ring as the cage clanked down, locking Ava Jade in with Alpha.

I gripped the cold metal, pushing up on a crate to make sure I didn't miss a thing.

“Ghost,” I called through the bars, and she turned, her face so hard it could’ve been cut from marble. I pointed at her opponent with two fingers, never losing my hold on her attention. “End that bitch.”

She nodded once and rolled her shoulders back, widening her stance as Pinkie lifted the shining metal whistle to his lips.

The sound of it rang through the room, sending Alpha into an immediate feral attack. I grinned, watching Ava Jade deftly avoid the advance, landing a solid jab to Alpha’s ribs, and she rolled out of the way and sprang back to her feet, ready.

Alpha bared her teeth, the knot between her brows telling me she’d misjudged her opponent. It wouldn’t be the last time.

Ava Jade blocked Alpha’s next blow with her forearm, but failed to see the nasty kick coming, the blow to my Ghost’s shin nearly sending her down.

The crowd roared at the hit, cheering for Alpha, and I wanted to eat each and every one of them for breakfast.

I settled for snatching up the nearest Armani shirt, yanking the fucker to me to knock my skull into his, rendering him a mess of unmoving muscle and flesh on the soiled cement floor. I spat on him, feeling Grey’s arms tug me back a step to stop the kick I’d been about to throw into his abdomen.

Grey pushed me back to the metal bars, back to the fight, and I growled as I watched Alpha land another kick to Ava Jade’s thigh, bringing a bright red tint to the surface of her skin.

If it weren’t for the fact she took it with a smile, I’d have been tempted to rip through these bars and snap Alpha’s neck.

Fuck, I wanted to.

Watching her wasn’t helping.

It was making my *need* that much worse. My violent soul longed to go to war with hers. To be at her side. Fight as one.

Watching was a form of torture, but when Ava Jade landed the next beautiful hit, forcing Alpha to stagger back two steps, her hand reflexively going to her mangled jaw, I almost came.

“Yeah!” I screamed through the bars. “Take that bitch, Ghost!”

My hand found my cock through my jeans, and I pushed against it, trying to fix its position with a snarl on my lips.

Pinkie blew the whistle for the end of the match, just before Ava Jade was about to strike.

“No!” I growled at Pinkie, slamming my palms against the bars.

“*Rook*,” Corvus growled beside my ear, but I was already climbing up, pushing and unlocking the cage door to step through, hollering back over my shoulder. “Get me a fucking whiskey.”

Ava Jade came to the corner and Grey stepped through behind me, setting the stool down for my Ghost, but she didn’t want to sit. She paced back and forth in the corner like a caged tigress, only stopping when I forced her, shoving her against the bars. I scooped the petroleum onto the back of my hand and held her against the bars as I swiped my fingers into it to run it over her forehead and cheeks. Over the cut on her brow to stop it leaking into her eyes.

“She hits like a fucking truck,” Ava Jade said between panting breaths.

“Then you hit her harder.”

She opened her mouth to allow the straw through as Grey pushed it in. She pulled greedily at the water, and I knocked the straw from her lips.

“Not too much,” I cautioned. “You’ll cramp.”

Her jaw clenched, but she nodded, breaking free of my hold to storm back to center ring as the next round was announced.

“*Rook*, come on, man,” Grey was saying, but his words were swallowed up in the roar of the crowd as Pinkie lifted the whistle to his lips and Ava Jade squared off against her opponent.

I let Grey pull me back through the cage door and slam it behind us, the whistle sounding for the second round. I jumped down from the ledge, fingers latched through the metal bars as they circled one another.

Fuck, she moved like liquid, dancing around Alpha as though there weren't bruises the size of bread loaves blooming on her legs. There was no denying it. My Ghost was bred for this. She was made from different stuff. Maybe the same stuff I was made from.

Something rougher, harder, *darker* than regular people.

Ava Jade feigned to the left, psyching out Alpha to land an insane hit to her right temple, jumping to throw her entire body weight into the throw.

Blood spattered over the floor at their feet as Alpha tried to regain her balance, but Ava Jade wasn't having it. My Ghost closed the gap between them, sweeping her legs out to knock Alpha to the ground. The big bitch went down hard, but she got hold of Ava Jade's ankle, twisting it to take my Ghost down with her.

"Get off the floor!" Grey was shouting.

"*Fuck,*" I heard Corvus curse behind me.

My teeth locked in my jaw, watching as Alpha dragged Ava Jade close, grabbing hold of her when she sat up to try to get free. The next bit happened so fast I couldn't be sure how they got there, but Alpha's arm snaked around Ava Jade's neck, her arm trapped beneath one of Alpha's knees, the other punching uselessly at Alpha's shoulder.

Ghost's face started to turn red, her light eyes bulging as Alpha choked off her air supply with a vicious sneer on her lips.

Corvus shouted uselessly, threatening murder if Pinkie didn't blow the fucking whistle, but I locked my eyes on Ava Jade, and when she found my gaze, I lent her the strength she needed. My head tipped in a small nod.

You know how to get out of this, I told her. *Stay calm.*

Her body sagged on cue, and Alpha immediately let her go, standing with a triumphant gleam in her eyes, but before Pinkie could blow the whistle, Ava Jade flipped, sending a kick upward into the bottom of Alpha's chin, coughing as she finally allowed herself to breathe.

Teeth rattled to the mat, and blood smeared over Alpha's mouth as she fell back, choking on it, spluttering as she blinked to get back full consciousness.

"*One,*" the crowd started to shout.

"*Two.*"

If Alpha didn't get up, it was over. Ava Jade got unsteadily to her feet, spitting onto the mat between heaving breaths, her entire body gleaming in the lights as she gathered what remained of her strength and staggered toward Alpha."

"*Three.*"

"*Four.*"

Alpha groaned, flipping uneasily onto her stomach, using her arms to push herself up.

The crowd called her name. Chanting.

I'd rip out all their voice boxes if they didn't stop, the only reason I didn't—couldn't—was because I didn't want to miss a second of what would happen next.

I licked my lips, teeth dragging over my lip ring.

"Finish it," I whispered.

Alpha lifted her face, and Ava Jade took two running steps and plowed her knee into Alpha's cheek, sending her back down.

"*Stay the fuck down,*" she screamed at Alpha, every muscle in her back puffed up, her hands claws at her sides. This was her restraint. She didn't want to stop.

She needed Alpha to stop so that she could stop herself.

But Alpha rolled back to her knees again as the crowd started a thirty second countdown for the round to end.

Alpha pushed to her feet and began climbing the fucking cage, trying to get away. It was the coward's way out; if she made it to the top, the match would be over. Forfeited. Unless Alpha was trying to get higher to put power behind a hit.

Ava Jade bent her head and cursed, her upper lip curling as she went after Alpha before she could get high enough up to do anything useful.

“Get that cunt down!” I shouted, my pulse pounding in my ears.

She grabbed Alpha's bun and ripped her from the bars, making her fall with a resounding *thud* to the mat and roll over, coughing at the air that was knocked from her lungs.

Ava Jade was on her in a second.

“Ten, nine, eight,” the crowd chanted, while others moaned and griped, calling for Alpha to get up. But she wouldn't be getting up. Not any time soon.

Ava Jade straddled the bitch, laying hit after hit *after hit* to her face.

“Seven, six, five, four,” they chanted.

“She's killing her!” someone screamed.

And they weren't wrong.

“Three, two—”

Pinkie blew the whistle, and I launched through the cage door, racing to Ava Jade, hauling her off Alpha before she could finish the job she started. She fought against my hold, spinning to land a brutal blow to my jaw that I felt all the way down to my cock.

“It's me. It's me!”

She blinked, thrusting away from me, her breathing erratic and eyes full of dark stars.

She bent over her knees, almost gagging from the exertion, her head tipping slightly to one side to see the evidence of what she'd done. Alpha, lying bloody and broken, but still alive, in a puddle of her own blood.

Two of our men rushed in to tend to Alpha, fixing her with a neck brace, pouring cold water over her bruises and cuts before pressing bags of ice there instead. One shone a flashlight into her eyes.

Pinkie entered the ring, snatching up Ava Jade's arm to drag her nearer to the fallen Alpha. Alpha, who was trying to say something to the Saints helping her, and a moment later was helped to stand, her gaze distant, the whites of her left eye filled with blood.

“And the winner by knockout is...AVA JADE MASON!”

Pinkie lifted her arm, and she lifted her chin in turn, looking out over the faces in the club.

Alpha stumbled closer to my Ghost, and I stepped up, ready to cut her down if she tried anything, but she extended a shaky hand to Ava Jade.

She took it, swallowing past a lump in her throat.

“You're a fucking animal,” Alpha slurred.

“It was a good match,” Ava Jade replied, her gaze catching on someone behind me. I spun to find Diesel just outside the cage, clapping for her. His grin wide.

CHAPTER

Eighteen

GREY

I PRESSED the ice pack to AJ's thigh, and she sucked a breath in through her teeth, snatching my forearm to squeeze tightly.

“Shit, does it hurt that bad?” I asked, pulling back, but she pressed the ice harder into her skin, her hot hand pushing down on the top of mine.

“Just fucking cold,” she said, the words whistled through clenched teeth.

I knelt, holding the ice there for her, trying to get a better look at her face.

Alpha got a few good shots in, but she looked like she'd get away without too much facial damage. The blow to her brow made it swell to cave-man proportions, but she was holding a smaller ice pack there, and I was sure the swelling would go down before the night was through. At least her eyes weren't swollen shut.

The purple tint blooming on her jaw would hurt for a while, though. As though she knew what I was thinking, she opened her mouth to move her jaw in a slow circle, feeling out the injury.

“Anything that needs medical—”

She shook her head before I could finish.

“I'm fine, Grey. I've had worse.”

I didn't doubt it, but I hated to imagine it. I hated seeing her hurt like this and the *idea* that she had ever been hurt *worse* than this made my stomach turn. Made my thoughts tint red as though my brain was soaking in poison.

Rook wasn't the only one who'd wanted to hop those fucking bars and rip Alpha's head off. I'd have done it happily if I didn't think it would piss Ava Jade off to the point where *she* wanted to rip my head off. If any of us had interrupted the match she would have taken it to mean that we thought she couldn't handle it.

She wouldn't have liked that.

I mean, fuck, she'd given Rook a damn good clock to the jaw for trying to haul her off Alpha, but I had a feeling that was done more blindly than anything.

The curtain flapped behind us, and Corvus and Rook stepped back into the private area. The party still raged outside on the main floor, the Kings mingling with the Saints just like Diesel wanted. The lawyers and bankers spending more money on drinks and games of cards at the tables in the other room.

Diesel hadn't opened that room in a while. We must have really needed the extra coin right now. Nothing worse than dealing with drunk gambling addicts who've just lost all their fucking money. *Not worth the trouble*, he used to say. Apparently, he'd changed his mind.

"How is she?" Corvus asked me.

"I'm fine," AJ answered before I could, and my stomach twisted. As much as I tried to forget it, I couldn't help the guilt still gnawing at me.

It was my fault Corvus' cover was blown.

But I couldn't do what that fucker wanted. I wouldn't trade AJ's life for my brother's secret and he *knew* it. He just wanted to fucking toy with me. I'd tried every night for days to trace those messages, but I was still coming up empty handed. The only thing that kept me going was the knowledge that all it

would take was one slip and I would have his dead ass in the palm of my hand.

There was no reason to tell the guys about the text messages if I didn't have anything useful to offer. They were nothing but this guy trying to tear us apart from the inside.

Rook would have done the same.

Corvus would've done the same.

No matter how many times I told myself, it didn't ease the hollowness picking away at my insides.

"Here," Rook said, flopping down beside AJ on the bench with a glass of whiskey. "Have some, it'll take the edge off."

She eyed the whiskey like she might turn it down, but when Rook pushed it at her a second time, she took it, knocking it back in one swallow then grimacing and shaking her head.

Rook rubbed circles on her back. "There you go, Ghost. Better?"

She nodded.

He was going to turn her into a fucking alcoholic. We were going to need to talk about that.

Corvus scrutinized Ava Jade from where he stood, his light eyes roving over every mark, every scratch, every bruise, and getting darker with each one he found. "Dies wants to talk to us about—"

"Boys," Diesel said at that moment as he stepped through the curtain, counting through a massive stack of bills, pausing to lick his fingertips as he speedily walked his fingers through them, double checking his winnings.

"You bet on me," Ava Jade said, not a question, but it was clear she was surprised.

"You really think I'd bet against one of my own?"

AJ flinched at that but said nothing, her cut-glass eyes falling to cut the cement floor instead of our father.

Diesel pocketed the bills, and I moved the ice pack to Ava Jade's other thigh.

"Don't tell me you boys didn't bet on your girl?"

"Course we did," Corvus said, patting his breast pocket. A tiny smirk tugged at the edge of AJ's mouth.

Diesel nodded and drew out his phone, the skin between his brows creasing. He turned the phone to us, displaying the time. "Time's officially up for the Aces," he said, digging in his front jacket pocket for a cigar. He patted his jeans pockets, frowning.

"Dies," Rook said and flipped him a lighter.

Dies caught it, a little off balance from his injury, and lit the cigar, blowing a cloud of sweet smelling gray smoke into the room.

"What's the plan?" Corvus asked.

"We'll meet at the warehouse to go over the plan. I'm going to need some time to round up the others and our new *friends*. You boys go ahead and open 'er up, but watch your asses. I'll be sending Axel, Pinkie, and Crowley right after you in case you run into trouble."

We all nodded and Diesel set his sights on Ava Jade. "Good fight," he said. "Wish it could've gone to a third round, but... I'm impressed."

She squinted at him, maybe trying to judge if he were fucking with her. He wasn't, but she needed to figure that out for herself. Our father gave credit where it was due. *Usually*.

Diesel's gaze snagged on Corvus before he spun to leave. He lifted a hand in the air making a circular motion. "Get a move on, boys, I want the Aces *folded* by this time tomorrow."

Ava Jade sighed.

"We can take you back to the nest on the way," I offered. "You should rest."

Her face scrunched up at that and she looked at me like I had shit on my fucking face. "Fuck no. Your pops would *love*

that.”

“It doesn’t matter what he thinks,” Corvus said, and I wished he would take his own advice.

But despite our protests AJ was still shaking her head. “*I’m fine,*” she all but growled. “I’m coming with you.”

She pushed my hands away and dropped the ice pack from her head to the bench, pushing to her feet to grab the clothes she came in, pulling them on right over top of her sweat-dampened shorts and sports bra. Her fingers fumbled to buckle on her knife belt and attach it to the garter on her thigh.

I put a hand atop hers, and though she stared daggers at me, she let me finish buckling it up for her, shivering when I brushed my fingertips up her thigh. I grinned at her, and she looked knowingly down at me.

“You are a fucking queen, you know that, right?” I found myself saying, wrapping my hands around her waist as I stood.

“About time you noticed,” she said, her voice laced with heavy sarcasm.

I pushed her hair away from her face and bent my head down to kiss the top of hers, smelling her cheap shampoo. I’d come to love that smell.

Corvus cleared his throat, and I pulled away.

“We should get moving,” Corv said. “We’re the only ones with the code to get in, and if Pinkie and the others get there before us they’re going to be pissed it isn’t open yet.”

Ava Jade nodded, doing her best to hide a slight limp as she walked up to Corvus and he fell into step beside her, an arm reflexively going up behind her, palm hovering protectively over her lower back without actually touching her.

“There you are,” the guy from earlier, Drake, said, lifting his glass to Ava Jade. “Nicely done up there.”

She tipped her head in thanks. I didn’t like the way she smiled at him.

“Back up, man,” I barked. “We have places to be.”

Drake lifted his hands, backing up a step. “Sorry, man. Just wanted to congratulate the winner. Glad I put my money on you, Ava Jade.”

Over his shoulder, I noticed the other guy, the one Ava Jade said gave her the creeps. The fucker who matched the description Becca gave of her booty-call boyfriend. He, too, seemed to have bet on Ava Jade and was lifting a stack of bills from an envelope with a wicked grin on his mouth.

His head jerked up, sensing my eyes on him, and he stuffed the money back in the envelope, flashing me a set of perfect teeth before turning away to head in the direction of the bar.

I boxed Ava Jade in on her other side and Rook trailed behind us, growling at anyone else who looked like they might interrupt our procession out of the club.

AJ’s knuckles turned white as she gripped the railing, hauling herself up the stairs and out of the noise and heat of the club. When the door opened, she couldn’t get through it fast enough, tipping her head up to breathe in deeply through her nose, staring up at the waning moon.

My ears rang in the sudden quiet, and I flipped up the collar of my jacket at the chill in the air. “You guys want to wait here? I’ll bring the Rover around.”

I didn’t want her to have to walk all the way around the lot if she didn’t have to.

Rook lit up a cigarette, nodding.

“Stop,” Ava Jade said and something in her tone made my skin prickle.

She stared up at the building across the street, tipping her head to one side. I followed her line of sight and cursed.

“*Get the fuck down!*” Corvus roared, slamming his body into Ava Jade’s, sending her down to the pavement just as the echo of the shot broke the sound barrier and the round embedded itself in the wall behind them.

My gun was out in an instant and Rook roared as a gang of men rounded the building and rushed us.

He sped straight ahead, zigzagging as the ten men fired at him, taking a bullet to his leg before he drew his own guns, firing wildly.

“Get her out of here!” I shouted at Corv who was hauling AJ to her feet.

I aimed and fired, hitting an Ace square in the chest before he could get another shot on Rook. The fucker crumpled to the pavement as Rook danced through the rest of them, a beast set loose on a herd of sheep.

“Fuck that,” Ava Jade said, gasping as Rook was hit again. Corvus didn’t try to stop her as she sprinted forward, following her instead, already firing.

The glint of the sniper’s rifle above reflected in the moonlight, and I took off after them, making an uneven path.

“Don’t stay still,” I hissed at them as the first of the Aces turned their attention away from my brother and toward us. Big fucking mistake.

Rook grabbed the Ace by the head and twisted, the *crack* of snapping bone resounding in the street.

Headlights flashed over us before jarring to a stop, turning around to flee the scene.

The Ace directly in front of me lifted his gun to aim at my face, and I sped the final step, knocking it from his hand. But before I could fire a shot of my own, the whisper of steel cutting through wind filtered into my ears.

He went down with a silver pommel embedded in his neck.

Ava Jade’s hard eyes found mine, and I nodded. “Keep moving!”

She nodded back, going to Rook as three more Aces began to surround him. She pressed her back to his and threw another knife. The gurgling cry of a dying Ace echoed through the night, telling me her aim was true.

Rook dropped his mag and refilled it, hooking an arm around AJ's waist to bring her to the ground as someone shot at her. As they both rose, blades and bullets flew. I rushed up and kicked one Ace in the back of his knee, sending him to the ground before pumping two bullets into his skull.

The screech of tires cut through the sounds of fighting and gunfire and my pulse picked up, doubling its tempo as I whirled to see the white van. To see its door opening and the men pouring out. Armed with a lot more than fucking handguns. An icy cold slunk down my spine.

Fuck.

The Aces never planned to go quietly. And they never planned to try to weather the storm. They were out for blood. Live or die. I should've fucking known. *We* should've known. Lenny Ace was nothing like his uncle was. He had no honor.

"Three o'clock!" I shouted, already firing, rolling to dodge a few stray shots.

"The alley!" Corvus bellowed. "Rook! Sparrow! *Move!*"

Rook finished off the last Ace in front of him and grabbed Ava Jade, dragging her to the alley. She fought against his hold, fingers reaching to jerk one of her blades out of the body of a man at their feet. The only blade she had. The rest, she'd already thrown.

No. Bad idea. The alley would provide cover from the sniper, but it would be like shooting fish in a barrel. Heat seared into my side, and I hissed, shouting as the realization that I'd been shot made the pain intensify.

"Grey!" Corvus was yelling, and I sensed Rook and Ava Jade had stopped.

A hail of gunfire sounded before I could move, and my eyes widened as I realized I was directly in its path, distracted.

A body knocked into mine and the *pop! pop!* of Corvus' shots rang in my ears as he laid down cover fire, hauling me away. Grunting as a bullet grazed past his face, brilliant red streaming down to his chin.

The others had to be on their way out.

There was no way they couldn't hear this. Right?

Even underground, with music pumping, Diesel would hear the pop of gunfire in the street outside, wouldn't he?

And the camera, it would've picked up something. But was someone manning the cams right now?

God fucking damnit.

Corvus shoved me into the alley with Rook and AJ, and I stumbled back, hand clutching the gushing wound to my side.

"Fuck, Grey!" AJ was shouting, rushing to me, tearing my jacket back to see the blood seeping through my fingers.

"He's hit!"

"We all are," Corvus growled, hesitating in the mouth of the alley. His gaze flicked to Rook behind me, fixing him with a dark stare. "Get them out of here," he muttered before turning back and running from the alley, drawing gunfire and the pounding of heavy booted feet after him.

"Corvus!" Ava Jade hollered, still clutching me. "He's going to get himself killed."

Her voice wobbled, and I didn't dare look, couldn't bear to see the pain I knew I would find in her eyes because she was right. And Corvus knew it.

"Fuck that," Rook said, switching out his mag to the last one he had on him.

I did the same, extricating myself from Ava Jade, removing my hand from the seeping wound to my side. Getting up.

It didn't seem to have hit anything important, and judging by the wetness leaking down my right ass cheek, the bullet had gone through and through. Blood loss would be my only issue. I'd survived worse.

"Stay here," I tried, grabbing AJ by her wrist, knowing it was useless. "Find someplace to hide and call Diesel."

She squinted at me, shaking her head once, slowly.

“Fuck, AJ.”

“*Move.*” Rook pushed between us, jogging out the mouth of the alley as the booted footsteps approached. It was too late now.

“You need to get a gun,” I told her, my voice hard. I lifted her hand to my mouth and kissed it, feeling the tacky wetness of blood smearing over my mouth.

She nodded, glancing down at her last blade clutched tightly in her fist. “We need to go.”

Outside, Rook roared as he engaged the half of them that didn’t take off after Corvus.

My brother needed me.

I let AJ’s hand go and swallowed, holding my breath against the pain as I raced from the alley.

I barely managed to dodge the hard side of a pistol as an Ace whipped it at my face, coming around the corner faster than a Mack truck. I fell to my ass to avoid the hit, and AJ sank her blade into the fucker’s jugular, not stopping at a single stab, but going at it three, four, *five* times before she was satisfied, reaching down to help haul me back to my feet just in time for me to shoot the next one and for her to throw her blade into the chest of the last one coming for us.

I nodded to her, and she nodded back, but something over my shoulder caught her attention, and her face went whiter than the ghost Rook named her for.

My guts twisted.

Corvus coughed, a sound of gruff pain, and I turned to find him ten feet from the entrance to the club, surrounded in Aces as they took turns stomping on him. Their heavy booted feet kicked and pushed down, making him jerk and cough, blood coating his lips.

I shot wildly, rushing past Rook, who’d disarmed the three remaining Aces near the alley and was going at them with vicious fists.

I felt AJ on my heels, but we weren't going to make it there in time.

An Ace, one I recognized from the meet at the warehouse drew his gun and aimed it low, directly at my brother's head.

I fired, but the gun clicked uselessly against my hand, out of bullets. I tossed it, and a fear unlike anything I'd ever felt before gripped my heart in a vise. *No. No, no, no.*

The door to the underbelly of Sanctum opened and a body stumbled through, grinning, his easy expression morphing the instant he saw the scene before him. Drake lifted his gun from the back of his waistband and fired.

The head of the man who'd been about to shoot my brother kicked back, and he crumpled to the ground. Ava Jade launched herself onto the back of the Ace next to him, and he cried out as she sank her teeth into his neck.

I nicked the gun from the one next to him and took aim, firing one shot after another, my bullets blasting from the barrel in perfect time with Drake's as the Aces in the circle around my brother went down one by one, taken by surprise.

Drake refilled his mag just as the door behind him smashed against the cement wall outside and Diesel came swiftly out, the others on his heels.

He wasted no time raising his gun, firing two rounds to finish off the two still doing a death dance with Rook.

I heard his outcry of rage at his prey having been taken from him, but he'd get over it.

"Sniper!" I warned. "Twelve o'clock"

Axel darted ahead to check it out, but it seemed the sniper had fled. There was no glint of metal barrel on the roof opposite us anymore.

"*What the fuck is going on out here?*" Diesel demanded, his face a mosaic of rage as he came to us, stooping to help a coughing Corvus from the asphalt.

"Fan out," he bellowed to the Saints at his back. "Clean this mess up. Bring me any still breathing."

“Son,” he said, giving Corvus a slight shake. He gripped Corvus by the face, forcing his eldest son to look at him. “Look at me.”

Corvus’ blinked, coming back to himself with a grimace. He jerked out of Diesel’s hard grip to spit blood onto the ground.

“Hey,” Diesel said, slapping his cheek. “Look at me.”

Diesel checked his eyes before judging the rest of him. “Are you hit?”

He lifted the hem of Corvus’ t-shirt, checking for injury, his gaze snagging on me. On the dark red staining the front of my jeans. “Christ, Grey,” he cursed, releasing Corvus to push my jacket out of the way and assess my wound.

“The fuck did you do that for?” Rook growled as he stalked closer. “I had it.”

But when he saw Dies’ face and Corvus’ distant gaze and beaten body, he stopped talking, his gaze fixing on Ava Jade instead, assessing her.

“Good, Bro?” Rook asked, slapping Corvus on the back, making him cough again.

“Yeah,” Corvus said, his voice garbled as he tugged away from Ava Jade’s helping hands, standing on his own. “Good.”

“Get me a fucking kit,” Diesel hissed at no one in particular, pushing hard against the wound to my side, making air rush in through my clenched teeth.

“Fuck.”

“Rook, get over here,” Diesel demanded, and Rook came around. “Hold this.”

Rook knelt in front of me and pushed the wadded up fabric against my wound as Diesel accepted a first aid kit from Pinkie and used his teeth to tear open a plastic bag. I bit down as he knocked Rook’s hand out of the way and began packing the wound with clotting powder. Once he was finished, he looked up at me. “Good?”

I nodded. “Good.”

Rook stood, and Diesel cursed. “*Rook.*” He seethed, limping to grip the back of Rook’s jacket and tear it clean from his back. Two bullet wounds, one to his thigh and another to the dangerous area between his neck and shoulder seeped steadily. “Were you just not going to fucking say anything?”

“I’m good.”

“Like fuck,” Diesel said, muttering curses to himself as he grabbed more clotting powder, stuffing it into Rook’s wounds angrily.

“And you?” he asked, turning to Ava Jade with another bag of powder clutched between his fingers. “Are you hit?”

Ava Jade shook her head.

“I could use some of that,” came a voice from behind us. Drake struggled over, clutching his biceps, his gun dangling uselessly from his fingers. “If you don’t mind.”

Diesel tossed him the baggy, and he caught it, dropping to a knee to pack his own wound.

I went to him, wincing as I reached out a hand to help him up when he was finished. He stood, tossing his light hair away from his eyes. I shook his hand. “Thank you,” I said earnestly, catching sight of another shadow behind Drake. Someone peeking out from behind the building on the next street up. Not fighting, just watching. Something about his posture, his shape, and height seemed familiar, but I couldn’t place it.

“Axel,” I shouted, since he was the nearest. I pointed and the shadow vanished. “*There*, one of those fuckers is hiding ’round the building.”

Drake took his hand from mine and air expelled in a gush from his lips as Ava Jade pulled him into a hard hug.

His hands hovered over her back awkwardly, like he wasn’t sure whether he should hug her back. Right now, I wouldn’t kill him for it. We owed him.

But before he could decide, AJ pulled away. “Thank you,” she said on a breath. “We owe you.”

Drake shook his head, a sad smile on his lips. “Nah,” he said. “You’re good, angel.”

AJ sighed, reaching out to twine her fingers with mine, unbothered that both of our hands were covered in blood.

“Got one,” someone shouted, leading an only mildly injured Ace out from the alley by his hair. Likely the sniper, trying to escape unnoticed.

Diesel took the motherfucker from Axel and threw him to the asphalt just as the rest of the people from inside of Sanctum’s underground began to pour out. The Kings looked on the carnage with a sort of awed surprise. The lawyers and bankers turned varying shades of green and red and white, but none could bring themselves to look away or leave.

This was what they came here for, after all. They wanted to see blood. Now, they could see what real death looked like. It wasn’t pretty. There wasn’t just blood staining these streets. Most men pissed themselves when they died and the smell of urine was just as strong in the air as the scents of blood and lead.

“Where’s Lenny?” Diesel asked, cocking his engraved Desert Eagle to press against the Ace’s temple.

The skinny fucker cringed away, but managed to keep from soiling himself.

“My father asked you a question,” Corvus growled, accepting a bottle of water from Pinkie to sip.

“Not here,” the guy said. “He only sent us. Said that it would be easy. That you’d all be here and we should pick you off as you exited.”

“*Coward.*”

“Where is Lenny now?” Diesel asked. “Where is the rest of your crew?”

The Ace lifted his hands higher, his fingers shaking like leaves in the wind. “I-I don’t know. I s-s-swear, man. They s-sent us and said they’d be right behind us.”

“You wouldn’t lie to me...” Diesel trailed off.

“N-no. No, man, *p-please*. I have family. I have a brother and—”

Diesel clocked him on the back of the head, just enough to stun him. “Shut the fuck up.”

The guy began to cry, and Diesel dragged him to his feet, hauling him by the back of his shirt toward Corvus. “*Apologize*,” Diesel demanded, and I recognized the manic gleam in his eyes. Diesel St. Crow rarely lost his control, but he liked to toe the line, and right now, he was fucking dancing on it.

“You fucking heard me, asshole!” Diesel shouted, shaking the Ace.

“S-sorry,” he choked out.

“Sorry, *what?*” Diesel prodded, and Corvus lifted his chin, waiting.

The Ace lifted his head to look Corvus in the eyes. “I-I’m sorry we tried to k-kill you.”

Diesel dragged him two feet to his left, placing him in front of me. “*Apologize*.”

My nose wrinkled at the smell of fresh urine, and I stepped back a step to avoid the growing puddle beneath the Ace’s feet.

“I-I’m so sorry,” the Ace said to me, his snot running down to his chin.

Diesel shoved the Ace away, making him fall to his knees in his own urine in front of Ava Jade and Rook.

“You aren’t finished,” Diesel roared, bending to grab a fistful of his hair to stop his whimpering, forcing him to look up at Rook and Ava Jade. Rook grinned down at him. AJ looked like she might carve his face into a jack-o-lantern and put it on her front porch.

“I’m sorry,” he cried. “I’m so, so, so sorry. Please. *Please*.”

Diesel let him go, and he slumped forward, fists against the pavement, shaking.

“Satisfied?” Diesel asked Corvus.

Corvus’ upper lip curled. “No.”

“Grey?” Diesel asked.

“Not in the slightest.”

“And you?” he asked Ava Jade.

She shook her head mutely.

“Rook? You satisfied?”

“Not yet,” Rook said with a wicked gleam in his eyes.

Diesel’s cheekbones flared, he nodded once, lifted his gun again and emptied the clip into the Ace’s skull to a riot of screams from the fine citizens of Thorn Valley watching at his back.

CHAPTER

Nineteen

AVA JADE

“WHY ARE we even doing this? It’s fucking ridiculous,” I said, kicking Corvus’ shoes out of his reach to keep him from putting them on.

He glared at me from the one eye he could see out of, the other one was completely swollen shut, and snatched his shoes from the floor.

“Because we said we would,” he groaned, falling heavily onto the small stool in the hallway of The Nest, and I could tell it pained him to reach down to pull the shoes onto his feet. The five stitches in his cheek strained as he grimaced. He had two cracked ribs and some internal bleeding, but even battered as he was, I knew he wouldn’t accept my help no matter how many times I offered.

And I *had* offered. Many times. After I’d laid into his dumb ass for trying to sacrifice himself Thursday night. What the actual fuck was that? I didn’t know how I felt about it other than angry as fuck.

No one had ever put my life above theirs.

“Besides,” Rook said, coming through the hall to kick his feet into his boots like the bullet hole in his leg didn’t bother him at all. “Corvus won’t be cooking jack shit with his gimp ass, and I’m hungry.”

“Dick,” Corvus hissed and Rook made a face at him, stepping out of the way for Grey to come through to get his

shoes on as well.

“Dies doesn’t want us here, anyway,” he added. “It’s too secluded. He knows where we’re going and said it’s a good idea.”

I really wasn’t going to get out of this, was I?

Fuck.

“We should be scouring every inch of Edgewood for those fuckers before they have a chance to regroup,” I argued. “Just because the Aces *seem* to have gone to ground doesn’t mean they aren’t just biding their time. What if they make a move on Diesel? Is *he* all alone at his place?”

Corvus lifted a brow at me. “You think he’s an idiot?” he asked. “Of course not. They’re all at Sanctum with their families. Dies is keeping them all under lock and key until Lenny Ace is a fucking corpse.”

I frowned.

I hadn’t known that, but they still didn’t share everything with me. I didn’t think they kept it from me on purpose, they just didn’t think I needed to know.

And maybe I didn’t.

I wasn’t sure I liked the difference in how I was feeling about Diesel St. Crow. The way he’d gone straight to his sons, tended to their wounds. The vicious way he’d forced that Ace to apologize before pumping lead into his skull. And now he was keeping not only his men, but all of their families safe at Sanctum?

He also had that street cleaned up within hours of the battle, the only trace of evidence that it happened at all: the bits of blood lingering between cracks in the pavement. I didn’t have to wonder why the cops never showed up. Before we’d all gone back inside to sew up our wounds, Diesel had passed all his winnings from the match to Pinkie.

“Go pay our friends in blue,” he’d said, expression tight from the loss of winnings.

“I don’t want to go,” I tried instead, switching tactics, rolling my shoulder, feigning injury from the sniper rifle practice session this morning. I forced an overdone wince. “I changed my mind.”

“Too bad,” Corvus said gruffly as he pushed to his feet. “Get your ass in the car.”

I crossed my arms over my chest, and Corvus’ brows drew as he caught sight of the blade strapped to my ankle. “How armed do you have to be to have dinner with your aunt, Sparrow?”

My jaw clenched. “As armed as I need to be to go into battle with a rival gang.”

He caught my meaning. The fact that I had every one of my blades back where they belonged and at the ready had nothing to do with my aunt and everything to do with the fact that there could be an ambush of Aces waiting for us anywhere.

Though I doubted they would strike while it was still daylight.

“They’re gone,” Grey said, speaking aloud what all of us were thinking. “We exterminated over half their crew. They’re hiding, licking their wounds somewhere. They won’t be back for a while, if they ever come back.”

Corvus nodded his agreement. “All our sources say there’s been no gang presence in Edgewood since Thursday night. Lenny’s Hail Mary failed. He won’t risk his own ass to try some shit like that again.”

“Maybe not,” I acceded. “But they could just as easily ally with another gang as we did.”

“Who would ally with them now?” Rook asked, making no effort to disguise how idiotic he thought my statement was.

I rolled my eyes at him.

“You know what, never mind. Just tell me you’re all armed.”

Rook opened his jacket, showing the sleek mahogany grip of his gun hooking from the top of his jeans. Grey lifted the back of his jacket, showing me his piece and the hem of his jeans, flashing me a row of mags strapped there.

I looked to Corvus.

He sighed. “Don’t worry, Sparrow. I’m armed.”

“Fine,” I said in a huff. “Then let’s go sit around a table and say what we’re grateful for. Sounds like fun.”

Grey chuckled, and I sent him a deadpan stare, telling him without the need for words just how *not* funny I thought this was.

It’d only been two days since fight night. Our bruises were at their darkest. Our cuts were puckered black scabs. The hollows beneath our eyes were deep and the most vivid shade of purple they could be.

We were liable to give my aunt a goddamned heart attack just showing our faces at the door.

“We were in a car accident,” I decided. “No one was hurt beyond cuts and bruises, which is why we didn’t go to the ER.”

“Don’t fucking smirk at me,” I told Rook. “You’re going to regret going to this dinner by the time the night is through. I promise you that.”



MY AUNT’S disgusting mansion loomed around a bend in the freshly cobblestoned road ahead, seen through the heavy iron bars of her front gates.

Grey drove us up to the intercom panel and reached out to jab the button. It crackled before a male voice came through. “Can I help you?”

“Yeah,” Grey said, leaning down so the tiny camera could see his face. He flashed a smile. “Could you please let Mrs. Humphrey know that her niece has arrived for dinner.”

A pause.

“Y-yes. Certainly. Please do come in.”

The groan of a mechanical pulley system swelled in the tepid silence. The nearest neighbor was over a mile away and here, on the grounds of the Humphrey Estate, only birdsong and the distant sounds of the water fountains in the garden could be heard.

The amount of privilege and excess behind these gates was enough to make me want to vomit.

Grey drove us through, steering the Rover up the drive to the front door.

“It’s not too late to turn back,” I blurted, putting my hand over Rook’s in the backseat to stop him from opening his door.

His face lit up. “Honestly, the fact that you don’t want us to go inside so badly just makes me want to go in even more, Ghost.”

I growled, letting him go as I pushed out my own door, hating how Corvus almost lost his footing as he stepped out. He gave me a cautionary look as he shut his door, trying to gauge if I’d seen. If I would tell the others he wasn’t ready to be walking around yet.

My nostrils flared, but instead of calling him out, I looped my arm through his. “You’re an idiot,” I muttered, trying to covertly take some of his weight as we ascended the wide ivory staircase to the massive wooden front door.

Corvus scoffed in reply but didn’t pull away.

The door opened before Rook could even curl his pinkie finger around the knocker, my aunt standing there in her grand foyer, cheeks pink from too much rouge.

“There’s my niece,” she trailed off, her wide, welcoming arms dropping as she got a better look at us. Red painted nails flying to her chest to ward off the start of the heart attack I’d warned my Crows about.

“Oh dear,” she said. “What happened?”

“Car accident,” I supplied, seeing a playful gleam in Rook’s eyes I didn’t like. “It looks worse than it is.”

“You should’ve called,” my aunt said, tutting as she ushered us through the door. “Come in, *come in*. Let’s get you in out of this heat.” She snapped her fingers and the butler, who’s name I’d forgotten, rushed in. “Jackson, will you get ice waters for everyone?”

“Right away, ma’am,” Jackson said, bowing, his dark hair not moving at all through the movement, held hard to his head like a helmet with too much gel.

“Could I get something stronger?” Rook asked, making the butler pause. Clutching his shoulder as though it was causing him a great amount of pain. “The damned doctor wouldn’t give me anything for the pain. It’s almost unbearable.”

The butler, Jackson, looked to my aunt for guidance and she looked at Rook, assessing his suddenly drawn face. She gave Jackson a nod. “All right, dear,” she said to Rook, going over to pat him on his opposite shoulder. “Would you like some Vicodin?”

Rook perked up.

“No,” Corvus said for him. “Just a drink to take the edge off will be great, ma’am.”

My aunt gave Corvus a tight smile. “All right, well, I suppose there’s no sense in pretending eighteen-year-olds don’t drink these days.” She turned, hollering down the hall after Jackson. “Bring up a bottle of my late husband’s best, Jackson. And a few extra glasses.”

His muted voice called back that he’d heard, and Rook fought to hide a smile.

When I caught his eye, I shook my head at him, and he winked.

“Smells delicious,” Grey offered, indicating the aroma filling the room. Far off, I could hear the clatter of cookware from the staff kitchen and wondered how many staff she’d hired just to make a fucking dinner for five.

The fact that Dad and I were living in a run-down trailer for most of my life, with barely enough hot water to shower, while his sister had been living *like this* just a couple towns over made me feel so ill I had to swallow back the taste of bile in my throat. Had to remind myself that it was my dad's *choice* to distance himself from his sister.

To not take her strings-attached handouts.

He was prideful and stubborn, but I didn't fault him for denying her. Wouldn't I have done the same thing on principle alone?

Besides, it wasn't even her money. It was her dead husband's.

My dad's favorite theory was that she'd poisoned him to an early grave, but I couldn't see it. The woman standing before us in a long silvery sheath of a dress with outdated blingy combs tucked in her ratty gray-brown hair wasn't capable of murder. Not even a coward's murder.

She didn't even look like she could tie her own damned shoes. If anything, I pitied her. Alone out here surrounded by stuffed dead things and priceless art and a butler who pretty obviously loathed her.

"The staff has been cooking all day," my aunt said, looking over our outfits now that she'd gotten used to the sight of our bruises. She smiled at each of my guys in turn, over-appreciative gaze finding tailored pants and brand name suit jackets left to hang open over crisp shirts. I had to admit they cleaned up *good*.

But they all grimed up good, so I wasn't surprised. I liked them just as well covered in blood and leather as I did in the clean cut styles they wore now. Maybe more so.

Definitely more so.

My aunt's smile turned into a frown as her milky eyes tracked over my attire, finding me in a thrifted skirt, black converse, and a tank top covered over in a soft black cardigan. That one wasn't thrifted, it was *lifted* from the racks at Nordstrom and felt like real cashmere. It was the nicest thing I

owned, but she sneered at it as if I was wearing the skin of a dead goat.

“Ava Jade, dear, would you be more comfortable in a dress? I took the liberty of purchasing a few. They’re upstairs in the spare bedroom if you’d like to—”

“I’m good.”

“AJ, don’t be rude,” Grey said, and I slowly craned my neck, leveling the full weight of my fury on him, but it only served to make him even more triumphant. The fucker. “She’d love to change.”

“No, I wouldn’t.”

Grey pouted, and I rolled my eyes.

Now was not the time for playing. We shouldn’t even *be here*. Goddammit.

“Come on, Ghost,” Rook said. “I’ll help you into your dress.”

He extended a hand to me, and my aunt gasped. It was her dismay that ultimately made me take his hand, slapping my fingers down onto his palm.

“H-how...how kind of your friend,” My aunt stumbled over her words just as Jackson re-entered the grand foyer with a tray containing a crystal decanter of amber liquid and five partially filled glasses.

Rook stopped before the bottom stair and reached over, snatching two glasses with his index and middle finger. “Cheers,” he said, winking at Jackson, who blanched.

Despite myself, my anger was fading fast, and I felt a traitorous grin worming onto my lips.

At least if the Aces somehow tracked us here, we’d have a veritable fortress to protect us. I knew for a fact my aunt had invested in a crazy system that locked down the entire place with metal shutters.

Silver lining.

I let Rook lead me the rest of the way upstairs while my aunt led Grey and Corvus through the dining room, not making them remove their shoes, which I remembered had been a *strict* rule for me during the one night I lasted in this fucking place.

“Thought it was Thanksgiving, not Easter,” Rook said, squinting at a small collection of Fabergé eggs.

“Those aren’t Easter eggs,” I said, tugging him away from them before he could grab the closest one. “They’re Fabergé eggs. Her husband gave her one every year they were married.”

“Why?”

“Why do rich people do anything that they do?”

He frowned, shrugging.

“They’re worth something like ten grand a piece, for the smaller ones.”

“Those fucking eggs?”

I nodded.

“Fucking rich people.”

“Fucking rich people,” I echoed, indicating the door down the hall.

He pushed through, and the wafting odor of fresh potpourri made both of us recoil.

“Ugh.”

Rook quickly grabbed the bowl of it from the low table just inside the door, dropping the amber liquid in its place. He crossed the room, opened the window, and tossed it outside.

I suppressed a giggle, seeing his eyes watering at the smell.

“I’m going to be honest, Ghost, I was planning to rip your clothes off the second we got into this room but…” He made a face, shutting the window again.

“What? My dark prince can’t handle a bit of shitty potpourri? Who would’ve known that was your Kryptonite.”

He narrowed his dark eyes on me, closing the gap between us in two long strides. He reached forward and grabbed my shirt, dragging me to him before tearing it into two pieces, the torn shreds catching on my arms as he ripped it off. My cunt throbbed, panties dampening at the heat in his stare.

“That was my nicest sweater.”

“Not anymore.”

“Oh!” Jackson exclaimed, appearing and then disappearing from the entrance to the room. He hovered just out of view, and I sagged, taking up one of the cups from the side table as the butler mumbled his apologies.

“I’m sorry, miss. Your aunt asked me to come and get you. She has a surprise for you and asked that you meet her and your friends in the sitting room. Again, so sorry, miss.”

Rook loomed over me, licking his lips as he reached past me for the other glass, clinking it against mine. “You heard the man, get dressed, Ghost. Your aunt has a *surprise* for you.”

I frowned, balking at his six foot frame, aching to have his tatted hands on my body. “Are you serious?”

His dark gaze flicked down to my pebbled nipples, and he let out a small growl before stepping away. “Deadly. Can’t keep the woman waiting, Ghost. I can rip off your dress, too. Later.”

I rolled my eyes but went to the closet, my greedy little cunt still pulsating beneath my skirt. Injured or not, I’d make him pay for this later.

“You’ve got to be shitting me,” I groaned, looking at the three dress options hanging inside the mothball scented walk-in. Each one worse than the one next to it.

Dear god.



“COME ON, GHOST,” Rook was saying, a teasing tone coaxing me the rest of the way down the hall toward the low sound of conversation in the sitting room. “Let’s go show your aunt how sexy you look.”

“Rook, I look like a fucking peacock.”

He pouted. “But such a cute little peacock.”

I punched him in the arm, the one near his gun-wound, and he moaned at the pain, making me groan in response.

Whoever made this atrocity of a dress really had some fucking balls. I damn near came down in my bra and half torn shirt to keep from wearing any of the options my aunt had chosen. But Rook somehow managed to reverse psychology me into the least atrocious of the options. A fitted peacock green and purple bodice sloped down to a full skirt that ended just below my knees with little strings hanging from the hem that obnoxiously tickled my legs.

And clearly Aunt Humphrey hadn’t thought to find shoes to match this fucking hideous dressed, so it looked all the worse from being worn with the black converse shoes I came in with.

Fuck it.

I stomped through to the sitting room, eyes turned up to a spot on the wall over all of their heads. “Go ahead, get it out of your system,” I announced, waiting for the inevitable laughter, but it didn’t come.

Aside from a rough cough from Corvus and a red-face from Grey, neither spoke.

“Oh, it looks darling!” my aunt said. “Wish I’d have thought to get the matching shoes. How marvelous. It’ll be perfect for the surprise.”

I pinched my brow, going to the tray of expensive bourbon to pour myself another glass and sink onto the low tufted sofa between Corvus and Grey, while Rook planted himself next to the alcohol.

“Is dinner ready?” I asked, drinking greedily from my glass. She didn’t know me very well, but she knew I didn’t like surprises.

“Patience.” She tutted, looking into the bottom of her empty glass.

Rook, noticing, quickly snatched up the decanter and crossed the Persian carpet to her side, taking the glass from her fingers. “Allow me,” he said, his voice smooth as silk.

“Oh!”

Rook filled the glass.

“Oh my, stop dear, that’s far too much.”

Rook gave her a devilish grin, and she fucking blushed at him. “Too much?” he shook his head. “You look like a woman who can handle her liquor, am I right?”

Her eyes widened, and Rook clinked the empty decanter against her nearly full glass.

“Garçon!” he called in no direction in particular. “We need a refill.”

“Rook,” Corvus warned, but Rook only flashed a set of straight white teeth at his brother and settled back down onto the sofa with his glass, lifting a leg to rest his ankle on his knee, so at ease I was actually sort of jealous of him.

Jackson entered from the foyer a moment later, hands clasped behind his back.

“Refill,” Rook repeated, looking at the butler like he was daft, stretching out his neck like he could see if the butler was hiding the liquor behind his back.

“Right away, sir,” Jackson replied, turning his attention to my aunt. “She’s here, ma’am. Shall I send her in?”

My aunt got unsteadily to her feet, setting her over-filled bourbon down on the table to straighten her dress. Clearly she did *not* know how to handle her liquor.

“Yes, yes. I’ll see her through.”

“Who else did you invite?” I asked, something uncomfortable tightening in my belly.

She barely spared me a second glance as she followed Jackson from the room. “You’ll see, Ava Jade. It’s a surprise.”

Heat flooded through my stomach, flashing over my chest until it was damp. Until the heat turned cold.

My stomach turned.

“We shouldn’t have come,” I said, barely recognizing the sound of my own voice because I was hearing *her* voice down the hall. Muted and distant and barely there, but even after all these years, I would know it anywhere.

“Sparrow?” Corvus asked, sitting up now. “What is it?”

My mouth went dry.

Aunt Humphrey came back through the entry to the sitting room, a wide smile beaming on her ashen face.

My mother followed behind her.

CHAPTER

Twenty

ROOK

AVA JADE LAUNCHED to her feet, her breaths long and heavy as she watched the woman follow her aunt into the living room.

I didn't like the look on my Ghost's face. She didn't like this.

She was... she was fucking panicking.

"Who the fuck are you?" I asked, putting myself between the woman and my Ghost.

"Oh!" Ava Jade's aunt exclaimed, her hand flying to her mouth, but I couldn't be bothered to play nice anymore, not until I knew exactly *what* had just walked into the room.

"Sparrow, who is this?" Corvus asked, a vein in his temple throbbing as he made himself stand, too. Grey watched the woman, and I got the sense he already knew who she was. His expression was dark, and I didn't like it. My fingers twitched toward my gun, and maybe I shouldn't have had that last bourbon because it roiled in my stomach now like a poison.

"Her mother," Grey said for Ava Jade. "Right?" he asked her.

The woman clasped her hands in front of her, lowering her head.

And I could see it now.

Even though this woman looked like she'd been fed through a fucking wood planer, there were similarities. The

long, dark hair, hers shot through with silver, coarse. The light colored eyes, her mother's bloodshot and surrounded in hollow flesh. The frame... it was hard to tell beneath the clothes hanging from her body, but it looked like Ava Jade's mother might've once had curves much like her daughter's. But drugs had eaten the meat right off her bones.

I knew the look of her better than anyone else could. She was strung out. Probably just coming down from a weeklong bender. Her shoulders were hunched. Her fingertips shaking. A slight twitch to her right shoulder.

She was trying to hide it, but even the expert makeup she'd hastily applied to her face couldn't hide the truth.

This woman was an addict, and my Ghost did *not* seem happy to see her.

It was enough for me.

"What are you doing here?" Ava Jade asked, her voice abrasive as she stared at her mother.

"I... I heard you were staying with—"

"*Oh,*" Ava Jade interrupted, smacking an open palm to her forehead like she was the idiot here. "I get it," she said with a poisonous smile. "*You heard that dear ol' Aunt Humphrey took me in after Dad was murdered and you thought wow, what a great opportunity to wring some cash out of the old hag. How far off am I?*"

"Ava Jade!" her aunt exclaimed, turning to the woman. "I'm so sorry, Valerie. I don't know what's gotten into her."

"Violet, would you give me a moment alone with my daughter?"

Ghost's aunt hesitated but left like she was asked.

Valerie turned her attention to the three of us, but none of us budged. At least the bitch was smart enough to know not to even bother asking. We weren't leaving.

"What is it this year, Ma?" Ava Jade demanded, taking two purposeful steps forward, making her mother cringe. "Blow? Smack? Fucking meth? How long since your last fix?"

Valerie lifted her chin, staring her daughter in the eyes, chin quivering. “I’m clean, baby,” she said, and Ava Jade looked like she was going to vomit. “I came tonight because your aunt invited me. I wanted to see you. I wanted to... to apologize for—”

“Oh, Jesus fucking Christ,” Ava Jade said, throwing up her hands. “We’re out of here.”

“*Please,*” Valerie pleaded, and when she made to step closer to Ava Jade, I intercepted her, holding out a palm to stop her. I shook my head. *No.*

That was far enough.

Valerie looked between me and Ava Jade, clearly distraught, but not for the reasons she wanted Ava Jade to think she was.

“It’s part of my recovery, baby. I need to apologize for the things the drugs made me do. I should’ve never...”

She stopped, unable to continue, and I felt my darkness rising like smoke through my veins.

What the fuck did this bitch do to my Ghost?

I shoved her back a step, and she put a fearful hand to the place where I’d touched her, cowering back.

“It’s fine, Rook,” Ava Jade said in a deadpan voice. “She can’t ever hurt me again. If she tries, I’ll fucking end her.”

Valerie’s throat bobbed.

“I really am clean, Ava Jade. I’m... I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to ruin your Thanksgiving.”

Enough.

Before Valerie could turn away like the kicked dog she was pretending to be, I lifted the purse from her shoulder and upturned it on the carpet, shaking out all its contents.

Valerie shrieked.

I kicked around the lipstick tubes, dollar bills, and *panties* that were now dotting the Persian carpet, but didn’t find what I

was looking for.

I stuffed my hand into the purse, checking the other pockets and the zippered closure, but they were all empty. I thrust the purse back at Valerie, finding Ava Jade staring at me. “It’s clean,” I announced with a shrug. My Ghost didn’t seem upset though, a deep understanding was all I saw in her eyes.

She knew I suspected her mother wasn’t clean, and she trusted me. But the purse devoid of drugs or any drug paraphernalia begged to differ.

“You want to go, AJ?” Grey asked, settling a gentle hand on Ava Jade’s back as her mother dropped to her knees to collect her things back into her purse.

Humphrey returned, glowering at the scene.

“How dare you, Ava Jade, that is *your mother*. She’s been in rehab for *months*. I thought you’d be glad to see her.”

Humphrey helped the woman to her feet, whispering reassurances in her ear.

Ava Jade seethed quietly, watching her aunt and mother with a mix of dark and painful things glittering in her eyes.

“I don’t believe that for one second,” Ava Jade said. “She’s here to fleece you, Aunt Humphrey. Go ahead and call the rehab center she *claims* to have attended. I doubt they’ve ever heard of her.”

That struck a nerve with Valerie.

She pulled away from Ava Jade’s aunt and spat onto the carpet, her expression quickly changing from practiced weakness to the sort of deranged mania that only an addict could bring to the surface. “You always were a little bitch!”

“Valerie!” Humphrey exclaimed.

“Oh, don’t act so surprised,” Ava Jade slung at her aunt. “You *know* what she did to me and you still let her come here? You’re just as bad as she is.”

“I can’t stand for this,” Humphrey said, lengthening her spine, lifting her chin. “I must ask you *all* to leave. I never should have taken you in, you vile, *vile* girl. I should’ve known you’d turn out just as rotten as your father.”

Ghost’s eyes flashed with malice.

“When those men came here looking for money, I thought it was an opportunity to save you, but I can see now you don’t want to be saved.”

“What?” Ava Jade hissed, and I could see her pulse racing in her veins from here, could almost hear it. Taste it. Like when she was fighting in the ring, my Ghost *radiated* violence. My darkness was ready to go to war with hers.

“*What?*” Ava Jade repeated, showing her teeth. “What men?”

“Those awful gangsters. They said they’d kill him if I didn’t pay what he owed but I don’t negotiate with *criminals*.” She folded her arms over her chest.

Ava Jade snapped.

She took out a blade and closed the gap between herself and her aunt in a flash, not even I was fast enough to stop her. Though, I didn’t want to.

I watched, enraptured as Ava Jade held a blade to her aunt’s hanging throat. “You fucking monster. You could’ve saved him!” her voice broke.

Grey and Corvus stood next to me now, watching as our queen exacted the justice she deserved. She didn’t need our help here, as much as I would’ve *loved* to have a piece of it.

Valerie finished with her purse, dragging her skinny ass from the floor to leave. She was muttering something to herself, her words all jumbled together, spoken with too much saliva in her mouth.

“Never should have listened to that guy. Stupid motherfucker. Why did I listen to him?”

I reached to grab her, wanting to know what the fuck she was talking about. *Who* she was talking about. She stabbed

something into my forearm and I hissed, drawing back, giving the cunt the perfect opportunity to grab my Ghost by the hair. Prying her from her aunt with a screech.

Ava Jade grunted as she jerked free, spinning on her heel like a dancer, her blade held out in a dangerous arc. Her mother managed to save herself from a certain death, falling backward just in time. The blade skated across her mother's throat, just enough to kiss the flesh there, to make bright red bloom over the pale skin. Not enough to kill her.

But there was still time.

“Oh my god,” Ava Jade breathed, and I found her staring at me, all the frenzied rage in her eyes gone, replaced with a horror I didn't understand.

Until I felt it. The rush of euphoria taking over so swiftly I couldn't feel my legs under me. Couldn't feel my face. But I could see the needle now, stuck in my arm, the plunger pushed all the way down. I shut my eyes, grinning as the heroin shot through my blood, erasing all the dark.

“Rook!”

CHAPTER

Twenty-One

AVA JADE

I UNLOCKED THE DOOR, and we pushed through into my apartment at Briar Hall. I held it open, ushering the guys in. Rook was held up with his arms between the shoulders of the others, looking not the least bit bothered about a damn thing.

“Do we need naloxone?” I asked, unsure what to do, my heart thundering in my chest as they laid Rook down on the couch and his head lolled to one side, a loose smile attempting to twitch up at the edges of his mouth. “I-I think they have some down in the nurse’s office.”

Grey knelt next to Rook, checking his pulse, his temp, and lifting his eyelids to check pupil dilation and light response. “He’s going to be fine. *Fuck*. Why didn’t we see this coming?”

He stood, swiping a palm over his face.

It was bad enough having to see my mother’s face after all this time—bad enough to find out that my aunt could’ve prevented my father’s death, but this?

This was a whole other level of bullshit to deal with.

Those cunts were just lucky my priority was Rook after we saw the syringe in his arm or I would’ve shoved their heads up each other’s asses. I still might.

As it was, I hoped the nasty cut I’d sliced into my mother’s neck got infected and she died of sepsis. I wasn’t sure what kind of monster that made me, and I didn’t care. I *knew* she

hadn't changed, but for a second, *just a second*, she almost had me.

If it weren't for the suspicion in Rook's eyes, I might've bought it.

And now look at him.

I felt sick.

"This is bad," Corvus said, perching on the edge of the coffee table facing Rook. "He's been clean for almost two years."

I knew only a little of Rook's past, and I wasn't surprised he'd found solace in drugs. I didn't judge him for it even though I could've, but that was probably because he'd done the work. He'd gotten clean. He didn't let the drugs consume him, turn him into something else. But heroin?

"He was addicted to smack?" I asked, confused.

Corvus shook his head. "Blow. Doesn't matter though, this high could destroy all his work."

"We can't let that happen," Grey gritted out, starting to pace the floor. I hated how his pain was pinching his face.

"We won't," I assured Grey. "We'll lock him up if we have to."

Corvus' head snapped up. "We tried that once," he said. "Not a good fucking idea."

"*Urghhh*," I growled, wanting to rip the hair out of my head. "I just want to go back there and... and..."

"They aren't worth it," Corvus said. "But if you want them dead, just say the word, and we'll make it happen. You don't have to be the one to do it."

The monotone way he made the offer made me pause. He wasn't joking in the slightest. The promise was there in his eyes, clear as a brand new day. He'd wipe them from the face of this earth. All I needed to do was say the word.

"Don't decide now," he added. "Think about it. If you'd rather do it yourself then fine."

There was no third option. Corvus wasn't going to let what my mother did to his brother go unpunished, but I knew he wouldn't kill her unless I gave him the green light. He'd hurt her, though, I could see it in the beast pacing behind his icy blue eyes. It wasn't like she didn't deserve it, but...

"I think I have a better idea," I found myself saying, but right now, revenge wasn't the priority. They'd get what was coming to them. *Both* of them.

Corvus nodded without asking anything else as Rook began to gag.

Grey rushed to the kitchen, ransacking through the cupboards. He came rushing back with a silver handled pot and held it next to the couch as he guided Rook over it, holding him up by the shoulder as he vomited into the pot.

My throat burned.

I didn't like this.

Rook was supposed to be invincible.

And I realized in that moment that I'd been counting on him as the one person who wouldn't leave me. By choice or otherwise. Because I'd believed him to be something he wasn't. Immortal. Immune to the things that could send mere mortals to their knees.

But no one was immortal. Not even Rook.

I wished I could unsee all of it.

He vomited again, and I felt bile rise in my own throat.

A key turned in the lock to the front door, and I was so out of it that I didn't even reach for a blade as it swung open.

Corvus did, though, he launched over the couch, stepping in front of me, his gun raised.

Becca screamed, dropping into a crouch to cover her head with her arms.

Becca.

Corvus lowered his gun, all his air rushing from his lungs in a hard pant. “Fuck, Becca.”

“Becca?” Grey asked.

I struggled to believe what I was seeing, blinking and swallowing past the bile to see her more clearly. She shakily pushed back to her feet, a small carry-on suitcase resting on the tile behind her. Dressed in leather leggings and a flowy printed top, she looked amazing. A heavy contrast to the peacock I was still wearing. The mixed emotions tangling behind my breastbone were almost too much for me to handle right now.

I didn’t want to see her.

I was so fucking glad to see her.

“Becks?”

She was still struggling to catch her breath. “Hey, babe,” she said, her voice pitched high, looking tentatively deeper into the apartment. She swallowed. “Bad time?”

Unable to stop myself, I pushed past Corvus and went to her, wrapping my arms around her, holding my breath to stop the sudden *ridiculous* urge to cry. “Shit, girl,” she muttered, put off balance in her heels before she wrapped her arms around me too, hugging me tightly. “Are you okay?”

She rubbed my back. “Honestly, I expected you to kick my ass out,” she muttered into my hair, her voice watery.

Maybe I should’ve, but it was too late now. She couldn’t go anywhere unless it was on another airplane with a Saint escort.

“What’s going on, babe? And what are you wearing, it’s tragic as fuck.”

Behind us, Rook vomited again, and she stiffened, pulling back, taking her essential oil perfume scent with her. Fuck, I’d missed that smell.

“Um, who’s sick?” she asked.

“Rook,” Corvus replied, stepping past us to drag Becca’s suitcase into the apartment and shut the door behind her, locking it. She eyed his tailored blazer jacket with a raised brow, but made no comment.

“You’re a fucking idiot,” I told her, wiping the back of my nose over the sleeve of the dress.

She recoiled as though stung but then nodded, a tight smile on her lips. “Think we kind of already established that, but I did say I was sorry, like, a million times.”

I shook my head. “No. I mean, you’re an idiot for coming back here, Becks. Your guy is still on the loose somewhere, and you’re the only person who can ID him.”

“Yeah and apparently an all-out gang war happening on the streets of Thorn Valley,” she added for me, indicating the bruise and cut on my face. I frowned at her.

She shrugged. “Daddy said not to come home because it wasn’t safe. He said there was a whole ass gang fight in the streets and a bunch of people died and you weren’t answering texts, so...”

“So, he said not to come back because there’s a literal *war* going on so you... what? Hopped the first flight home?”

She rolled her eyes. “Look. This mess is as much my fault as it is anyone else’s. If I can help or at least just be here for you, then that’s what I’m going to do. You’re my best girl, Aves. I couldn’t stay there, knowing you were here dealing with all this shit alone.”

I snorted. “Well, not alone.”

She eyed Corvus. “Not the same,” she said, and she was right. It wasn’t the same.

They meant something different to me than Becca did, and I didn’t realize how much I needed her here.

Had no idea that despite trying to hold onto my anger, I’d already forgiven her.

The bitch. I fucking loved her.

Rook had been right about that, too.

“You’re still an idiot,” I told her. “Now I’m stuck babysitting your ass.”

Becca winced, but I just shook my head at her. “It’s okay. I’m glad you’re here.”

“Glad someone is,” she muttered, her gaze jerking from me to Corvus and back again before she cleared her throat and sighed. “Good. Now, what can I do to help?”

Becca took the handle of her suitcase and rolled it further into the apartment, her nose turning up at the smell of vomit on the air. “God, what did he eat?”

Corvus’ haughty stare followed her, his jaw muscles flaring as he clenched his teeth. I grabbed the arm of his jacket and pulled it hard. “You don’t have to forgive her, but don’t be a dick,” I whispered.

He pursed his lips but nodded.

Becca gasped, and the suitcase dropped to the hardwood as she caught sight of Rook for the first time. “Holy fuck,” she said. “What happened to him?”

“He’s been drugged,” I said, going around to the other side of the couch as Grey helped ease Rook back down onto the cushions.

“Can you grab me a cloth?” he asked, but before I could go for one, Becca was already rushing through to the kitchen, running a kitchen towel under the hot water. She came with it and knelt next to Grey and Rook, lifting the cloth to wipe away the bits of vomit stuck to his chin.

Grey watched her with narrowed eyes for a moment before holding out his hand for the towel. “I got this,” he said, and she dipped her head, getting uncertainly to her feet to pass it to him so he could finish the job she’d started.

She swallowed hard, tapping her wrists against her thighs. “So, uh, I’m just going to address the big fat fucking elephant in the room and say—”

“Becks, you don’t have to do this now.”

“I do. Just let me say it.”

I shut up, wrapping my arms around myself at a sudden chill in the room.

“I fucked up. Really bad. But I think you should know the reason why I thought I was doing the right thing. I mean, at first. And really only for a minute.”

“You were manipulated,” I corrected her. “*Used*. It’s—”

“No. It wasn’t just that. I *wanted* to hurt them. If it weren’t for the Saints, my mom might still be here. I blamed them even though she brought it on herself. She was only caught in the crossfire because she was cheating on my dad with a Saint.”

“*What?*” Corvus demanded. Clearly, he hadn’t known this and there was very little Corvus James didn’t know.

Becca nodded. “My mom never took my dad’s name. Her last name was Matthews. Eden Matthews. She was with Damien St. Vincent *before* he left to go start his gang chapter somewhere else. Her death was probably why he left.”

Recognition flashed in Corvus’ eyes, and I wondered what he knew about her. About what happened.

“I didn’t find out about the affair until a few years back. It just made me hate the gang even more,” Becca added, tucking a loose strand of her long straight hair back behind her ear.

I hadn’t known this, and a part of me ached for her, but another part of me wondered why she’d omitted this part. Though, I hadn’t exactly given her a chance to explain herself since all that shit went down.

Her brown eyes found mine, the apology clear there. “It wasn’t just *him* influencing me. I was angry, and I wanted someone to hurt for making me have to grow up without her. I was wrong. I didn’t know you guys, but when I *did* get to know you I knew I couldn’t go through with what he wanted me to do. Especially not after—when I knew it would hurt Ava Jade.”

“If you’re asking for us to forgive you...” Grey said, his tone harsh as he trailed off.

“I’m not,” Becca said. “But I wanted you to know why I agreed to help him. And ultimately, why I didn’t go through with it all. You can forgive me or damn me, but either way, if my girl will have me, I’m not going anywhere.”

I offered her a sad smile, and she returned it.

“I’m sorry about your mother,” Corvus said. “If it helps you to know it, Damien St. Vincent loved her. He was broken after she passed. And you’re right, it was the reason he left. Because he couldn’t stand living on these streets anymore, knowing that he would never see her on them again. At least, that’s what Diesel told us. It’s a common story. The women we love are taken from us. It’s dangerous business, falling in love with a Saint.”

A knot formed between Becca’s brows, and I could tell she was trying to rectify what Corvus had told her with the narrative she’d constructed in her own mind. She’d placed Damien St. Vincent in the villain’s role in her head, with a wicked devil tongue that seduced her mother ultimately to her death.

She shook her head, clearing it. “Well, that’s why I’m here. I’m not going to let the same thing happen to Ava Jade. Not if there’s anything I can do to stop it.”

Corvus nodded darkly. “And you would give your own life to save hers?”

It was a loaded fucking question.

“Corv,” I said, giving him a *what the fuck* look, but he didn’t retract his question, still waiting for Becca to reply.

Becca’s lips pulled down at the edges, but when she answered it was with a conviction I hadn’t seen in her up until now. “Yes. I would. She’s my family, and I owe her my life.”

Her words hit me like a fist to the chest, and a breath caught in my throat.

“You’re forgiven,” Corvus said. “But if you betray her again, I’ll gut you myself.”

She swallowed. “Um. Okay?”

“Grey?” Corvus hedged, waiting for his brother to weigh in.

Grey’s gaze landed on me briefly before he spoke. “You’re good,” he told Becca without looking at her.

She smiled, relieved and pressed her hands together as though giving thanks to god above. “Fuck. That’s so good to hear. I half thought you guys would be the ones to kill me if I came back so...”

She wipes the back of her palm across her forehead, laughing awkwardly. “Dodged a bullet here. Literally.”

The room fell silent, and I went to kneel next to Grey, brushing stray black strands of hair away from Rook’s face. Becca grabbed her suitcase, muttering something about going for a shower to give us some privacy.

“He’ll really be okay?” I asked again, the ashen tone of Rook’s skin making me think otherwise.

Grey took my hand, squeezing it. “Yeah. We’ll take shifts keeping an eye on him, but he’ll be just fine. We’re all going to be.”

I wish I believed him, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that things were only going to get worse.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Two

CORVUS

SPARROW SLEPT CURLED in a ball at the end of the couch where Rook was still passed out, their feet tangled together. I'd managed to convince her to go take a shower and change, but she'd refused food and sleep until exhaustion finally took her a few hours ago.

Grey was dozing in her bed and had been since he declared Rook completely out of the woods. Lucky bastard.

It'd been days since I'd slept more than a few minutes, maybe an hour, at a time. With the Ace's deadline crawling nearer and Ava Jade's stalker back on the scene, sleep wasn't a priority.

And now...

Now that the Aces had made their move and vanished. Now that the stalker seemed to have gone eerily silent. Every minute was important. Every second. I could sense the tension stretching around all of us, flexing, tightening.

Something was coming, and I needed to be ready when it did.

I sighed heavily, my stomach aching with a hollow hunger, throat dry.

My tired bones creaked as I stood, head spinning as I made my way to the kitchen on quiet, shuffling feet, holding the counter to steady myself as I searched for a glass.

I drained two glasses of water before going to the fridge, seeing two of it for a second before I was able to realign myself with a sharp bite to the inside of my cheek. There.

There, that was better.

I grabbed some kind of premade salad and lifted some dressing from the door, rifling through the cupboard for some sort of protein. I found a bag of slivered almonds and dumped it on top of the salad with a bit of dressing, leaning heavily against the counter to eat.

Sparrow lifted her head sleepily from the couch and then snapped her head in my direction, wincing as the whiplash from the quick movement seared down her neck. She rubbed out the ache, groaning softly.

I lifted my fork in a silent *good morning*. “Sorry. Needed some food.”

She pushed her sleep-mussed hair from her face and swiped a palm over the corner of her mouth, sitting up to check on Rook. She leaned over him, gently pressing the back of her hand to his forehead.

“He’s really warm,” she whispered.

I nodded.

“The fever is low. He’s out of the woods, Sparrow. Don’t worry.”

She peeled the throw blanket from her shoulders and got to her feet, her spine popping as she stretched. “Did you sleep?” she asked when she was finished, her body sagging as she padded into the kitchen, going for the espresso machine.

When I didn’t answer she stopped, peering over at me with a harsh gleam in her eyes. “Corvus, when was the last time you slept?”

I shrugged. “I got a few hours the other night.”

She narrowed her eyes at me, setting down the portafilter. “You’re lying.”

My jaw tightened.

Fuck.

It had always been my tell, and if I wasn't so damned tired, I'd have been able to keep from doing it.

"You *are* lying. Jesus, you look like garbage."

I lifted a brow, shoveling another bite of salad into my mouth. "Thanks, Sparrow. Really laying on the compliments this morning."

She rolled her eyes.

"Grey's been in there for hours, go and wake him up and sleep in my bed for a while. Unless Diesel needs us for something, we don't have anything we need to do today."

I kept eating without replying.

"Corvus," she pressed. "Did you hear me?"

I swallowed. "Yeah, I heard you, Sparrow, but there's no fucking way I could sleep in someone else's bed. I can barely sleep in my own."

She mulled that over. "Then we can all go back to the Nest. You need to sleep."

I set the salad back down on the counter, my stomach souring. The idea of shutting my eyes for even a minute was repulsive. It didn't matter that I could feel the exhaustion like heavy lead in my veins. It didn't matter that behind my ribcage, my heart felt like it was slogging through mud one minute and fluttering like a caged bird the next. And the voices...

I knew they weren't real.

Just audio hallucinations. Like before. Distant whispers like radio static that would only become clearer the longer I deprived myself of rest.

I knew now not to fear them. I knew they didn't mean I was crazy. Just tired.

But sleep wouldn't come. Not now. Not with all this shit going on. There was no point in trying.

“You aren’t even listening to me, are you?” Sparrow asked, her gaze darkening. “I’m warning you, Bones. I haven’t had my coffee yet. Don’t fuck with me.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose, a frustrated heat rolling off my back, but I couldn’t even fully feel that. My body not wanting to cooperate with connecting the proper neural pathways. “Look, Ava Jade, there’s no way I’m going to sleep right now so—”

“What if I sleep with you?”

“What?”

She shrugged, dipping her head to hide the slight flush in her cheeks. “Neither of us thought we were going to sleep that night I stayed at the Crow’s Nest with you. You fell asleep sitting up, and I wound up passed out in your fucking lap,” she laughed uneasily. “So, maybe we can recreate whatever weird shit happened to make us both able to sleep like babies.”

“So you can drool on me again?”

Her face scrunched up, and I felt a smile on my lips, tugging at the stitches in my cheek.

“If that’s what it takes,” she said, recovering with a grimace. “It’s, what...” she looked at the clock on the stove next to me. “Just past seven. So, I only slept for about three hours. I could use a power nap.”

She came over to me, leaning on the counter to look up at me through her lashes. “You’d be doing me a favor, really.”

“You’re relentless.”

“It’s why you love me.”

Something in my core tightened at her words, and I had to bite down on my own tongue to keep from saying *yes*.

She might’ve been joking, but looking down at her now, her face soft from sleep, eyes slitted, hair an absolute fucking mess, I knew it was far from a joke.

I loved her.

She cocked her head to the side, considering me. “What? Why are you looking at me like that?”

I wrapped an arm around her waist and drew her into my chest, laying a rough kiss to the top of her head. Maybe it was the exhaustion talking, but right then I’d probably do anything she asked me to. It was terrifying.

I surrendered to no one.

...apparently no one but her now.

I let out a shaky breath. “If Diesel doesn’t need us, then fine, Sparrow, I’ll take a power nap with you. I’ll try to.”

“Would you be opposed to sleeping pills?” she whispered into my chest. “Because I’m pretty sure Becca has—”

“No pills.”

She hesitated. “Okay.”

Becca’s door creaked open across the room and my Sparrow pulled away from me to see her friend exit her room, already dressed and ready for the day. I kept from smirking at her outfit. Fitted Lycra pants, combat boots that looked like they were from a designer label, a loose fitted tank top and ball cap that she’d pulled her long brown hair through in a tight ponytail. Not her usual attire. It looked like something Ava Jade would wear if she knew she might run into trouble.

“You make coffee yet?” Becca asked Ava Jade.

She shook her head.

“Good,” Becca said. “That’s my job.”

She hesitated before entering the kitchen, craning her neck to see Rook in the living room. “He’s still out?”

“Yeah,” I told her. “But he’s all right.”

The crease in her forehead made it seem as though she had been legitimately worried about him and maybe she was. I’d detected no lie in anything she’d told us last night. And anyone willing to lay down their life for my Sparrow was okay in my book. But I’d also meant what I said. If she did *anything*

to betray Ava Jade again—if she hurt my brothers—I would end her.

“And Grey?”

“Asleep,” Ava Jade replied. Jerking a thumb to her bedroom.

“Not anymore,” Grey said, wandering from the room in nothing but his boxers, stretching his arms high over his head, the veins in his biceps and waist jutting from his skin like snakes.

Speaking of...

“Come on, man,” I hissed at the same time Becca cleared her throat.

Grey’s hard-on was squashed between his stomach and the waistband of his boxers, a good two inches of its head poking out for everyone to see.

He looked down, bored. “It’s a dick. Are you offended by dicks now? You’ll be disappointed to know that you have one, too, Bro.”

Ava Jade chucked a tea towel at him. “Go put some pants on,” she said, her gaze sliding to Becca, a tick in her jaw.

She was jealous.

It was a good look on her.

“There’s fucking vomit on them,” Grey complained, covering his cock with the towel.

“Oh!” Becca exclaimed. “I bought these really nice Puma sweats for...well, it doesn’t matter who they were for. I bet they’ll fit you. One sec.”

The reminder of Becca’s mystery Ace boyfriend soured the mood in the room, and I had to wonder not for the first time whether we’d already killed the fucker.

I was willing to bet Becca was wondering that, too. Holding on to the hope that he was dead, which would mean she was in considerably less danger.

I doubted she was so lucky. I'd seen not a single Ace who truly matched the description she'd made. Though Ava Jade was right, that one King definitely *did* match.

My tired mind tried to work through the puzzle of it all, wondering whether or not Diesel had recorded anything of their conversations where Becca's boyfriend actually *said* he was an Ace. Though even if he had, what was this guy's word worth?

"Here," Becca said, returning from her room to toss Grey the sweatpants, and whatever I'd just been thinking about was knocked from my skull, and I couldn't claw it back.

Yet another symptom of insomnia. The inability to hold on to slippery thoughts. To make connections. To see things coming before they did and stop them.

My Sparrow was right. I needed to sleep. If I didn't, I'd start missing shit that was right in front of me.

Grey pulled on the sweats, and Becca was right, they fit him like a glove. He didn't seem to like that fact, but it was better than wearing around Rook's vomit until we could get back to the Nest.

Right on cue, Rook stirred, a low groan falling from his lips as he rolled lazily from his back to his side, arm flopping from the side of the couch.

Ava Jade abandoned her attempt to make coffee and rushed to the living room, grabbing the glass of water from the coffee table.

"Hey," she said, sitting uneasily on the edge of the couch, hand hovering over his shoulder like she was afraid to touch him.

Oddly, I didn't feel jealous as Rook settled his hand on her thigh and squeezed weakly, or when she helped him up and pushed the hair back from his face to pass him the water. I felt... glad.

So fucking glad that she was there for him just as much as we were. That she could give him things that Grey and I never could.

Rook sipped the water, grimacing, probably wishing it was whiskey.

His slitted eyes glanced around the room at the rest of us, and a frown curled the edges of his lips downward. “All right,” he hissed. “Show’s over. What the shit happened?”

“You don’t remember?”

“I remember your mom being a cunt and then... just nothing.”

“That was pretty much it.”

Ava Jade dropped her head, unable to look him in the eyes. Maybe it was good if he didn’t remember everything. If I were being honest, there was a small part of me that was afraid for Rook to wake up. It could’ve gone either way, with him pissed at Ava Jade and out for her mother’s blood, or like this... his usual aloof self, not giving two fucks either way.

His hands shook as he drank more water, and he was pale and sweaty as fuck. He needed a shower and to be watched like a hawk at all times over the next couple weeks. He’d be twitchy.

To my knowledge he’d never touched heroin before, but I could vividly remember him coming down off a cocaine high.

Shit wasn’t fucking pretty.

People died.

We just tried to make sure the *right* people died. It was all we could do.

If Rook couldn’t have his next drug fix, he needed blood on his hands.

Grey rounded the sofa into the living room, sinking onto the coffee table to wait until Rook looked up at him.

Once he did, Grey studied his stare, nodding silently to himself as though he got all the answers he needed just from looking into the black depths of his brother’s stare. “All right,” he said.

“Satisfied?” Rook prodded.

“For now,” Grey replied. “But you fucking tell me if I need to be more worried.”

Rook gave a single terse nod.

“Hey,” Grey barked. “I want to hear you say it.”

“All right. *Fuck*. I’ll tell you.”

“Good.”

Becca came into the kitchen, picking up where Ava Jade left off, making coffees for everyone.

“I’m not a very good cook,” she said as she frothed milk. “But I can do pancakes if you guys want something to eat. Or we can order in.”

Ava Jade shook her head. “Actually, if it’s cool with everyone, we need to head back to the Nest once Rook’s good to move.”

The man himself flinched at her words, and she noticed, wincing with second-hand shame.

“What for?” Grey asked and my jaw clenched.

“Your idiot brother hasn’t slept in days. Probably longer. I’m going to put him down for a nap.”

Rook laughed at that, and even Grey smirked. Traitors.

I shook my head at her. “You’re dangerously close to making me change my mind about the whole fucking thing,” I warned.

But she only shook her head. “Nope. You’re going to nap even if I have to knock your ass out to make it happen.”

I bit my cheek to keep from grinning.

“Bet you fifty he doesn’t sleep more than an hour,” Rook said.

“Make it a hundred and I say he doesn’t sleep at all,” Grey countered, his eyes flicking to Ava Jade. “Not even if *you* ask him nicely, AJ.”

Her cut-glass eyes narrowed on Grey and Rook. “You’re on, motherfuckers.”

CHAPTER

Twenty-Three

AVA JADE

SHIT. I fell asleep too fast.

I knew it the moment I opened my eyes, hearing the faint sounds of a deep rumbling voice coming from the closed closet door across the room.

Groaning, my arm stretched to the opposite side of the bed, feeling cool empty space where Corvus should've been.

Fuck.

I was going to be out a hundred and fifty bucks.

My eyelids peeled back, adjusting to the glow of late evening light.

Evening?

I quickly rolled to the other side of Corvus' bed, his engine oil and spice scent filling my nose as my legs slipped over his tightly tucked sheets to snatch my phone from the nightstand.

I flinched at the brightness of the screen, seeing that it was past eight in the evening before peering back to the closet door. He wouldn't have stayed in here for eight hours, would he? We got here around eleven, and I was probably passed out by twelve.

My muscles ached, protesting the movement as I swung my legs from the warmth of the covers and off the side of the bed, touching my toes to the carpet. I leaned forward, pressing my palm into the hollows of my eyes.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd slept this long.

The three hours I'd gotten last night plus however many I'd had now equaled a greater amount than I'd probably had since I was a fucking toddler.

And I'd done the sleeping next to another human being. Twice.

What was happening to me?

Inside the closet, something crashed and the door pushed open, an angry Corvus quietly stepping through to avoid waking me. Behind him, his mic was knocked against the wall, hanging from the stand awkwardly like he'd tossed it away.

He stopped in his tracks, seeing me sitting up in bed. "Fuck," he grunted, throwing a fist through his hair. "I didn't wake you up."

I shook my head. "You didn't. But you should've. Why'd you let me sleep so long?"

He gave a one shoulder shrug, and I noticed he was already dressed again, the boxers and t-shirt he'd slept in now joined by a pair of faded black denim jeans. "You needed it."

I pinched the bridge of my nose. "That wasn't the point. The point was—"

"Sparrow, I just woke up."

"What?"

"About an hour ago."

I couldn't contain my triumph as a relieved grin spread over my face. "Really?"

He nodded, seeming just as shocked himself. "Yeah, really."

"I knew it," I muttered to myself. "Those fuckers better pay up."

Despite having just slept for what I had to guess was a pretty good amount of time, Corvus still managed to look

exhausted as he crossed the carpet and sank onto the edge of the bed with a deep sigh.

I crawled back across the tangle of blankets to sit next to him, indicating the tossed mic in the closet. “What went on in there?”

His jaw clenched. “I had an idea for something new and I thought...”

“What?” I asked when he didn’t finish. “You thought what?”

He fell back onto the bed to stare at the ceiling. “There’s no point,” he said numbly. “Primal Ethos is dead. Besides, the gang needs me right now. I shouldn’t be wasting time—”

“Shut the fuck up. Don’t be stupid. Primal Ethos isn’t dead, not unless *you* let it die.”

His expression darkened, his gaze never leaving the ceiling. “You don’t get it, Sparrow. It’s over. The Bone Man—the *mystery* of him—that was the allure. Without it, I’m just another jackass with a microphone.”

I couldn’t help it, I laughed, and his forehead creased, betraying a rage he usually kept tampered down.

“I’m sorry but that’s fucking bullshit. Have you looked online *at all* since you were outed?”

He didn’t answer. It was answer enough. He hadn’t.

I shook my head. “You should. If anything, they’re even more mad for you now than they were before.”

I wasn’t going to let him do this. He was too talented to throw this all away. With or without Diesel’s permission, he needed it. Pushing to my feet, I grabbed both his hands, dragging him up from the bed. “Come on, show me what you were working on.”

“We need to check in with Diesel.”

“He can wait another hour.”

“Sparrow—”

“Just do this for me, okay? Show me what you’re working on. Maybe I can help. And then as soon as we’re done, I promise you we will go and check in with the others.”

His resistance weakened as I hauled his ass to his feet and toward the closet, dragging him into the small enclosed space with me. I dropped his hands and lifted the mic back into position, fiddling with it until it sat properly in the stand.

“Okay. Now show me.”

“It’s just rough shit. It isn’t even finished yet. It’s... it’s missing something, but I can’t fucking figure it out.”

I bit my lip to keep from smiling. Was Corvus James *nervous* to show me something? It wasn’t a look I’d seen on him before. It was... kind of cute.

I reached past him and shut the door behind us, feeling a tingle go up my spine at the feeling of being in a confined space, of him being so close I could feel the press of him like a physical touch even though we were nearly a foot apart.

“I’m waiting,” I prompted him, looking up at him coyly from beneath my lashes. Fuck. Had he always been this tall? In the tight space, he seemed to tower over me, and from the way he was looking at me, I could tell his mind had gone to a similar place as mine.

I swallowed. Cleared my throat.

Corvus smirked before lifting his phone from his back pocket to tap the screen, bringing up what appeared to be some rough lyrics in a notepad app.

“Since you’re here, mind giving me some rhythm?”

“Hmm?”

He hit a section of not padded wall with the side of his closed fist to create a simple beat, showing me what he meant.

I stepped closer, copying the beat until I had it right and he could lower his fist.

Surprising me, he reached up and caught the string dangling from the light above us and tugged it, plunging us

into darkness. The rhythm of my fist on the wall faltered and my pulse picked up, but I recovered quickly, my belly tightening as Corvus began to hum into the dark. A deep sound that I felt all the way to my toes as he moved through the opening of the song.

He began to sing, filling the small space with his voice so fully that he could have been singing inside of my head. His rough voice ricocheting through my body as he sang of being stronger.

About how he thought he'd made himself into something that couldn't be affected. Couldn't be broken. Couldn't be hurt. How he never saw me coming.

The lyrics hit me hard. I could've written them myself, and when he began the chorus again, my voice rose to meet his, feeling the truth of the song flow through me like I was nothing but a vessel.

Our voices trailed off as one, and I was left momentarily breathless, body aching. Pulse throbbing with a need so pure it could've brought me to my knees.

"*Sparrow*," Corvus whispered, and I felt him grow nearer in the pitch darkness. His knuckles brushed down the back of my arm, making me shiver and a little gasp escape my lips. "I think you were the thing that was missing."

Rough fingertips found my temple and skated down the line of my jaw until they rested against my lips, making them part.

"You were always the thing that was missing."

He pressed this thumb into my mouth, a slight groan on his lips as he slid it against my tongue, pushing to the back of my throat until I moaned.

"Tell me you want me," he said, so close I could feel his breath fanning over my lips as he withdrew his thumb, wetting my lips with it.

He moved fast, gripping the back of my neck to haul me closer, until I could feel the brush of his lips against mine when he spoke again. "*Tell me*."

“I want you,” I muttered breathily, my panties already soaked, thighs squeezing at the hot ache between them.

“Good girl.”

A ripple of unexpected gratification raced through me, making me shiver.

His lips pressed to mine, hot and full as they pried mine apart to allow his tongue entry. My back slammed against the padded wall, wrists held against the wall to either side of my head. I moaned into his mouth as he pressed into me, letting me feel the hard length of him against my belly.

I struggled against his hold, needing to be closer. Needing to take off the layers of clothing separating us, but he held me there, hands tightening around my wrists.

“Now, Sparrow,” he chastised. “Did I tell you that you could move?”

My mouth parted, but no words came out. I’d never given over control like this before, but something about letting myself go, about handing that control over to him and not having the burden of it on my shoulders turned me on so much it fucking hurt.

I wanted him to make me his. I *wanted* to relinquish myself to him. And it scared the shit out of me.

“You will not move,” he said, and a stuttering breath left my lips as he released my wrists, and I kept them there, high above my head as he traced a light line down them with his fingertips. Down past my shoulders, over my breasts, down my waist to the elastic band of my panties.

He hooked his fingers into them and pulled them down painfully slow. I tried to wiggle my hips to help him along, but he placed a warm palm flat against my lower belly and pushed, holding me still as he used his other hand to finish removing them.

“C-Corvus,” I said, my voice breaking on his name as my arms started to lower of their own accord. I needed to touch him. Needed to feel him inside me.

Warm breath fanned over my greedy little cunt, and I bucked against his hand, my own hands delving into his hair to find something to hold on to.

He grabbed my wrists and spun me, pressing my chest to the wall as the sound of leather rushing through denim echoed in the darkness and his belt was wrapped tightly around my wrists, binding them together at my back before he flipped me back around.

Corvus kicked my legs apart, and I groaned as he laid a kiss to the sensitive skin of my inner groin.

“Stay still, Sparrow,” he told me, and I cried out as he closed his mouth over my wet heat, tasting me, his tongue flicking over my swollen clit.

He groaned. “You taste so fucking good.”

I whimpered, my body near to convulsing as he added a finger to the repetitive movements of his tongue, pressing it slowly into me.

“That’s it,” he cooed between teasing licks. “Sing for me, Sparrow.”

He plunged another finger inside of me and increased the speed of his tongue, making me cry out at the intensity of the sensations, wrists trying to break free from their binds as I ground against his mouth.

“*Oh fuck,*” I said on a breath, my orgasm building to the breaking point.

He feasted on my cunt, hands gripping hard at my waist to keep me pinned there, unable to move as the orgasm rushed through me, making stars burst against the back of my eyelids in the dark.

I tried to pull away, the orgasm almost too much to take, but he held me through it, forcing me to feel every last spark of it until the flames subsided.

“Holy fuck,” I said, letting my head fall back against the padding to catch my breath. Was it bad that I wanted more?

One of the best orgasms I'd ever had and I was already primed to beg on my knees for round two.

"You want more?"

I nodded, still struggling to catch my breath.

"I need to hear you say it, Sparrow."

"Yes."

Corvus pulled me down until my knees hit the carpet and I sensed him rise above me. Heard the shuffle of his clothes as he removed his jeans.

The light flicked on and I blinked at its brightness, staring up at Corvus as he finished removing his shirt, his chest covered in a tattoo I'd never seen before. Actually, I didn't think I'd ever seen Corvus without his shirt on. The name Emmanuelle was written over his chest in black script, surrounded with a myriad of imagery.

A crowned heart.

A massive crow.

A sparrow.

Roses and thorns.

I followed the lines of ink all the way down to the massive cock hiding beneath thin black boxers.

My mouth watered.

"I want to see you," Corvus said, his left hand sinking into my hair as he thumbed the waistband of his boxers and tugged them off, letting them fall to the ground at his feet. His massive cock sprang free and I remembered the feeling of it inside of me that night in Lodi. The fullness of it seated all the way to its hilt, hitting something so deep it bordered on pain.

How I'd been so angry and so turned on and so confused.

I wasn't confused anymore.

Corvus' grip on the back of my head tightened as he guided me forward. "Open," he ordered me, and I did as I was told, opening wide for him as he pushed between my lips. The

salty taste of him coated my tongue, and I moaned around his girth as he shuddered, fingers knotting into my hair.

“Fuck, Sparrow.”

I let my tongue slip over the underside of his cock, my arms straining at the binding holding my wrists together. I wanted to touch him. To feel the silky slip of his base against my palm.

Corvus picked up his pace, pressing in deeper, until I could feel him at the back of my throat. I could feel my own wetness smearing over my thighs as he pumped into my mouth and I pushed forward to meet him, trying to show him that I could take it. I could take it all. He didn't have to hold back.

I wanted him to choke me with it.

I wanted him to leave me gasping.

Sensing what I wanted, he lifted me until I was plastered against the wall, the back of my head cushioned by the padding as he fucked my tight little throat, hot hands clasped to either side of my face as he panted.

“Damn,” he cursed, slipping out from between my lips as I gasped for air.

I was going to ask him why he stopped. I could feel that he was close, but before I could get enough air into my lungs to speak, I was jerked back to my feet and Corvus had me with my chest against the wall again. The belt slipped from my wrists at the same time as he lifted my hips and thrust into me.

I moaned at the fullness, adjusting to his size as my fingernails dug into the padding on the wall.

“God, Sparrow, you're so fucking wet for me.”

He reached a hand around to my front, and I felt my shirt tear from my back as he ripped it clean off my skin, fingers finding a nipple to squeeze.

I jerked at the pain, arching my back. *“Yes.”*

Corvus squeezed the other nipple, harder than the first, as he eased out and slammed back into me.

I fought to stay on my toes as he fucked me from behind, his height making for a challenge.

“Come for me, Sparrow,” he said, breathless as he continued a quick pace, and I felt a tightening at his command, the beginning of another orgasm spurred on by his command.

His hand slid down the slippery skin between my breasts until it found my clit. He rubbed it viciously as he fucked me, grunting into my ear as he held off his own release.

“Choke me.” The words fell from my lips unbidden, and he did as he was told, wrapping his free hand around my throat from behind, cutting off my air supply at the perfect moment.

I came hard on his cock, writhing against him, grinding into his hilt as the orgasm spiraled through me.

“Fuck!” he hollered as he came with me, rough, wet fingers wrapping around my middle as he thrust his last, pressing me into the wall.

I gasped as he released my throat, both of us sinking to the floor, knocking the microphone against the wall. He hauled me to his chest as he sat awkwardly against the wall in the tiny studio, and I crashed against him, listening to the quick steady beating of his heart until our breaths began to even out.

“Do we have to leave this room?” Corvus asked after a few minutes, and I knew what he really meant because I could stay here forever, too.

CHAPTER

Twenty-four

AVA JADE

AFTER ALL THE shit that had happened in the last four days, going to class felt like the biggest waste of time, which was why when Becca and the guys banged on my bedroom door at Briar Hall exactly thirty minutes ago to wake my and Rook's asses up, I'd almost bitten off all their heads.

"Are you sure there's been nothing from Diesel? Nothing at all?" I asked Corvus for the third time since I'd peeled my eyes open.

Fuck, you'd think after all the sleep he and I had yesterday I'd be raring to go, but somehow, just after two in the morning, I'd sunk into a deep and dreamless sleep next to Rook as he finished sweating out the toxic substance still lingering in his bloodstream.

We hurried down the stairs to the front atrium with only minutes to spare until the bell, Becca breaking off from the rest of us with a blown kiss to rush off to her homeroom class.

"Nothing," Corvus confirmed. "The Aces are underground, Sparrow. They won't be poking their heads out anytime soon, not after losing that many men. They're *dead*, and if they know what's good for them, they'll stay that way."

I frowned. They weren't all dead.

Diesel had sent pictures of the deceased to Corvus late last night for Becca to flick through. He wanted to be certain her man was dead. But he wasn't among their corpses. All the

morbid slideshow had accomplished was to make Becca barf up the meager dinner she'd managed to choke down an hour earlier.

I rolled my shoulders back, trying to let the lingering feeling that we should be doing *something* roll off my back, but it wouldn't leave. Something wasn't right. I could fucking feel it.

"Excuse me," called a man's voice from the front office, and as one, the four of us turned to find the principal sticking his long neck from the door, indicating toward me. His balding flaxen hair clung to the sides of his head like a bird's nest befitting of his long thin nose. "Miss Mason, may I have a word please."

I sighed heavily, turning to retrace my steps to the office as the bell sounded through the halls. At least with my new status as a Saint I wouldn't be marked tardy.

Unsurprising to me, but very surprising to the principal, the guys followed behind me, flanking me on either side.

"Problem?" Corvus asked before I could speak for myself.

The principal blinked, pushing the door the rest of the way open to stand in its mouth uncomfortably. "Uh, well, I believe it's a conversation better had in private."

I didn't budge.

"Whatever it is, you can say it in front of all of us," Grey said.

I nodded my agreement, just wanting whatever this was over with so I could nap behind my textbook in homeroom.

The principal's Adam's apple bobbed and he patted the front of his pressed slacks. "All right then, if you're sure." He cleared his throat, jerky eyes meeting mine. "It seems your aunt has unauthorized all future tuition payments."

He left the sentence open, hanging with something like a question, waiting for me to fill in the blanks he didn't have answers for, like who would be taking up those payments going forward for the next term.

I couldn't say I was surprised. I figured after the other night, the bitch and I were finally through with each other, which was good because I didn't con or steal from my family. And the things I intended to do to that woman would go a step above either of those.

"I fail to see the problem," Rook said, slinking between me and Grey to put himself nearer to the principal, his dark gaze fixed to the small man's face. "Perhaps you can enlighten me?"

The principal recoiled from Rook's nearness, glancing between Rook and me like I might do something to help. To stop any attack. I wouldn't.

"Oh, well, you see..."

"Yes?" Rook prodded, his body tightening, coiling like a snake.

The principal fell back a step. "I just wanted to congratulate Miss Mason," he blurted. "I wanted to, *um*, personally let her know, *uh*, that she's qualified for our scholarship program... and that her final semester of the year will be fully covered, including boarding fees."

The principal let out a small gasp as Rook slapped a hand down on his shoulder, giving it a squeeze. "Well, isn't that nice," Rook said, giving the man a little shake as he turned to face the rest of us. "Isn't that nice?"

"Very," I agreed. "Thank you. I'm glad I qualified."

In all reality, if I'd applied, I probably would've qualified for the program. If such a program existed. Though I supposed it did now.

"Yes, yes," the principal said, dropping his shoulder to get away from Rook and back into the office. "Just wanted to let you know. You'll get an official letter emailed to your academy address later this week."

He couldn't get away fast enough and as the office door closed, the four of us burst out laughing, rushing away from the office and down the hall to homeroom.

“*Fuck*,” I said, shaking my head. “You guys didn’t have to do that. I could’ve just paid for it.”

How expensive could it possibly be? I had about five grand sitting in my secret cubby upstairs in my room.

Grey raised a brow at me. “You have thirty-five grand?”

“*What?*”

“The price of privilege,” Corvus said with a twist to his lips and then, “Don’t worry, Sparrow, we didn’t pay either. Diesel’s *contribution* to the school wasn’t a monetary one. He offered *not* to expose their century of corruption, racial and sexual preferences—”

“Don’t forget that one priest they had before the church shut down,” Grey added.

Corvus nodded. “Yeah, and *that*. Anyway, we had acceptance letters the next day and the school’s motto was changed by the end of the following week. There are things in this world worth a lot more than money, Sparrow. Never forget it.”

“*Shit.*”

“Shit, indeed.”

I had to admit, it felt oddly liberating to be free of my aunt’s promises. To break away from the future I *should’ve* wanted for the one I actually did want. The one where I belonged.

Homeroom went by in a half-dozed blur, and math was more of the same. I couldn’t bring myself to focus on any of the problems we were solving in class, but it didn’t matter. Thanks to *past* Ava Jade, I was still pretty far ahead of the class. That was going to change fast though if I couldn’t get my ass in gear and focus.

My mind kept wandering though.

And not just to the Aces.

To the faceless enemy targeting not just me, but me and my guys now.

I had a feeling he was the one to blame for outing Rook's *thing* with the vice principal.

He'd admitted to watching us through the academy's security system the day I'd burned all the hair from Brianna Moore's pretty little head.

He had to be CrowKiller321. The fucker who'd exposed Corvus' identity as The Bone Man. Grey hadn't managed to reverse trace his IP. No surprise there. This guy, whoever he was, was fucking *good*.

And I knew he was far from finished.

Who would he target next?

What was he hoping to accomplish, playing these twisted games with us?

The itch to *do* something was so strong I found myself leaving AP Math with a whispered excuse of using the bathroom to Grey, needing to move. To think.

Halfway there, I pulled my phone out, bringing up the email from the stalker that day in the academy kitchens. My thumb hovered over the reply button, pulse picking up speed as my vision began to tint crimson.

I clenched my teeth, stopping near a long window in the hall of the upper floor, bouncing on the balls of my feet.

It was me he wanted.

What if I made him an offer he couldn't refuse? Would he leave the others alone?

I didn't know every skeleton in their closets, but I knew there were plenty to be dug up if you knew where to look. How deeply could he bury them if I didn't do something to stop him?

There was apparently nothing to be done about the Aces until they resurfaced, but *this*...this I might be able to put a stop to. I just needed a few minutes with this fucker and a freshly sharpened blade.

Swallowing, I clicked *reply*.

To: gh380xc@gmail.com

From: Ava Jade Mason

Subject: RE: Miss me?

WHY DON'T you come out of the shadows and play? Or are you too much of a coward? It's me you want. Come and get me, motherfucker.

I HIT SEND BEFORE I could change my mind, reassured by the heaviness of the four sharpened pieces of steel strapped to my limbs. By the fact that I knew any of the guys would have sent the same message if our roles were reversed. They couldn't be angry with me for this. Especially not if it got me the result I wanted.

This fucker's head on a spike proudly displayed at the entrance to the Crow's Nest as a warning to any others who might try to raise a weapon against my guys.

Feeling much better, I pushed into the bathroom, going to splash some water over my fury flushed neck and cheeks.

I pocketed my phone, on edge as the sound of shuffling feet beneath a stall alerted me to someone else in the bathroom.

The room fell silent.

My brows drew. "Hello?"

I bent to peer beneath the stalls, finding the small floor spaces all empty. But I'd definitely heard someone.

The fury came rushing back at the realization that the stalker would still want to keep tabs on us here even though Grey now had complete control over every form of surveillance on the property and was certain there was no outside access anymore. What if he were *here*? Watching in the flesh.

My upper lip curled back as I reached for a blade and kicked the first stall door open.

A girlish squeal from the stall next door made me hesitate, but only for a second before I kicked that one open, too.

The girl cowered in a ball, hugging her knees to her chest atop the toilet seat, her long brown hair hanging like a curtain to cover most of her face. Though it didn't cover enough to hide the fact that she'd been crying. By the look of it, she'd been crying in here for a while. Her eyes were puffy and red, mascara streaked down to her chin.

I thought I recognized her as a freshman who usually sat near the front of the cafeteria. Usually alone, or as a fifth wheel to another group of kids who mostly ignored her. I couldn't remember her name, though.

She stared at me like I was the grim fucking reaper come to inhale her soul. Jesus.

My stomach tightened, and I backed up a step, the fire in my veins spluttering. "Um..."

Fuck. I wasn't good at this.

"Are... are you okay?"

The girl burst into sobs at my question, pressing her face into her knees.

Oh god.

I stepped into the stall, awkwardly patting the girl's shoulder. "There, there."

That's what you were supposed to say, right?

"I'll, uh, I'll go get the nurse, okay?"

Her hand shot out, grabbing me by the wrist to stop me. "No!"

Something about the fear in her voice stopped me, and the hairs on the back of my neck pricked.

"Why not?"

“Please,” she sobbed, wiping snot across the back of her hand. “Please just f-f-forget you saw me.”

My phone chimed in my pocket, but I barely heard it over the rush of blood in my ears. Something bad happened to this girl.

This girl who looked like she couldn’t be more than fifteen. This girl, who, under the running makeup and red eyes, looked sweet and innocent despite attending school at a place like this.

“What happened to you?” I found myself asking, sinking down to her eye level.

She spied the knife in my hand and gasped, prompting me to put it away. I lifted my empty hands to show her I meant no harm. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

Her tears slowed as she considered me, clearly scared, but there was something else there too. A thing I recognized. A spiteful sort of anger, hidden beneath layers of pain.

“But that’s what you do, isn’t it?”

I cocked my head at her, not understanding.

She swallowed, her hair falling forward to shadow her eyes. “You hurt people. You and those other guys. The Crows. I’ve heard about you.”

“Then you know that this town belongs to *them*. And that they take care of the people in it.”

A twitch in her upper lip told me I might be on the right track. “Tell me what happened. Maybe I can help.”

Fuck, how much I’d *love* to pummel one of the cocky, baby-faced jocks into the ground right about now. I shuddered just to think of the release. Maybe I’d even let Rook help me.

I couldn’t get justice for me and the guys. Not yet. But maybe I could get some for this girl.

Her lips parted, but no words came out.

“It’s okay,” I assured her. “If you want, I won’t even tell them it was you who told me.”

She frowned, looking at me suspiciously. I could tell she was wondering how I knew it was a *someone* and not a *something* she was crying about.

“I can’t,” she decided.

“Then whatever happened will probably happen again.”

Her lower lip quivered.

“His life would be ruined.”

So it was a *him*. We were getting somewhere.

“Did he hurt you?”

She looked away.

Motherfucker.

I could feel my cheeks flushing with a renewed heat, and I struggled to keep my voice even. “If someone hurt you, you can’t let them get away with it.”

Her hands clenched to fists against her thighs. “You won’t tell him it was me who told you?”

I shook my head, a sick feeling in my stomach at the look she was giving me.

A minute ago, I was sure what this was, but now I didn’t think I was prepared for what she was about to tell me.

“I already called the hotline,” she said. “You know that one for reporting crimes anonymously, but nothing happened. No one even called me back.”

What?

I needed to get her back on track. I could examine that little tidbit later.

“Tell me what happened.”

She squirmed against the toilet seat, her brown eyes looking everywhere but at me. “He offered me a better grade. It was just supposed to be that one time,” she finally said and the force with which my rage intensified was like a bomb detonating in my stomach. I’d be shocked if there wasn’t smoke coming out of my ears.

I managed to maintain a calm front, but my next words came out strained. “Go on.”

The girl, whose name I learned was Layla, told me as much as she could before her face turned green and she couldn’t talk anymore. Until she was shoving me out of the way so she could crawl down off the toilet, lift the lid, and vomit into the porcelain bowl.

I felt like joining her by the time she was finished.

She sat back heavily against the toilet, breathless from being sick as I rose to my feet, every inch of my skin vibrating.

“I’m going to take care of this,” I told her. “You don’t have to worry about Mr. Williams anymore.”

“What are you going to do?” she hollered after me as I left the bathroom, but I didn’t reply. She didn’t want to know.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

CHAPTER *Twenty-Five* GREY

MR. WILLIAMS barely looked up as I rose from my desk, leaving my shit as I exited the classroom ten minutes before the bell. AJ wasn't answering me, and she'd been gone too long.

I thumbed a quick message to the guys on my way down the hall.

Grey: Something's up.

Chances were I was being paranoid and she was just too fucking antsy to be stuck sitting in class, but if that were the case she would've answered my texts by now. I pocketed my phone and reached my hand back behind me, ready to draw the gun there if I needed to.

Heavy, thudding footfalls sounded around the corner ahead and I clenched my jaw, fingering the outline of my gun through my shirt, working the thin fabric up and out of the way.

"AJ?" I hissed, sweat slicking my chest.

Five more steps and there she was.

Ava Jade didn't stop as she rounded the corner, staring straight ahead, her hands in fists at her sides. Her face red. Her body rigid. Murder in her eyes.

I scanned her for injury, but she seemed unharmed.

"AJ," I repeated, stepping in her path.

"Move."

"Hey," I said, a lick of anger racing up my spine as I gripped her arm, hauling her to a stop. "What the fuck is going on?"

She spun, slamming her palm against my forearm to break my grip on her. Pain radiated up my arm, and it was my face that brought her back to me, if only for a second. She blinked, realizing what she'd done and stopped, inhaling deeply through her nose.

"Where were you?"

Footsteps ascended the stairs at the end of the hall and she stiffened, watching like a hawk until Corvus and Rook crested the top of the staircase, their faces hard as they zeroed in on us.

"What happened?" Corvus demanded, hurrying down the hall, his sights fixed on Ava Jade.

Rook drew his gun, stepping past us to peer around to the next hallway. "Clear," he muttered, replacing his gun in the back of his waistband, a knot forming between his brows as his gaze landed back on Ava Jade.

She was practically shaking with rage, her jaw locked.

"Ghost?"

Her light eyes tracked a path to Rook and the glass in them shattered, her shoulders shuddering as they fought to fall. "He's a fucking monster," she said, her hand unconsciously going to her stomach.

"Who?" Rook demanded, his gaze darkening. "Name him."

"Williams."

I cocked my head at her. “*Mr. Williams?*”

She nodded.

I racked my brain, remembering every time I caught him staring at her in class, but I’d just been with him during AP Math while she was in the bathroom. He couldn’t have done anything.

“Did he fucking touch you?”

Her eyes found mine, confused. “You think he’d still be breathing if he had?”

No. I didn’t. But then what the fuck was she talking about.

“Sparrow, start talking. What happened?”

She rolled her shoulders back, taking another shaking breath before she began.

AJ explained about the girl she ran into in the bathroom. She told us how the girl had given Williams head once for a better grade. And later, how he’d used a video he’d taken of her giving him head as blackmail to get her to do other things, threatening to post it on the internet and ruin her life.

“He took her somewhere. To a place that she said had a video camera set-up with a bed and nothing else. She didn’t know where it was because he would blindfold her to take her there. He...”

She choked before continuing. “*Fuck,*” she said, lifting her hand to bite her knuckles to stop whatever she was going to say next. “He’s a fucking pedo. What were your rules about that?”

This question she posed to Corvus. “Hmm?” she prodded. “They don’t get strikes. They go straight to the grave, right?”

A muscle in Corvus’ jaw ticked. Rook was already glaring down the hall like he could will Williams to leave the classroom right this minute so he could shoot him in the kneecaps.

Corvus’ brow pinched. “Not without proof.”

“What that girl said isn’t good enough?”

He shook his head. “No. If we relied on the word of fourteen-year-old freshmen there would be a lot more unmarked graves in Thorn Valley... filled with some very undeserving corpses.”

Ava Jade’s eye twitched.

“But,” Corvus continued. “We will look into this.”

“Fine,” Ava Jade said. “We look into it *now*. Right fucking now.”

Rook was already nodding. “Grey, get the address. The fucker will be busy with classes for the next few hours. We’ll scout his place while he’s busy here. If he was taking videos, we’ll find them.”

“And if he was?” Ava Jade prompted.

“Strike three,” Rook confirmed, his nostrils flaring.

AJ nodded gravely. “I want to help.”

Rook’s lips parted, the creases in his forehead smoothing as he searched her eyes, then nodded.

I set to work logging into the staff side of the academy’s online portal from my phone.

“Should we bring Becca? I don’t want to leave her here.”

“I’ll call Tiny. He’ll come and stay with her until we come back. Good?”

“Yeah. I’ll text her to let her know.”

“She’s not going to like that,” Rook said.

“She’d like coming with us a lot less.”

AJ had a point. Becca was stronger than I’d ever given her credit for, but normal people had limits, and what we would do if we found out the girl was telling the truth would go far beyond Becca’s. Besides, Tiny was basically a giant cuddly bear with a gun. He’d probably braid her hair and order her a fucking chocolate cake.

“Got the address,” I announced.

“Let’s go.”

Behind us, the bell rang as we made our way down to the Rover, alert for any signs of attack.

Diesel would kill us if he knew we were going on a little side-quest for our humanitarian project right now, but Ava Jade wasn't wrong. If Williams was what that girl claimed, he had no place in Thorn Valley. Letting him get away with doing what he was accused of even one more time would be one time too many.

Plus, if he'd done it once, we knew from experience it was very fucking likely he'd done it before. Layla might not be the only one.



WILLIAMS' place was a pedo's wet dream.

Secluded at the outer edge of the city, surrounded by trees with no neighbors for miles.

Of course, that alone didn't mean he was guilty, but I couldn't help noticing it as we stepped out of the Rover and onto his freshly paved driveway. AJ shared a look with Rook and I knew she was thinking the same thing I was.

Ava Jade stormed ahead of us, rushing his front door. She kicked it in with one long heavy stroke of her leg.

Now was not the time to be getting turned on, but...

I cleared my throat, jerking my head after her. "Let's go."

We followed her inside, down a narrow hall that broke off into three directions. Up the stairs. Into a living room to the left, and a kitchen to the right.

Rook stormed up the stairs, where it looked like Ava Jade had gone if the boot prints on the off white carpet were any indication. Corvus went through to the kitchen, and I went the opposite way into his living room. My nose wrinkled at the smell of the place. It reminded me of the group home. Musty with an undercurrent of microwaveable food.

I tossed the couch cushions first, then moved on to the coffee table, tugging out both drawers to tip their contents onto the carpet. Nothing.

The bookshelves.

I tipped the spines, flicking each one out of its place until they were all in a pile on the floor at my feet.

A corner of white paper stuck out from one and I bent, lifting the heavy tome, a copy of a book called I'm Not Sam. I lifted the paper from the pages, but found it blank. Though, beneath were words that jumped out at me. I grimaced, reading a small part of the page the makeshift bookmark had been stuck in.

Was his taste in fiction enough to condemn him? I was starting to think it might be when I heard AJ call from upstairs. "Get up here," she shouted, and I let the book fall closed, dropping it to the pile at my feet with the others.

Corvus and I met in the hall, and I followed him up the stairs. "Anything?" I asked Corvus.

He shook his head. "You?"

"Super fucked up book. Not enough to be sure."

A door was open at the end of the hall when we got to the top of the stairs, bluish light bleeding onto the carpet.

The sound of a girl crying filtered past my ears and my stomach tightened as we went into the room, finding AJ sitting at a small desk in a small room, Rook hunched over her, his face a twisted mask. The heavy blackout curtains were drawn so tightly over the window that the entire room was black save for the light of the monitor screen.

AJ suddenly pushed away from the desk, knocking Rook back in her haste. "I can't watch anymore," she growled, shoving past me as she left the room, thudding back down the stairs.

I went to Rook, still staring at the screen like he couldn't peel his eyes from it even if he wanted to, the murderous intent in his stare deepening.

I didn't need to see it, didn't want to, but I needed to know what we were dealing with.

On the screen a video played. Recorded on a shitty camcorder in what looked like a dingy basement type of space. Mr. Williams wore a mask while he fed his cock to a little boy, but there was no mistaking it was him.

Behind the still-playing video was a wide finder screen with hundreds of tiny little video files. Each one labeled not with names but with ages and sexes.

I didn't want to believe the smallest number was accurate.

"Turn it off," Corvus roared.

Rook clicked over to another video instead, his body rolling with rage.

Corvus shoved Rook back and grabbed the entire monitor from the top of the desk and smashed it on the floor, stomping on it for good measure, his breaths sawing in and out through his teeth.

"In our fucking town," he hissed. "Right under our fucking noses."

Guilt pooled in my stomach like acid, and I swallowed back the taste of bile rising in my throat. I'd always known Williams was a bit of a creep, but this? I'd been in his class for months now, and I hadn't seen this. I should've.

Corvus' turned his fury on me. "Want to tell me how this fucking slipped your notice, Grey?"

A muscle in my jaw ticked. I shook my head. I had no excuse to give.

"He was clearly good at hiding it," Rook said numbly, his stare still fixed to the busted monitor. "His kind often are."

Not for the first time, I felt a deep peace at knowing I'd killed the man from Barrett's Home for Boys. I still didn't know exactly what he'd done to deserve the broomstick Rook shoved up his ass, but seeing him now, I thought I might have a better idea.

I wished I didn't.

"Come on," Corvus said, calmer now, putting a hand on Rook's shoulder. "We have some justice to dispense."

"Wait..." Rook trailed off, his eyes slanting as he considered something for a second and then walked out the door to the room without another word. I followed him down the stairs, hearing what he'd heard. Noises from below.

We followed the sound to where the dining room table had been shoved to one side of the room, the oval shaped rug beneath thrown back to reveal an open hatch and dark stairs leading down.

The smell from below made me hold my breath as he descended into the darkness after AJ.

A lightbulb swung at the end of a long orange cord fixed to the ceiling. Casting a wavering light over AJ as she stared over a short double bed, the gray sheets stained with something darker. A rat skittered past our feet, its hind leg caught in a trap that it dragged along with it.

The culprit to the noise we'd heard from above.

"*Ugh*," I cringed, stepping back. I fucking hated rats.

"Move the Rover," she said, the *zip* of a blade whizzing through the air preceding the sound of the rat's final squeal. "We do this here."

"I need my kit," Rook said.

"I'll take you," I told him.

"I'll wait here with AJ for him to get home," Corvus said. "Take the main roads. In and out. If you aren't back here in twenty minutes—"

"We will be," Rook promised Corv, and I believed him. There wasn't a single thing on this earth that would stop him from returning to this dank basement to dole out justice for the children who would be forever scarred by what had been done to them.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Six

ROOK

“GRAB the lighter fluid from under the sink, would you?” I asked, remembering we were out of gasoline as I made my way to the shed, skin itching. The pain in my abdomen, a symptom of the withdrawal, stronger now than it had been this morning. I grimaced through the pain, a muscle in my right arm spasming as the reaching hands of my darkness raked at the back of my skull, demanding to be fed.

Tonight, it would dine on the dirty soul of a pedophile.

But... it whispered. Dan the Man was only a phone call away. I could fix it. I could almost feel the chemical burn of cocaine on the back of my throat. Could almost fucking taste it.

I could skin Ghost’s mother alive for doing this to me, but that wasn’t a call I could make. My girl had promised me vengeance once our lives in Thorn Valley returned to a semblance of normal, and that was good enough for me. For now.

I unlocked the shed and stepped inside, the lingering scent of bonfire filling my nose. I breathed it in deeply, clutching the edge of my work table and shutting my eyes to get a hold on myself. I dug in my back pocket, drawing out a cigarette with shaking fingers to put it to my lips.

The flame danced on the top of my Zippo, an inch from the end of my cigarette as I froze in place, staring down at the

surface of the table in front of me.

There, atop a torn slip of paper was a small black bag. Round and bulging. Knotted at the top.

The words were an afterthought, and I had to force my eyes to leave the familiar baggy to read them.

You're welcome.

That was it.

No.

Fuck.

I blinked hard, hoping that when I opened my eyes again, it wouldn't be there.

But it was.

“Rook,” Grey called from outside and in a knee-jerk reaction I snatched the eight-ball of coke from the table and shoved it deep into my pocket, flicking the paper away.

“Hey, you good? We need to get back,” Grey said, appearing in the door. “Got the lighter fluid.”

I grabbed my busted up red toolbox and lifted my blowtorch from its nook with a pinkie. “Yeah. I'm good.”



WE GOT BACK to his house before he returned home, parking the Rover in the trees a little farther down the road.

The afternoon sun, so warm and so fucking bright, was at odds with the dark rising within, making me froth at the mouth as I waited, crouched low behind a boulder near the end of his driveway. The black ball in my pocket feeling like it might burn a hole straight through.

My knuckles rubbed over its outline through my jeans, and I gritted my teeth.

I heard the car coming and nodded at Grey through the living room window, tensing the thin length of rope between

my fists. It was going to be hard not to end him right away, but filth like Mr. Williams deserved to suffer first.

The rope bit into my fingers as I stretched it to its limits, a shudder rolling down my spine as the images from his computer screen replayed behind my shut eyelids. I'd only had the pleasure of slaughtering one other monster like him.

The one I really wanted dead, the counselor from Barrett's Home for Boys, bit a bullet before I could get to him. Though I had a feeling I knew who'd done the job for me, and I was glad it was one of us. At least I had the satisfaction of knowing that he would have seen Grey's face and known the reason he was there. *Who* he was getting justice for.

Didn't change the fact that I wished I'd done it myself, felt robbed of the chance to get my revenge, but now. Here. Tonight. I would get my revenge for others who never could. Never *would*. Not in the way that they should.

My teeth clenched, baring in a snarl as tires turned from the choppy road to the smooth pavement of the drive, slowing.

A car door opened, and I rose from behind the boulder in one swift movement, grinning as I stalked around the back of his car on silent feet, my shadow lying over him as I approached.

He started, seeing it a second too late. I wrapped the cord around his throat twice, pulling it tight until my biceps strained. Williams choked and spluttered, clawing at the thin cord around his throat as I sent him to his knees, not letting up until his clawing hands turned to useless deflated lumps of flesh and began to sag.

I squeezed one last time before shoving him forward onto his face, releasing the cord. I kicked him hard in the side, and he replied with a coughing breath, going back to a limp stillness as he passed out. Couldn't have him suffocating before we'd had our fun, now could we?

Another car was coming, and I cursed, bending to lift the dead weight of his body onto my shoulder, the bullet-wound in my leg protesting the extra weight. I groaned, carrying him

around the other side of his car until the other vehicle passed by.

I pushed a hip into his car door to close it before hauling him inside, through the house to the kitchen, where I dropped him down the hatch and watched as black-painted fingernails grabbed him by his ankles and dragged him into the dark.

I bit my lip ring, fingers fumbling for a cigarette before I changed my mind, climbing down into the hole, closing the hatch behind me.

Grey helped my Ghost lift Williams' limp body onto the bed.

I dropped my toolbox to the cement floor and crouched, digging into it for the zip ties. I grabbed a handful and tossed them onto the bed. "Tie him down."

Ghost didn't waste any time, grabbing a couple strips of plastic before tugging Williams' arm high above his head, securing it to the dated metal headboard while Grey did the same on his opposite side, securing his wrists and ankles in place until he was stretched into a long X on the dirty mattress.

Corvus watched from the edge of the room, arms crossed over his chest as he oversaw our progress, like he always did.

Once Ava Jade was finished, she drew out her blade and carved a long slit into his arm with a flick of her wrist, making him rouse. Crimson spilled over the sheets as the math teacher found his voice, letting out a low, pitiful sound, little gasping cries as he tugged on his extremities, only a little at first, then thrashing, moving the whole bed as he flung his body back and forth, tearing the skin of his wrists in the process.

Ghost's upper lip curled back, and she lifted her blade again.

"Patience," I said, and her manic gaze found mine in the dim space, her knife-hand stilling.

"We don't want it to be over too quickly."

A muscle in her jaw ticked, but she nodded. She understood.

My darkness fluttered.

“*Wh-whats going on here,*” Williams shouted, his voice breaking, pitched all wrong. It was the best sort of music. “Hey! Miss Mason, just what is it that you think you’re doing?” he continued, staring up at Ava Jade with a crease in his brow before his eyes finally found me and he stilled.

I inhaled long and slow, taking in his fear.

He reeked of it.

I licked my lips.

“N-no,” he uttered through quivering lips before those lips pulled back over his yellowing teeth. “I’ll press charges,” he threatened, and I grinned in response.

“I will!” he promised. “You won’t get away with this.”

“And you think we’re going to let you get away with what you’ve done?” Ava Jade asked, her voice strangely calm, but with a note of mania that only I could recognize. She was only speaking calmly because she’d already decided exactly what she wanted to do to him and knew nothing would stop her from doing it.

Williams had the decency to shut his mouth at that, pressing his teeth together as he began tugging anew at his binds. He didn’t deny it.

It was as much of an admission of guilt as we would get, not that we needed one after the evidence we found.

“You’ll pay for this,” he said.

Ava Jade only shook her head. “No,” she said. “But you will.”

She lifted her head, eyes landing on Grey, then Corvus, then me. A slow smile pulled at one corner of her sharp mouth. “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

“Take his fingers first?” Grey asked, eyeing his filthy hands where they flexed and squeezed, tried to get free.

Ghost shook her head.

“His cock?” Corvus put in, readjusting his stance against the wall to get a better view.

She shook her head again and I saw in her a version of myself when her eyes flashed with malice in the light.

“Fuck him in the ass with one of your blades?” I asked.

Her grin widened. I hit it right on the money.

Not a bad idea.

“Help!” Williams screamed, his voice frantic now. “Help! Someone, please!”

Ava Jade leaned over him. “Hold him,” she told Grey, and to my surprise, Grey knelt on the edge of the mattress and held Williams’ face steady as Ava Jade got hold of his tongue and sheared it from his mouth.

Blood spurted upward, spraying over Grey and my Ghost, coloring them with the most beautiful shade of red.

They fell back as Williams gurgled, craning his neck to keep from choking on his own blood as Ava Jade held his tongue up to the light, examining it before tossing it over her shoulder with a look of disgust.

If I’d ever had even a shadow of doubt about where she belonged, it was gone now.

Grey was right. She was our fucking queen, and I’d go to war for her no matter the cost or consequence. She was one of us.

As my gaze fell back to Williams, I was... almost jealous.

It was my turn to have some fun.

“I like your idea,” I told Ava Jade, tapping the pads of my first two fingers to my chin as I rounded to her side of the bed, looking down at our soon to be masterpiece. “But the guys are right. We should take his fingers first. Then his junk. I’ll cauterize the wounds, of course, so he doesn’t bleed out...”

“And then I can fuck him with my blades?”

“We’ll save that for the finale.”



TOO BAD WILLIAMS was almost fully gone by the time I even got to use my torch, but still, it was a balm to my soul to watch his skin turn red, then black, then flake off to float beneath the light all around us like gray snow.

I coughed beneath the shirt I'd tied around my face, Williams' ashes tickling my throat.

My Ghost's hand pushed down into mine, our fingers twining as she drew nearer into my side, unbothered that my naked torso was covered in sweat, blood, and smears of ash.

Grey and Corvus stepped out, leaving the hatch open behind them to give some airflow as we finished up here. The plan was to set fire to the whole joint before we left, ensuring that everything here was turned to ash with Mr. Williams. His victims didn't need to relive the things he'd done to them if any of those videos should come to light. Their peers wouldn't ever look at them the same way.

They would be questioned. Their parents would want to know why they never said anything. No one could possibly understand.

It was better this way. Justice had been served and he couldn't hurt anyone ever again.

"It's kind of beautiful, isn't it?" Ghost said, indicating the still smoking remains on the concrete floor at our feet. Williams' charred shape was curled in on itself, in the fetal position, hands over his head, the white of his bones showing through the burnt remnants of his skin.

I'd thought Frank had been my best work, but Williams took the cake. I squeezed Ghost's hand in mine, lifting it to my lips. I pressed a kiss on the back of her palm. "It is."

She shivered at the touch of my lips, and I tipped my head to one side, peering down at her. Her lips parted at something she found in my stare.

“You’re not the monster people think you are,” she said, and the black thing in my chest tightened.

Her face pinched. She moved to stand in front of me, lifting a hand to brush the pad of her thumb over the top of my cheekbone. It came away stained black and red with blood and ash. Her breathing deepened.

I mirrored her movements, brushing my knuckle down her cheek, streaking a path through Williams’ debris.

“I am,” I assured her.

Her chin tipped up, defiant. “Then I guess I am too.”

My brows lowered.

She pressed a hand to my stomach, dragging her nails low until they met the top of my jeans. Her eyes never left mine as she undid the button there, making me groan and my already thick cock turn to iron against the press of her hands.

I dropped my forehead to hers, a tremor rolling up my spine as she took my length into her hand, stroking it from tip to base.

“Fuck,” I cursed into her hair.

Here? We were going to do this *here*? Now?

This was an entirely new level I didn’t even know existed.

My fingers twisted into her hair, jerking her head to look up at me.

Some unspoken thing passed between us. A connection forged in blood and blades and fire. It was a joining of souls. Mine twisting with hers, hers with mine, creating something gnarled and twisted. Stronger. New.

“Fuck me, Rook,” she pleaded on a breath, and I could see it in her eyes, she felt it, too. Her thighs pressing together, a pained expression crossing her sharp features. “*Please, Rook. I need you.*”

I wouldn’t make her ask me twice, but I wasn’t about to take her on the defiler’s bed or on his dirty corpse.

I lifted her onto me, and she gasped when I forced my tongue into her mouth, carrying her to the wall until her back was pressed into its rough, uneven surface, pinned there by my hips.

My cock pushed hard into her heat through her clothes, and she moaned as I moved against her. It didn't take long for me to feel her wetness seeping through and I inhaled her next moan as I stepped back, letting her fall back to her feet as I grabbed the waist of her jeans and pulled.

The button popped free and she had them halfway down her legs in the blink of an eye, clawing me back to her, her nails biting down into my chest and shoulder until I felt the well of blood. The caressing trails of it as it flowed down my warm flesh.

She had my cock in her hand again, and I groaned, convulsing as she pumped it, backing up against the wall again, guiding my hand back to her waist.

I did as she wanted, lifting her off her feet as she spread her legs wide for me, using a tight fist around my base to guide me inside.

My head pushed against her opening, and I sucked a breath in through my teeth as she thrust her hips forward, impaling herself on me with a cry, her hips rocking in ecstasy as she arched her back and let her head hang.

I cupped her perfect ass, holding her up as she moved against me, little panting gasps driving me to the brink of an entirely different kind of insanity.

Her tight cunt squeezed me gloriously as I began to move too, slamming into her hips with the taste of Williams' ashes still on my tongue. My lips curled back over my teeth, and I growled against the side of her neck, making her shake in my arms.

Pain exploded across my left shoulder, and I jerked as the sensation awoke something that had long been sleeping deep inside, adding to the intensity of my pleasure.

The glint of my Ghost's blade caught the light, and I smiled. "Do it again."

She stabbed the sharp tip of it into the thick meat of my shoulder muscle, pushing it in slow as I fucked her.

"Harder," she urged me.

I leveled my dark gaze on her, aching to taste her lips again. To feel their softness under the hard bite of my teeth.

"*Harder*," I urged her, the challenge clear.

She pushed hard, and I did the same, her body bucking between me and the wall until I felt her beginning to come undone. Her dripping cunt erratically tightening, *tightening*, *tightening* around my girth until my balls tightened and the fire of my orgasm shredded up my spine.

Reflexively, I lowered my head, biting into her shoulder, marking her in the same place she'd marked me. She gasped, releasing the blade in my shoulder to allow it to clatter to the floor as she coiled around me like a snake, coming on my cock just as my own climax hit like a fucking Mack truck, erasing all thought. Leaving us a tangle of trembling limbs against the wall, the heat of Williams' still smoldering corpse making it even harder to breathe.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Seven

AVA JADE

MR. WILLIAMS' body still had yet to be found in the ash and rubble of his house at the edge of the city, though officials had been searching since the flames and embers died out early this morning. Soon, they'd find him. But for now, Thorn Valley seemed to collectively be holding its breath, waiting for good news.

All except for Layla Hopkins, who we found in the cafeteria at breakfast, staring up at the news channel on the widescreen television, her food untouched. Subtitles flashed across the bottom of the screen, telling the general public that so far, there was no evidence of arson or any form of foul play. For now, at least, they were treating this as an accident and the authorities suspected the fire came from a burner that was left on in the kitchen.

Which was exactly the story Corvus had fed to the fire chief along with a wad of bills and a cliff-notes version of what we'd found in his house in case the chief decided the bribe wasn't worth the man's life.

So far, everything was going to plan, and I couldn't help a smug smirk as I slid into the serving line, piling a plate high with scrambled eggs and bacon while the guys wandered to our table. I gave Grey a strange look, but he didn't see, his stare fixed to the screen over Layla's head.

Apparently, I was the only one eating this morning.

I mean, the sooty, acrid smell of Williams still clogging my nose would probably taint it all with a funny taste, but with enough hot sauce...

Yeah, it'd be fine.

The metal spoon clattered against my tray as I scooped some fruit into a bowl and set it on my tray. Layla twisted in her seat, doing a double take when she saw me. Her first reaction was fear, but I held her there, captive in my stare for a moment, waiting for it to sink in.

I nodded, and she slumped at my wordless admission, a breath puffing from her lips, eyes watering. There it was. The relief.

It solidified that we'd done the right thing.

Layla Hopkins should fear me, but she should fear for the real monsters more.

Better the evil you know than the evil you don't.

"Hey, Angel."

My fingers tightened on the tray, and I turned, finding a very familiar six foot tall frame also piling a tray high with breakfast.

"Drake?"

He peered up at me from the corner of his eye. "Yes?"

I looked to the guys, who were all staring at Drake's back with varying looks of unease.

Drake nudged me out of his way, reaching past my arm to grab some fruit for himself as though this was entirely natural.

"Um, what are you doing here?"

Behind him, I thought I saw another King entering the cafeteria, a girl from my English lit class on his arm, blushing as she bit her lower lip.

Drake tossed his light hair back from his face and lifted a strip of fatty bacon to his mouth, tearing off half the strip with his teeth. "Part of the deal with Dies," he said once he'd

swallowed. “Apparently,” he pointed to the ketchup behind me, “do you mind?”

I moved out of the way for him to grab it. He loaded it onto the mountain of eggs on his plate.

“Apparently, *what?*”

“*Apparently,*” Drake repeated, plopping the ketchup back down. “The Aces have resurfaced further south. They may or may not have cut a deal with the, *uh*, Skeletons?”

“Skeletons?”

“No, fuck, that’s not it. *The Dead Men*. That’s them.”

I lifted a brow. I hadn’t heard of them.

“You wouldn’t know them,” Drake said, reading my mind. “They’re little league. Barely a blimp on the map, but together with what remains of the Aces...”

“Why weren’t we briefed on this?” I found myself asking, as though Drake would know.

He started toward the table, *our table*, pausing to look back over his shoulder at me. “You coming?”

Drake slid in easily across from Corvus, setting his tray down with another piece of bacon hanging from his mouth. He caught Corvus staring and lifted the lip of his plate, tipping it in his direction. “Want some?”

Corvus’ phone rang, and he lifted it to his ear. “Yeah?”

He listened for a minute to whoever was on the other end, eyeing Drake as I slid in next to him and he made some space for me.

“What’s our move?” Corvus asked over the receiver, and I assumed it was Diesel calling to explain just what the fuck was happening.

“Got it,” Corvus said and hung up, setting his phone down on the table.

“Pops?” Drake asked between mouthfuls of egg.

Rook tapped a coin on the table, sitting up straighter to peer over at Corvus. “Want to fill us in?”

“We got word that the Aces were cutting a deal with the Dead Men,” Drake said before Corvus could.

“And apparently Diesel thought it might be a good idea to increase gang presence at Briar Hall in case they try anything,” Corvus added.

“Surprise,” Drake said sarcastically, an easy smile gracing his full lips. “We’re homeroom buddies now.”

Rook’s dark gaze zeroed in on the other Kings entering the cafeteria. I spied the creepy looking fucker from fight night, the one that matched Becca’s description, and wished she was down here eating with us so I could point him out. He hovered near the rear exit to the cafeteria, sipping something from a paper cup.

There looked to be a total of five new students at Briar Hall. Two of whom looked far too old to be here.

Drake, though, even with the evidence of a hard life carved into the weathered lines of his face, somehow managed to give off the aura of someone young and full of life. He fit in. The others really didn’t.

Grey’s foot slid into mine under the table, *hard*, and when I looked up, I found him watching me.

Watching me watch Drake.

Had I been staring that long?

I cleared my throat, my appetite suddenly gone. “I think I’m going to take this up to Becca. See if she’s up to eating anything.”

“Becca?” Drake asked, lifting a brow.

“My roommate,” I explained. “She wasn’t feeling well this morning. She’s still in bed.”

“Ah,” he said, stabbing another forkful of eggs. “Want me to go with you?”

“We’re good here,” Grey said. “Why don’t you go and sit with your guys, yeah? We’ll let you know if we need you.”

I pressed my lips together, holding back a grin.

Drake, unperturbed, stood, scooping up his tray. “Whatever you say, man.” He flashed me another quick grin. “Later, Angel.”

“I don’t like him,” Grey muttered, his hand curling into a fist on the table.

“If he looks anywhere below your neckline again, I’ll have to carve out his eyes,” Corvus added, the new skin forming over the puckered scar on his cheek, catching the fluorescent lighting. We’d taken the stitches out last night and it was looking a lot better.

“He saved your life,” I reminded him.

He shrugged. “Doesn’t matter.”

Rook sat back in his chair, letting his coin roll over his tatted fingers as he watched Drake walk away. “I kind of like him,” he said, making Corvus and Grey balk.

“Don’t you, Ghost?” he asked me with a knowing gleam in his eyes.

I lifted my tray from the table, heat rushing up my neck. “I’m going to see Becks,” I said, dodging the question. “I’ll be back by the bell.”

I heard Grey hiss something nasty at Rook that I didn’t catch and listened to the throaty sound of Rook’s laugh as I left the cafeteria, feeling the itch for a good long run.

“Oh my god, did you get this?” A girl by the elevator asked the guy standing next to her, and I hesitated when the doors pinged opened. “Check your school emails. There’s no way this is real, right?”

“I got it, too! They don’t mean Corvus like *the* Corvus, right?” the guy asked, and I dropped my tray, breakfast forgotten.

The girl looked up at the clattering sound of the tray hitting the tile and startled when she saw me coming, cringing back into the wall, sinking low into a ball, her phone outstretched to me.

“Hey, whoa,” the guy next to her said, lifting his hands, getting in my way.

I decked him in the jaw, sucking in a breath at the sting in my still-bruised knuckles as he careened to the right, tripping to keep his footing.

“What the fuck,” he groaned, his mouth sounding like it was full of marbles.

I took the phone from the girl’s hand and lifted it to my face, scrolling back up to the top of the email on the screen.

“What is this shit?” I asked, nudging her with the toe of my boot.

“I don’t know!” she wailed. “I swear, it just came to my phone.”

The email was a photocopy of an old newspaper. Almost twelve years old.

The headline jumped out on the screen in bold text.

CULT KILLINGS: FIVE DEAD IN BRUTAL SLAUGHTER

What the fuck was this?

All around me, students paused on their way to breakfast and classes, their devices pinging as the email was circulated.

I scrolled lower on the screen, my pulse racing as the gruesome image of a crime scene devoid of bodies but not of blood screamed at me in black and white. It was a child’s bedroom. Complete with train-patterned sheets, tiny toy cars, and a starscape nightlight. The entire thing was coated in blood. It puddled on the mattress, soaked into the carpet. Splashed over the wallpaper. A tiny dark handprint was left on the floor near the base of the bed. A child’s handprint.

My stomach turned.

I scrolled lower, reading the first few lines before I had to force myself to stop.

It was a brutal scene in east Lennox this morning when the bodies of married couple Francine and Douglas Adler were found in their home along with Douglas' brother, Chris Adler, and their eight month old son, Emmanuelle. They are survived by their eldest son, who was admitted to Lennox General this morning with only minor injuries. Authorities suspect the killings were part of a cult ritual due to the nature of the deaths and the—

I couldn't bring myself to read any more.

Bile rose up the back of my throat.

Emmanuelle.

The tattoo on Corvus' chest.

Everyone in the state knew about the cult murders. The Adler family was only the first to go. After them, the Finches and the Hayes were found dead in their homes in similar ways. It was later learned that they were all in the cult together. That Douglas Adler was their leader.

I glanced back down at the text in my hand, seeing where the photocopy of the newspaper had been altered. A piece of paper cut into a thin rectangle covered a line of text that seemed to be saying how the surviving boy's identity would be kept confidential. On it were the words: CORVUS JAMES ADLER.

Fingers shaking, I tapped on the sender's email at the top of the screen.

CrowKiller321@gmail.com

My heart lurched in my chest, heat sizzling down my spine.

I chucked the phone at the wall, and it smashed into tiny bits, raining down onto the tile to the backdrop of gasps from the students in the atrium.

I stalked to the nearest student and knocked the phone from their hand. "Don't fucking read that." I seethed, staring at

all the other students as they stared back at me.

In the cafeteria, a chair scraped back from a table, and I heard Grey shout.

“You fucking heard her,” someone yelled and I turned to find Brianna *fucking* Moore on the bottom of the stairs. “*Put your goddamn phones down.*”

She knocked two phones from the hands of the students nearest to her.

From the corner of my eye, I saw movement and a face flashed clear in the daylight before it vanished around the corner of the west hall.

A face I recognized.

I drew a blade, and the students around me all screamed like little bitches, falling back, their phones suddenly forgotten in the face of something far more interesting: a girl on the edge of her fucking rope.

“Hey!” I bellowed after the King, giving chase as I sped through the atrium and down the hall, catching the flip of his jacket as he pushed through the exit doors at the end and went outside.

“AJ!” I heard Grey shout somewhere behind me, but I wasn’t stopping.

It was him.

That creepy fucker from fight night. I was sure of it. Why lurk around the corner watching like that if he had nothing to do with it.

Why *run*?

Guilty.

Guilty.

Guilty.

“It’s him!” I called back over my shoulder before I shoved through the heavy metal doors, bursting into the humid morning, squinting as the sun stabbed into my eyes.

I raced forward, lifting a hand to shield my eyes as I scanned the front lot for him, seeing nothing.

“Hey!” I screamed, rushing ahead to vault over the low hedges in front of the parking lot. “Come out, you fucking coward!”

I dropped to my knees and bent low, peering under the vehicles in the parking lot, searching for feet, for movement, for anything.

“AJ,” Grey shouted from behind me as I rose back to my feet, storming around an SUV to peer into the bed of a truck.

Grey caught up to me, his gun at the end of his extended hands, aimed low as he looked over all the cars. “Where is he?”

I growled my frustration, my skin tingling with rage. “I fucking lost him.”

I kicked the nearest tire, kicked it again. *Again.*

“*Fuck!*”

“Hey,” Grey said, brushing a soothing hand down my back, but I didn’t want to be soothed right now. I wanted fucking blood. I shrugged him off, putting my hands to my hips as I paced the narrow space between two cars, my chest and back slick with cold sweat, my head spinning from the aftereffects of too much adrenaline and not enough fuel in the fucking tank.

“We’ll find him, AJ,” Grey promised as I hunched over, hands braced on knees to pinch my eyes closed, trying to clear the spots from my vision. “But right now we need to get to the Nest.”

“What?” I asked, and the reality of what’d happened before I saw the King fleeing the scene of his crime hit me. “Corvus.”

Grey nodded gravely. “He took off.”

My heart squeezed. “Alone?”

His jaw locked. “Rook went after him, but Corvus is faster than any of us. He looked like he was heading for the Nest though, so...”

I took one last long look over the cars in the parking lot, praying for even the slightest indication that the fucker was still here, but I really had lost him. He was gone.

But I knew who it was, and I would get answers from him. That was if Maverick still wanted to keep his fucking alliance with the Saints. I wanted him on a fucking platter, and I would have him one way or another.

Drake came rushing from the front entrance a second later, just the person I wanted to see.

“What just happened back there?” he asked, jabbing a thumb back toward Briar Hall. “Your guy just lost his fucking shit. Something about an email?”

“It was your man,” I said, looking at Drake in a new light now, knowing we couldn’t afford to waste much time here. I didn’t like the idea of Corvus alone in the woods, even if it was only a few miles between here and the Nest. It could be exactly what the fucker expected. He could be waiting.

Drake’s brows lowered over his eyes. “What are you talking about?”

I cleared the few steps between us and pointed my blade at him, bringing it to within an inch of his chest. To his credit, he didn’t budge at my advance, only stiffened. “That creepy fuck from fight night. The one you said was your one-man clean-up crew.”

“Aries?”

“I saw him lurking in the atrium when that mass email was sent out to the entire school. And when I pursued him, he fucking *ran*.”

This seemed to surprise Drake, but not as much as it should’ve. “Maybe he was just running because you were chasing him, Angel,” he said with a shrug, but the tension in his jaw said it all. He didn’t trust Aries, either. “I mean, he saw you fight. I’d run, too.”

I shook my head. “I’ll be having a little chat with Diesel about this,” I warned. “If you and your leader want to keep this alliance, I want Aries served to me on a silver fucking platter. You hear me?”

Drake recoiled from the sting of my words but nodded. “It’s probably just a misunderstanding.”

“We’ll be the judge of that,” Grey said.

Drake nodded. “Understood.”

I let my gaze rest heavy on Drake’s for another moment before inclining my head to the Rover parked a few rows down. “Let’s go, Grey.”

CHAPTER

Twenty-Eight

CORVUS

A SOFT KNOCK came at the door to my bedroom. I knew it was her. Something in the tentative double rap of her knuckles gave her away, and I shrunk into myself, resisting the urge to throw something at the door. Shout at her to fuck off and *leave*.

It was exactly what I'd been doing for the last two days, but even I knew I couldn't stay in here much longer. It wasn't that I wanted to hide from my past. It was the fact that I'd worked so fucking hard my entire life to push back those memories. To pretend what happened never happened.

To rid myself of the nightmares that left me in a tangle of sweaty sheets with bile climbing the back of my throat.

"Corvus," Ava Jade whispered through the door. "You can tell me to fuck off if you want, but at least take some food and water. Please?"

I sighed heavily, lifting from my core to throw my legs off the edge of the bed and hang my head. "Come in."

I'd eaten since Tuesday morning. Not much, but enough to keep me sustained. I'd crept downstairs during the early hours of the morning while everyone else in the Nest slept.

The only person I'd spoken to since I'd come home and thrown my door closed had been Diesel. He was the only one who already knew the truth of my heritage. The place and the *people* I'd come from. I didn't know who told him about the

email, but it didn't matter. He'd called me right after putting in a vicious call to the principal, threatening to raze the academy to the earth if they didn't get to the bottom of who had sent the unsanctioned newsletter to the entire student body.

The conversation between my adoptive father and me wasn't a long one, and I'd said little more than yes or no to all the questions he had. A firm *no* to his offer to come by the Nest. Another *no* to his asking whether I knew why the guys and I seemed to be the ones under attack from the Aces.

We couldn't hide the truth from him for much longer, because the truth was whether we had proof or not, I knew it in my bones that this was Ava Jade's stalker. The Aces weren't even capable of these types of attacks. Weren't smart enough.

Whoever this was, they knew just where to stab us. How hard to twist the knife.

Diesel sent Pinkie and Axel since I'd declined his offer to put us up at Sanctum. Extra muscle packed with a small arsenal to back us up in case of an attack.

But it never came.

Tuesday blurred into Wednesday, and suddenly the sun was dawning on Thursday. Time seemed to have no bearing as I sat here, reliving the worst day of my fucking life.

Ava Jade knocked again.

I cleared my throat. "I said come in," I called again, trying not to let my frustration creep into my voice.

She pushed into the room, a bowl clutched in one hand and a water bottle under her arm. Steam coiled off the mountain of breakfast hash in the bowl, and my stomach rumbled.

She offered a sheepish smile and came in, tip toeing across the carpet as though she was walking a tightrope.

"I'm not going to bite you," I growled, accepting the bowl from her, suddenly aware of how terrible I smelled. I needed a fucking shower. Though if she cared, she didn't show it, settling anxiously into a seat on the bed beside me, her palms pressing into her thighs.

“Could’ve fooled me,” she said with a half-hearted laugh, and I flinched at the reminder of all the angry things I’d shouted through that door over the past two days.

“I…”

“You don’t have to apologize.”

“So, want to tell me what I’ve missed?”

She bit her lip. “Not much. We’ve confirmed the Aces have allied with the Dead Men and are on the move. Looks like further south, but Diesel has people keeping tabs on them for now. We’re planning an attack for the end of the week.”

“Friday?”

Shit, was that tomorrow already?

She shook her head. “No. The guys are throwing Diesel a birthday party tomorrow at his place and then we have the full moon party later in the night. We’ll hash out the plan at Dies’ place and roll out early Sunday morning for the attack.”

I grunted my understanding, able to tell she wanted to ask me about *it*. She wanted to divert the conversation back to what she’d seen in that email blast, but I wasn’t ready just yet.

“So soon?”

“My idea,” she admitted. “We weren’t ready last time. We need to strike first this time. Strike hard. Put an end to it all.”

She wasn’t wrong.

“Where’s Becca?”

She jerked her head to the door. “In the loft. Still sleeping, I think.”

“Is that everything?”

Now I was just stalling, and I could tell she knew it, but she played along anyway.

“Almost,” she said. “We think we might know who the stalker is.”

I jerked, twisting my hips to face her. “*What?* Why the fuck didn’t you tell me?”

She lifted a brow at me like I was the one being fucking daft. “Pretty sure you threatened to kill anyone who so much as came within two feet of your door.”

“Who is it?”

“We aren’t a hundred percent sure, but we think it’s Aries. That King that was at fight night. You know the one. He was ___”

“Yeah, the creepy fucker who was watching you. I remember. Why him?”

“He was watching in the atrium when that email went through. I caught him creeping around the hall, and when I went to confront him, he ran.”

“What do you mean, he ran?”

“I mean *he ran*,” she said again, exasperated. “And I fucking lost him and now none of the other Kings have seen him since that morning. He hasn’t checked in with Maverick. Nothing. No word. No trace on his cell. He’s just gone.”

“He matched Becca’s description of her ex fuckbuddy, too, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Did she see him?”

She shook her head. “She was sick, remember? Grey showed her a still image from the security footage from that morning, but there was nothing that caught his face. She said he had the same hair and stature but that was it.”

“So...” My throbbing brain struggled to piece together all the new information. “We think Becca’s guy might also be your stalker? They might be the same person?”

She lifted one shoulder. “Maybe.”

“And that guy may not have ever been an Ace at all, but a King the whole time?”

Seemed a bit fucking far-fetched, but I’d considered all the logical options and none of them were fitting.

She let out a long gush of air. “I don’t know, Corvus. We’re still trying to figure it all out.”

“But if it’s a King, then...”

“The alliance might be a set up,” she finished for me.

“We have to tell Diesel.”

She sagged at my words, and I knew she was thinking it was just one more reason for Diesel to hate her. If we told him she had a stalker that was targeting *us*, he wouldn’t like it. But she was one of us now. And we protected our own. She would see.

This was the closest we’d come to any sort of lead on this guy, and I cursed my dumb ass for not being the one to figure it all out. Instead, I’d been locked up in here like some kind of depressed hermit, leaving all the work to them.

She held out the bottle of water to me, and I swallowed, accepting it from her. I set the bowl down on the nightstand, and she frowned at me.

“I’ll eat it,” I promised. “But I need to do this first.”

“Do what?”

“Did you read it?”

She blinked, her face flushing pink as she realized what I was talking about, adjusting to the abrupt change in topic. Before I could leave this room and get back to business, this needed taking care of.

“Only the first couple sentences,” she admitted. “Once I knew what it was, I stopped.”

I believed her, but I was almost disappointed. It would make hearing everything I was about to say that much harder. It would make telling her that much harder.

“And Rook? Grey?”

She shook her head. “None of us read it,” she told me. “We wouldn’t invade your privacy like that.”

I nodded to myself.

“Can you get the guys?”

Her nose wrinkled, but she nodded and left.

I drank half the bottle of water while I waited for them all to come back, my stomach both growling and turning at the idea of eating the small breakfast someone had prepared for me.

I would eat it though. It was the least I could do considering I hadn't slept in well over seventy-two hours. Again.

“Hey, man,” Grey said, a muscle in his jaw jumping as he hovered in the doorway.

I waved him in.

“You good?”

A shaky laugh passed my lips.

“The truth? Not really, man. But what the fuck is new, right?”

His lips pressed in a tight line as he dragged the folding chair from my desk to a spot near the bed, unfolded it and sat down.

Rook and Ava Jade came in a second later. My Sparrow to the bed next to me, her back taut as she sat down. Rook bit his lip ring, crossing his arms over his chest as he toed the door closed behind him and leaned against it.

He nodded.

I nodded back, then blew out a breath, trying to get control of the ache forming behind my eyes. “I only want to tell you once,” I said to them all. “And then I never want to hear about it again.”

“You don't have to,” my Sparrow was quick to say. “It's really not our fucking business.”

I looked up, holding her stare, a fist clamping around my lungs at the depth of emotion in her eyes.

“I do, and it is. I know all about you,” I told her. “I know where you come from. I know every black mark on your record. I know about your dad. Your mom.”

She recoiled.

“I know about the older guy you were fucking well before it was legal for him to touch you. Kit, was it? Your friend’s self-defense instructor?”

She pursed her lips. “Well someone did their homework,” she muttered to herself, clearly trying not to be angry with me.

“I did,” I admitted. “And that isn’t even half of it.”

She blanched, and I turned my attention toward Rook and Grey. “And you’ve both always been open with me about where you came from. What made you. I owe it to you.”

Grey shook his head. “That’s not how we see it.”

“I know.”

“You don’t know everything,” Rook put in, but he was wrong. I *did*. I wished I didn’t. But I’d done my fucking homework on them, too.

I knew all about the fucker at Barrett’s Home for Boys who liked to defile his charges. I knew all about his time at the Sanatorium. The drugs they fed him. How long they kept him in that padded room. And how often they tied him down.

I knew.

They deserved to know about me, too.

“My last name is Adler,” I started, hating how that single word tasted on my tongue. Souring my stomach. “My father was Douglas Adler, the cult leader responsible for the deaths of a combined twelve people. It would’ve been a lot more if the cops hadn’t figured out what was going on and stopped the three other families involved from *ascending* too.”

“How old were you?” Sparrow asked, folding her hands tightly between her knees.

“Seven.”

I didn't look up. Couldn't handle seeing her face.

"I didn't know much about what my family was caught up in. Only that people came to the house a few times a week and they would all go downstairs, to the basement, and... breathe."

"Breathe?" Grey asked.

"Yeah. Like, weird, fast breathing. Loud. Rhythmic. And then my dad would talk for a while and they would hum. Always the same tune."

The tune that had stuck with me, playing in my unconscious mind at all hours of the day and night, keeping me from sleep for the first month after they died. It had taken me years to finally rid myself of it.

"When my father decided it was time for us to *ascend*, my mother had doubts."

"She tried to stop it?" Rook asked, his expression darkening, hand closing to fists where they were crossed over his chest. I knew he was picturing ripping my father's throat out with his bare hands. I pictured the same thing for years.

"She told me to hide. Tucked me under my bed behind some bins and said not to make a sound."

Ava Jade's chin quivered, and I swallowed past the burn in my throat, needing to continue before I changed my fucking mind. "She said she was going to get my little brother next, but that was when my father came into the room. He told her Emmanuelle had already ascended and was waiting for them on the other side. I didn't know what that meant at the time."

I settled the tremor in my core and sat up straighter, disconnecting myself from the story. A tactic I was cautioned against when the therapist at the hospital told me I may be developing a dissociative disorder.

"She was hysterical," I went on. "But my father calmed her down, promising her it wouldn't hurt and that it would be over soon. He asked her to go and get me, but she told him that she'd already sent me away. Told me to run and to keep running and not stop until I got to town."

“He was angry, but said that I would find my own way to my ascension. That they needed to be strong so that the others would follow their lead into eternal life or some other fucking shit. The memory is all fucked up, but I do remember what happened next very vividly.”

“My uncle came in, and my mom lost it. She was screaming and fighting them. I remember... I remember trying to plug my ears to keep from hearing it. I... I remember the smell of my own fucking piss in my nose. Most of all, I remember feeling completely helpless while they held her still. While she choked. Then it was Uncle’s turn to choke and then my fathers. Through the small passages between the bins, I could see contorted, blurry images of them. Pale. Still. And the red. So much red. Soaking the beige carpet. Streaking their soft white skin.”

“I don’t know how long I stayed there. A long time, I think. But at some point I crawled out. Past their bodies. I remember thinking that they said Emmanuelle had ascended and I didn’t know what that meant but I thought I needed to check on them because my parents weren’t going to. They were never going to again.”

“I found him in his crib.”

Ava Jade choked on a sob, pushing the back of her hand to her mouth to try to keep it in. I tried not to feel it; what I felt when I looked down on my tiny little brother still, bloodless, and lifeless in his crib, surrounded in a puddle of dark crimson. A hollowness to complete that I didn’t think anything would ever fill it again.

But then something did.

Anger.

A toxic rage so complete and so out of control that the state almost sent me away to juvie at eight years old. But Diesel found me. He recognized my anger. Taught me how to use it. To wield it when I needed to, and control it when I didn’t. He was the one who helped me see that the anger was directed at myself, not anyone else.

I was angry because I'd sat there, hiding my face in the carpet, plugging my ears. Crying into my pajamas. Pissing on myself.

I was angry because I did nothing to stop it. Because I wasn't paying close enough attention. Because I didn't see it coming.

Diesel told me if I wanted, I never had to feel that way again, and I never had. Until recently. When Sparrow flew into my world and turned it upside down, a fucking faceless wolf on her heels.

"It wasn't your fault," Sparrow said. "You know that, right? You know you couldn't have done anything to stop them? You were just a kid."

"I know."

"That's some twisted shit, man," Rook said. "Even by my standards."

I laughed hollowly.

"Doesn't change how we see you," Grey interjected. "Not at all. You could've told us."

I pinched the bridge of my nose, sniffing, using the pads of my thumb and forefinger to clear the beginning of tears from my ducts before they could show on the rims of my eyes. "Yeah. I know. I just—"

"Wasn't ready?" Ava Jade supplemented, sighing, and I got the sense she understood more than she was letting on. I wondered if she'd ever share with us her own defining moment. The thing that twisted her beyond repair. Turned her into something powerful. A force of nature.

"I guess."

Her bright eyes cut away from me, finding a spot on the carpet. "Are you going to be okay? I mean. Do you want to stay home again today?"

I shook my head. "Nah. I don't give a fuck what any of them think."

“If anyone so much as looks at you funny, I’ll cut them,” Rook promised.

“Samesies,” Ava Jade echoed, putting on a smile for my benefit. “You should eat. And maybe shower.”

“That bad?” I asked, pinching the front of my shirt to sniff down the collar. Recoiling.

“Kinda,” she replied with a wince, her hand finding my thigh to give it a tight squeeze before she considered her own state of affairs, lifting her fingers to the messy bun deflated against the top of her head. “Want company? My hair’s fucking tragic.”

“On that note,” Grey said, pushing off from his chair. “I’m going to go check in with Dies about their missing King and then get back to trying to trace that email.”

“You could come, too,” Ava Jade offered, and Grey hesitated before his jaw flexed.

I tried not to get my back up at the idea of Ava Jade naked between us, water cascading down her breasts, filtering down her legs. His hands on her wet skin. The idea made my stomach tighten, but it was less repulsive than it had been a few days ago.

“Shower’s too small,” I said.

Grey and I shared a look before he winked at Ava Jade. “Next time, AJ.”

CHAPTER

Twenty-Nine

GREY

“WHAT IS THAT?” I asked Ava Jade, gesturing to the brown box in her hands as we made our way out of the Nest.

She shrugged. “A gift.”

“You bought Diesel a gift?” Corvus asked, incredulous.

I nodded to Pinkie and Axel as they pulled out of the driveway first, letting them know we were right behind them.

AJ pursed her lips. “It’s his birthday, isn’t it? Did you not get him anything?”

“What did you get him?” Corvus asked her, answering her question with one of his own, making her roll her eyes as she opened the door for Becca to slide into the backseat first. Her friend scooted all the way to one side, letting AJ sit in the middle between her and Rook.

“It’s really nice,” Becca said. “I think he’s going to like it.”

“So you told her what it was but you won’t tell us?” I asked, pulling the driver’s side door shut at the same time as Rook and Corvus closed theirs, sealing us all inside the Rover.

“It’s not that big a deal. If you think I shouldn’t give it to him, then I’ll just leave it in the car.”

She was getting frustrated now. We’d made her uncomfortable. Corvus and I shared a look in the front.

Rook patted the box on her lap with a smirk in the rearview. “Whatever it is, I’m sure he’ll love it, Ghost. We’d have gotten him something, but he has a strict no gifts policy for his own birthday.”

She lifted a brow in the rearview. “You could have told me that.”

Rook lifted a shoulder. “Didn’t think you’d be rushing out shopping.”

“I didn’t,” she argued. “I ordered it online.” A huff. “Fuck, I knew it was stupid. I’ll just leave it in the car. Maybe one of you will like it.”

“Sparrow, chill. Give him the gift. It might help soften the blow of...you know.”

I pivoted in my seat, watching her face darken as I looked out the back windshield, reversing out of the spot to drive us down the choppy gravel road. It was decided that tonight we’d tell Diesel about AJ’s stalker. How we suspected it was him who was to blame for the personal attacks against us and not the Aces.

Diesel was already made aware that we thought Becca’s boyfriend, the one who’d been acquiring dangerous intel about us, might be a King. He was working that shit out with the King leader, Maverick, who’d promised to turn Aries over as soon as he was found.

Either the man was a damn good fucking liar or Diesel was losing his touch because he believed they had no ill-intent toward us. And my father could sniff out a lie from a mile off.

But as good as he was, he didn’t know that AJ had a stalker. That we thought Aries and said stalker may be one and the same person.

Tonight, he’d find out.

I doubted AJ’s gift would soften his reaction, but it couldn’t hurt.

Becca squirmed in her seat, staring anxiously from the window. I tried not to be suspicious of her every action, word

spoken, or tick of her face, but it was harder than I'd thought it would be.

I'd been on the voting side to drop her off at the Vandermark hotel on the way to Dies', but she'd been insistent on coming to look out for AJ. Not just in the den of papa wolf, but later, at the Docks for the full moon party.

I didn't know what she expected to be able to do if shit went south in any capacity, but AJ seemed content to have her with us at least for now. Tomorrow morning when we set off on the attack to oblivate the Aces and Dead Men, Becca would be deposited at the penthouse suite of the Vandermark hotel with hired security since we'd need all hands on deck for the fight.

At least she wasn't foolish enough to think she could handle coming with us for that.

"He's totally going to love it," I heard Becca whisper to her friend before inching her window down to light a little pinner of a joint, blowing the smoke out into the slowly darkening evening.

"Want some?" she offered to AJ, who shook her head, but Rook reached over and took it from Becca's fingers.

"Thanks, love," he said, rolling his own window the whole way down, leaning his head back against the seat in the path of the wind as he inhaled deeply. Something was up with him lately. I couldn't place what it was, but he was quieter than usual.

More reserved.

Less on edge.

I knew it was likely to do with the fact that he'd killed a healthy fucking number of people over the past couple weeks, including the things he did to Williams, but I couldn't help feeling like there was something more to it than all that.

Even after a strike three, he was never this reserved.

He adjusted himself in his seat, pushing his hand into the pocket of his jeans and keeping it there as he took another toke

of the joint.

“Hey,” Becca complained, reaching across AJ to steal it back from him before he could finish it. “God, ever heard of puff puff pass?”

Rook didn’t answer, staring out his open window as we turned onto Diesel’s road, the house ahead of us flanked by a line of Saint vehicles. A few of them loitering out by the rose bushes, smoking.

The space next to Diesel’s car in the driveway was reserved for us, and I pulled into it. “In and out,” I reminded the others. People were going to start showing up at the Docks in the next hour or so with or without us and with shit the way it was in Thorn Valley, we couldn’t leave that turf unprotected.

We got out of the car to the sound of Primal Ethos playing on the radio and Diesel smashing his fist on the front window from inside, giving a stern look at the lads smoking near his roses. They fell back to the driveway, nodding at us in turn as we made our way inside.

Anthem of the Broken played low on Dies’ sound system from the living room, and it didn’t escape Corvus’ notice, a vein in his temple throbbing as he worked his jaw. No doubt overthinking what it might mean. Likely it was just The Edge, but if Diesel was as pissed at Corvus about his musical career as he originally seemed to be, he would’ve changed the station by now.

“Is that Primal Ethos?” AJ mouthed to me behind Corvus’ back, pointing through the wall to the living room on the other side, the box still under her arm.

It was a rhetorical question, but I gave her a nod anyway.

“What the fuck?” she mouthed.

I shrugged, noticing her wince as she shifted the box to her other side, rolling out her shoulder. She was getting scary good with that sniper rifle, but it came at a cost. I’d seen her shoulder when she stepped out of the shower last night, purple and blue in the shape of a rifle butt marring eight inches of milky skin in the groove between her shoulder and chest.

Even butting it properly, like I knew she was, it was still leaving marks. We'd need to give it a rest for a while.

"You good, AJ?"

She stopped rolling it and smiled. "Yeah. Why?"

"Nothing."

I pushed past Corv to enter the living room, knowing she didn't need the coddling, even if some foreign instinct inside me wanted to coddle her to fucking death sometimes.

"Hey," I said, finding Dies with a cigar pinched between his first two fingers, standing in the middle of the living room as he told the mustard gas story to a few Kings seated on his low sofa. He looked up as I entered and stopped right before the climax of the story to the shock of his audience.

"Ah," he said, eyes bright with drink. "There's my sons."

He ushered me into the living room, pulling me into his side to sling an arm over my shoulder. "You know these three, don't you?" he asked, pointing the gray ash end of his cigar at the three Kings on his sofa. The middle one was Drake, the other two were Lucas and Avery. They were the ones Dies had agreed to implant into Briar Hall to beef up gang presence there.

Drake lifted his beer in salute as he stood to go and get a refill, while the other two said a lame hello, clearly wanting Dies to get back to his story.

"Happy birthday," I told Dies, who blew off the sentiment.

"Don't remind me."

"What are you now, old man?" Rook said, slinking into the space to toss an arm around Dies' other shoulder. "Fifty seven? Fifty eight?"

Diesel balked at him, releasing me to put an offended hand to his chest. It was good to see him in good spirits. Between his birthday and Christmas, they were the only two days of the year we were guaranteed to see him smile.

"Fifty," Diesel corrected Rook.

“Keep telling yourself that,” Corvus said, entering with Ava Jade and Rebecca Hart on his heels. “You’ve turned fifty the last five years and counting.”

Diesel leaned in close to Rook’s side, whispering in his ear. “That was meant to be our little secret.”

Rook laughed darkly, shaking his head.

It was a running joke among the gang. The oldest Saint members had been bringing balloons and cakes emblazoned with the number 50 for years with no signs of stopping the tradition. If Diesel survived to sixty, I had no doubt he’d turn fifty again that day, too.

“And look who decided to join us,” Diesel said, craftily changing the subject as his sights narrowed on Becca. “Come here, darlin’.”

Becca looked to AJ for guidance, paling, but AJ nodded her forward, a warning in her eyes meant for my father.

Becca came into the living room, swallowing as she took my father’s outstretched hand, and he turned it, lifting it to his lips. “Bygones?” he asked her, holding her gaze with his trademark stare. The one that could hold you captive for hours if he wanted it to.

She choked on her reply, clearing her throat before she echoed his sentiment. “Bygones,” she agreed.

Diesel grinned. “Good.” He tugged her hand, spinning her away toward the couch. “Have a seat, love. The King who was sitting there seems to have grown bored of my story, but I think you’ll like it just as much.”

AJ stood on her tiptoes, peering around into the kitchen, where a group of Saints chatted, beers in hand, weapons at the ready. No one would be getting drunk tonight, but the potential threat wouldn’t stop them from enjoying themselves. It was the one time a year Diesel would have a drink with them, continuing the tradition his wife started of inviting the whole gang over for a birthday potluck each year.

“Is that Drake?”

“Yeah.”

“I wanted to talk to him.”

He looked like he was going out the back. “He’s probably gone for a piss. Wait till he gets back.”

She snuck a look at me, reading my suggestion for what it really was. A plea for her not to go off alone with him.

He was a handsome guy. I hated to fucking admit it, but it was true. And Rook was right. AJ did seem... interested.

I didn’t know whether I wanted to slit his throat or roast him over a fire. I might wind up having to do both. It didn’t matter if she’d already told me she intended to ask him about her father’s death. That conversation could easily go sideways.

Ava Jade chuckled to herself, walking to the couch. She jerked her head at the King next to Becca. “Move,” she said, and he ambled to his feet, giving up his seat for her.

She made no secret of being uncomfortable with the fact that Dies and Maverick seemed content to believe she’d just scared that creepy fucker, Aries, off. I mean, *okay*, she was scary, but only if you’ve done something to piss her off.

Or, maybe she was scary all the time. Judging by the way the other Kings looked at her, I was starting to think we’d just become immune to her.

She set the box down on her lap just as Diesel was about to start into the story anew.

“What’s that?” he asked instead, taking a drag of his cigar.

AJ clenched her teeth. “I wasn’t told about the no gifts rule.”

“No shit?”

“Nope,” AJ confirmed, her lips popping on the ‘p.’

Diesel glared down at the box like it personally offended him, but Rook jabbed him with an elbow, and he cleared his throat. “Well let’s open it then, shall we?”

AJ set it on the small ottoman in front of her and kicked it closer to him, nearly making the box topple to the carpet. Her forefinger spun the dented silver ring on her thumb, the one Rook gave her. It'd become something of a nervous habit over the past few weeks. Not for the first time, I told myself I'd get her one, too.

Something with a stone the color of her eyes. That actually fit her.

She should have one from each of us.

Diesel bent to ditch his cigar in an ashtray on the coffee table he'd pushed against the entertainment unit and lifted the box. He was still a bit unsteady on his leg, but was doing a good job of concealing it.

It pained me to know that he would likely use a cane in private for the rest of his life. It was a hard lesson learned for everyone, but sometimes lessons needed to leave scars to remind us not to repeat old mistakes.

Diesel pulled out a switchblade and carved through the tape on top of the box before re-pocketing it. He pulled out the item inside, letting the cardboard fall to the floor at his feet.

The conversation around us died the instant he held the leather jacket up to the light, his expression hardening.

Fuck.

Rook cursed under his breath and Corvus silently pinched the bridge of his nose.

“*What?*” AJ asked, glaring around at all the Saints watching Diesel carefully for a reaction.

We should've fucking told her.

I didn't think she'd get him a goddamned gift, though.

Why would she need to know that the beat up leather jacket Diesel wore was the last gift he ever received from his late wife?

No matter that it was falling apart. That he'd paid seamstress after seamstress to repair it despite them telling him

it was a lost cause or the fact that he wouldn't agree to replace the lining or any part of it no matter the extent of the damage.

To AJ's credit, it was a nice fucking jacket. She'd likely paid at least a grand for it. And it looked to be Diesel's exact size. Thicker through the shoulders with additional leather and hand-stitched elbow patches. A muted matte black that seemed to absorb all light with a gunmetal silver zipper wider than my thumb, the pull tab custom fashioned into the Saint symbol.

Diesel lowered the jacket, laying it over the ottoman in front of him with a carefully crafted blank expression. "Was there something wrong with my jacket?" he asked AJ.

"*Dies,*" I tried. "She didn't know."

He held a hand up to silence me. "Answer the question."

Getting angry now with all the eyes on her, AJ lifted her chin, and I winced inwardly. "Not if you like the hobo-chic look."

Diesel turned his ire on me. "I think it's time for you boys to go," he said, and his stare brokered no argument. "Your Docks need manning."

He whistled sharply. "Axel, Crowley, Derrik. You're with them. Pack up. Get out."

AJ, skin bristling, stood from the couch, eyeing the jacket like she might take it back but ultimately thinking better of it. She hauled Becca to her feet with her. I guessed we weren't going to be having that chat with Diesel about AJ's stalker problem tonight after all.

"Come on, Becks," AJ said, her face red as she pulled Becca from the room.

Corvus whispered something to Dies, and our father clenched his jaw, but made no reply as Corvus stepped away, dropping his head instead.

"Later, Dies," I said halfheartedly, and he gave me a nod, clapping Rook on his back as we all left, some of the fire gone out of him at whatever Corvus had said.

“What did you say to him?” I asked as we moved to follow the girls back out onto the street. We’d barely lasted fifteen minutes in there. To be fair, it was ten minutes longer than I thought we’d last with AJ and Becca in tow.

“I told him that Jacqueline would’ve liked Ava Jade, and he knows it... and that he really needs a new fucking jacket.”

I snorted. My brother wasn’t wrong.

From what we knew, Ava Jade was just a younger version of Diesel’s previous wife. Strong, with a spine sturdier than a roman column and sass for fucking days.

“What the shit was that all about?” AJ demanded, tearing open the door of the Rover a millisecond after I unlocked it.

“That shitty jacket he wears,” Rook said, sliding in beside her. “It was the last thing his wife ever bought him.”

“And no one fucking told me?”

“We didn’t exactly expect you to get him a gift,” I replied, reaffirming what we were all thinking.

“It’s his *birthday*. That’s what you do.”

“Even for people who once tried to have you killed?” Rook asked, cocking his head as I started the ignition.

“If they also happen to be the father of the three guys you’re fucking, then yeah. Even then.”

She grumbled wordlessly to herself while Becca pressed her lips together to keep from laughing, a blush on her cheeks.

“Oh, Ghost,” Rook joked, tugging her in against his side despite her protests. “You’re nicer than I thought you were.”

“Don’t make me fucking stab you, Rook. Let me go.”

She extricated herself from him, her glare sharper than her words.

He lifted a hand in mock surrender, digging into his right pocket for his blade to hold it out to her. “Don’t make promises you aren’t going to keep.”

She rolled her eyes at him and sank back into her seat, simmering in her frustration with arms crossed over her chest.

“I bet you he wears the jacket by Christmas,” I said, turning on the radio as I pulled out onto the road, waiting for Axel and the others to pull up behind us before leaving.

“Or he’ll use it for kindling in tonight’s bonfire,” Rook said, and I sent him a look in the rearview.

What the fuck, man?

He shrugged. “What? It’s the truth.”

CHAPTER

Thirty

AVA JADE

BECCA BUMPED my shoulder as we pulled into a parking spot at the Docks, over-eager party-goers already flooding the entire area.

“Come on, girl,” she said. “Let’s go get you a drink.”

I grumbled wordlessly in reply, sighing as I followed her from the Rover, the guys exiting along with us. The music rose into the night, echoing across Spirit Lake and back to us as scantily clad bodies sauntered up the long dock to the twinklight covered pier. Inside the wide opening, people were already dancing. White and purple light twisted and flickered over the floor in time with the beat.

This was positively the *last* fucking place I wanted to be right now, though I understood the need to be here. Beneath the layers of graffiti painted all over the once green warehouse, you could still see the sharp spike at the top of a spade shape. The strong triangular form of a red ‘A’ since covered over with a glowy looking Saint tag.

If the Saints didn’t hold the location, the Aces could make a play for it, though I doubted they were strong enough to do that now. I also fucking doubted something as idiotic as a pier mattered to them. Though the guys had told me when the Aces controlled the Docks the place was a fucking shit show. Young girls getting roofied. Dirty drugs causing overdoses. Less than willing participants guided, stumbling, to the Red Room.

That wasn't how they ran this place, and it showed. Teens and younger adults alike congregated here, wary of my Crows, but respectful of their authority. They knew exactly what would happen if they broke one of the rules. If they stepped a toe out of line. So they didn't. Mostly.

Apparently, Rook once tossed a guy over the railing out back for trying to sell blow laced with dirty fentanyl. The guy lived but barely.

As we made our way up the dock, Corvus accepted a small bag from a skinny twenty-something with messy black hair and dipped his pinkie finger in. It came out white, and he touched it to his tongue, tasting the cocaine. He nodded, indicating the larger bag the smaller one had come from, checking its contents. He lifted out a Ziplock with about thirty single pills in smaller baggies inside. "We don't allow these here," he told the guy, tucking the bag into the inside pocket of his jacket. "You can collect them at the end of the night."

"But—"

"Problem?" Rook hissed at the guy, and he shook his head, pulling the drawstring on his drug bag tight.

"No. Not at all. Thanks, man."

No one sold drugs here that didn't first pass through inspection from the Crows. And not without them getting their cut at the end of the night.

The dealer scampered off after the crowd, slyly making inquiries as he passed through couples and groups of friends bound to split by the time the night was through.

I sighed, hearing heavy booted footsteps behind me and turning to see Axel, Crowley, and Derrik coming up the dock behind us, each carrying a heavy duffle. One of which I recognized. I lifted a brow at the badly concealed heavy artillery. "Really?" I asked Axel, indicating the sniper rifle. "Is that necessary?"

The guys and I were already armed with our regular load-outs, theirs buffed only with additional magazines. The gear

the other Saints were carrying seemed hella fucking overkill to me.

Though no one else seemed to notice or care.

Axel fell into step beside me. “Orders,” he said with a shrug. “Grey knows how to use it.”

I smirked. Grey wasn’t the only one who knew how to use it anymore, but Axel didn’t need to know that. There was a quiet sort of satisfaction in keeping that fact to myself.

“So,” Axel said, dragging out the ‘o,’ his gaze sweeping up to Becca walking a few paces ahead next to Grey, the pair of them chatting while they walked. “Your friend, is she—”

“Touch her, and I’ll cut your balls off.”

Axel coughed, his eyes going wide as he stared down at his feet instead of at her ass. “Cool. Noted.”

Even if he wasn’t a healthy ten years older than her, I didn’t want Becca getting any more ingrained in this life with these people than she already had to be. With any luck, we’d get the Ace problem *and* my stalker dilemma resolved in the next few days and she could go back to her normal life without having to look over her shoulder, worried someone might want her dead.

Something inside of me crumpled at the realization that the only way she’d ever be truly free—really out of danger—would be for me to put distance between us, too. I was a Saint now. Like it or not and regardless of the tentative truce between Diesel and me, I doubted he was going to let me go.

Truthfully, I didn’t think I wanted to be let go. Not if it meant being separated from my Crows.

“Well, I’m going to go stuff this shit in the back office,” Axel said awkwardly, hefting the sniper bag higher on his shoulder as he took off into the pier, the other Saints following closely behind him.

“What’d you say to him?” Rook asked, rushing to catch up, tossing his finished cigarette into a sand pail by the entrance as we stepped inside.

I pursed my lips. “Not much. Just that I’d cut his balls off if he touched Becca.”

Rook tipped his head to one side. “Can’t blame the guy for trying,” Rook said with a mischievous grin, his gaze tracking to Becca, who was drawing a little mickey of Crown Royal whiskey from her black purse, her hair falling over her face like a shimmering curtain.

No. I really couldn’t.

Becca was hot as fuck.

If I swung that way...

“*Ava Jade*,” Rook said, and I hadn’t heard him say my real name in so long that I startled at the sound of it leaving his lips, my stomach flipping. “Do I need to be worried?”

He glanced between Becca and me, speaking just loud enough for me to hear him over the music.

I snorted, shaking my head as I swatted him. “No. But just because I don’t order from that menu doesn’t mean I can’t appreciate the options.”

“Hey,” I grabbed his chin hard, tugging his gaze back to me. “*I* can read the menu. Not you.”

His lips split wide, teeth grazing over the ridge of his lip ring as he looked down on me.

“Aves!” Becca shouted, and instinctively, I bent at the knees, hand reaching for a blade.

“What are you doing?” she asked, holding out the small bottle of whiskey to me with a raised brow.

Fuck. I needed to relax. Just a little.

I shook my head, accepting the bottle to take a small sip, just enough to wet my tongue and feel a burn down the back of my throat. Tonight wasn’t the night to lose control, no matter how much I’d have liked to. I still couldn’t fucking believe Diesel’s nerve.

That jacket was nine hundred bones. The most I’d ever spent on an article of clothing, like, ever. The only reason I’d

spent the money was because it was gang income. Money I'd earned from the diner hold-up and my winnings from fight night. With the Crows covering literally all of my other living expenses and now with a free ride at Briar Hall, what the fuck else was I going to spend it on?

A girlish voice whispered beneath the hard shell formed in my mind... *shoes. Bras.* Those pretty lacy panties I'd seen in Becca's laundry. I wondered how much a pair of those cost.

I handed the whiskey back to Becca and shivered as Grey ran a fingertip down the back of my arm, slipping his hand into mine, our fingers twining. He grinned at me before leaning over to say something in Rook's ear that I didn't catch. Rook grinned eagerly, his black eyes flashing on me.

"Come on," Corvus shouted, leading the way to the raised stage at the back of the space, his body a long, rigid line.

I grabbed Becca and towed her along with us as we weaved through the crowd, Rook pushing ahead to catch up to Corvus.

Around us, I saw how everyone stared.

At all of us, but mostly at Corvus.

It was easy to tell if they were staring because they knew him as The Bone Man, their eyes bright and expressions filled with a devout sort of admiration. Or... if they were staring because they now knew him as the sole survivor of the Lennox Cult Murders.

Some of those looked on with pity, others with disdain. I released Becca, flashing my blade at the latter with a warning in my stare that had them turning their heads real fucking fast.

Corvus stepped up onto the stage, looking down on Rook with his brows lowered like he didn't particularly like something he'd just said. Axel and the others returned from their office drop off, settling onto the sofa atop the dais.

"Hey," Grey said, leaning forward to talk to Becca on my other side. "You good chilling here with Axel and the others for a minute?"

Her face screwed up, and she cocked her head at him. “I mean, I guess so, why, what’s—”

“We need to talk to AJ real quick. Won’t be too long.”

Becca’s lips popped open in a little ‘o’ and clearly she was catching on to something I wasn’t. “Ah,” she said after a second. “*Talk*. I got you.”

She brushed against my shoulder. “Have a wonderful conversation,” she said in my ear, giving me a knowing look as she sauntered up the two steps onto the dais and plopped herself down on the sofa between Axel and Crowley. Axel’s eyes flicked up to meet mine for a second before he shifted a few inches away from Becca.

“So, what exactly do we need to talk about?” I asked Grey, catching sight of Corvus and Rook over his shoulder a few feet away at the edge of the raised stage, arguing about something.

“You’ll see.”

“What’s going on?”

“Trust,” he said simply, lifting our joined hands to press a warm kiss to the back of my palm. The sly gleam in his eyes gave me goosebumps, and I thought maybe I knew what they wanted to *talk* about.

Grey grinned, tugging me toward the door to the Red Room.

I bit my lip as I craned my neck to see Rook and Corvus still arguing. Something in my belly tightened as Rook threw his hands up, his lips easily readable as he shouted at Corvus. “Fine. Your loss, man.”

Grey opened the door to the Red Room and dragged me through as Rook left Corvus standing at the edge of the stage, his hands in fists at his sides.

The red light flicked on, and a gush of warmth rushed over my skin as we entered the room, the smell of lavender scented cleaning products and some kind of diffused oil thick in my nose.

I blinked to adjust to the light, skin tingling as Grey released my hand to remove his jacket.

My throat went dry, at odds with my greedy cunt as my gaze swept the room, finding it devoid of partygoers, but filled with a hundred other things that made adrenaline spike in my blood.

Leather straps affixed to the walls. A large silver hook where at least five different types of whips hung like a horse's mane from the low ceiling. A suspicious chest with a padlock on the side. A sex swing. A shining silver pole. Low, inviting black couches strewn with cock shaped pillows. Mirrors reflecting reversed images of us from the ceiling.

And the piece de resistance, a round table at the heart of the space with spokes jutting out from its cushioned leather edges, an assortment of leather straps and buckles flayed open, waiting for someone to latch on to.

Behind us, the door opened, washing louder music into the room for an instant as a couple tried to push through the door, giggling, already drunk.

Rook slapped a palm against this side of the door, stopping them from coming all the way in. "Room's closed."

They fell back, the guy putting his lady friend in front of him like a shield as they backed away. A little laugh escaped my lips as Rook shoved the door shut, tipping his head to one side to give me one of his rare wide smiles.

"So, Ghost... shall we put you to the test?"

"Depends..." I trailed off, trying not to let it show how badly I wanted to rip all their clothes off. After the bullshittery of earlier tonight and the bullshittery of our lives in general lately, I could think of no better release than this, but something was missing.

"Is Corvus coming?"

Rook's grin faltered. "No, Ghost."

"But he knows I've been with both of you, too," I reasoned, not understanding his reluctance to join us. I didn't

realize how badly I'd been craving that.

Being with Grey and Rook together had been the most incredible sexual experience I'd ever dared to imagine, but having all three of them at once...?

Fuck. If it didn't kill me, it would only make me stronger, right?

"Knowing it is one thing," Grey said, kicking off his shoes, his gaze still heavy on my body. "Watching is another."

"Our brother has never been much good at sharing," Rook added. "At least, not with the things that matter."

I nodded, trying not to sound disappointed as a Primal Ethos song began to play outside, the lyrics of it filtering through into the room, muffled by the door. The throb of the beat expanding and contracting around us echoed in my chest.

It was almost like he was here with us, and I let a small, coy smile find my mouth.

Rook was right, it was Corvus' loss. It didn't need to ruin it for the rest of us.

As though he sensed the change in the atmosphere at my conscious decision to enjoy myself no matter what, Rook cleared the gap between us. I braced myself, a small moan coming from my lips. A jolt of pure, unfiltered lust struck me like lightning as his strong fingers carved a path up the back of my neck, twisting into my hair to tug my head back, his lips crushing to mine.

Behind me, Grey pressed a hot kiss to the base of my neck, his fingers finding the zipper at the top of the slinky black dress I was wearing. It raced down the length of my spine, hands running over my ribs as he pushed it wide open, fingertips tracing the solid lines of my Saint tattoo before coaxing the sleeves from my shoulders and down my arms.

Rook's lips left mine, his mouth finding my throat, teeth grazing the sensitive skin along my collarbone. I shuddered between them, my gaze finding the door behind Rook. "What..." I said on a gasping breath. "What if someone comes in?"

“Let them,” Rook said.

“Fuck that,” Grey said, his warmth leaving my back as we went to lock it, but just before his fingers could catch on the lock, the door opened and Corvus’ six foot frame pushed through, shutting the door behind him.

Rook released my hair, and I let my head roll, feeling the brush of warm air on my chest and back as my dress hung awkwardly from my frame. Half on and half off.

Corvus’ jaw tightened, his light eyes blackening.

“Stay,” I said before I could stop myself. “Please.”

He growled low, twisting his head down and away from me.

I brushed past Rook, and he let me go.

I gave Corvus no choice but to look at me as I planted myself in front of him, reaching past his wide frame to lock the door.

“Stay,” I said again, slowly peeling my dress from my arms, pushing it past my hips to let it pool in a black puddle around my heels.

His hungry eyes roved over the blades strapped to my body and the lingerie he bought me after the Lodi show. The night he first had me and ruined my bra and panties.

I put a hand to his chest and felt him shudder beneath my fingers. “I’m yours,” I promised him, letting that sink in but not without a caveat he had to understand because I would *never* choose between them. I couldn’t.

And I didn’t fucking care what that made me. What that made us.

I wouldn’t have it any other way.

“*All of yours.*” I twisted to face Grey and Rook, both of them breathing heavily, waiting in the wings for the go ahead. “*And you are mine.*”

“Sparrow...”

“You don’t have to stay,” I told him. “But I want this.”

He lifted his chin. “Then you’ll have it.”

I couldn’t help smiling, my thighs squeezing as a violent need coiled up through my belly, making me clench my teeth. Making my toes curl.

Corvus’ eyes lifted to something behind me before returning to my face. “Do you trust us?”

I turned to see what he was looking at, my throat bobbing at the sight of the table—the straps that would hold me down.

“That’s a loaded question,” I whispered, so low I didn’t think he would’ve heard me, but he jerked my back against his chest, erasing the space between us as he lowered his mouth to my ear.

“Give me my answer, Sparrow.”

I swallowed. “Yes.”

His hand snaked down between my breasts, lower to flatten against my stomach, fingers tickling at the edge of my panties.

Rook and Grey watched as Corvus slipped his hand beneath my panties, brushing over my soaked opening.

He groaned into my ear, nuzzling at my neck, making me shut my eyes against the riot of sensations coursing through my body.

Then he released me just as suddenly, pushing me forward. I thought I’d fall, but Rook was there, and he took me from his brother eagerly, dipping his head closer to mine, his fingers pressing hard into my waist. “You don’t have to do this,” he said, and somehow, coming from him, those six words made me *melt*.

I remembered the look in his eyes out behind the apartment buildings. When we’d fought and he’d held me down. His weight pressing heavily into my body, making it impossible for me to move. For me to get free.

I'd panicked, and he'd seen it for what it was. My trauma making a resurgence, wrapping its spindly fingers around my throat. Suffocating me.

I shook my head, pushing his black hair from his eyes. "I want to."

Besides, these were straps, not vicious hands. And these were my Crows, not a dealer come to collect his due.

"Tie her down," Corvus said, and a flutter of anticipation beat against my ribcage.

Grey took my hand on the one side, and Rook snatched my other, both of them leading me to the table like a pair of magicians might lead their lady to a vanishing cabinet.

But I intended to be *very* present.

They helped me step up onto the table, my heels making it difficult.

I reached down to take them off, but Grey settled a hand over mine, stopping me, a wicked gleam in his eyes. "Leave them on," he said.

"Lie back, Ghost."

My heart thudded against my ribcage, echoing in my ears over the muffled roar of the music outside.

I sank to my backside and let Grey tug my legs off the edge of the table as I lay back, my head resting on the pillowed edge, nearly hanging off.

Rook stuffed a hand beneath my back and undid my bra with a flick of his wrist, tugging at the delicate material until it came all the way off, my breasts laying heavily against my chest, nipples pebbling from the slightest brush of the fabric.

"Mmmm." Rook groaned, bending over the table to grab my left breast and guide it into his mouth. I tried to reach for his hair, my hips bucking, but my arms were ripped away, pressed down against the cushioned edge of the table as Corvus buckled them in starfish wide.

I bucked against Rook's mouth, resisting the urge to pull my arms from Corvus' grip. This was what he wanted. What he needed.

My full surrender.

If he would give me what I craved, I would at least try to give him what he craved, too.

I opened my eyes, seeing my reflection in the mirror above. My torso covered over with Rook as he lavished my breasts, his mouth on one, his hand roughly pawing the other. And Grey at my hips, adjusting me so that my ass was on the cushion, legs hanging all the way off the table, before he fixed the wide leather strap over my lower waist, securing me in place.

And Corvus, studiously tightening the straps at my wrists. I could see the tension in his shoulders even from the birds-eye-view angle as he tried *not* to watch what Rook was doing.

I moaned louder as Rook bit down on my right tit, my head tipping back at the pain.

I reached uselessly outward, trying to find something, someone to hold on to. I wanted to touch them. Taste them.

Why were they making me wait?

"Patience, Sparrow," Corvus said, his voice a gravelly rumble from his chest.

Rook fingered a blade from where it was strapped to my thigh and twirled it in his fingers, making my breaths come uneven and my throat bob in anticipation.

I followed the glint of it in the red light as he lowered it to the hollow below my rib cage and carved a path downward, hard enough to let me know he meant business, but not hard enough to draw blood. Not yet.

I peeled my shoulder blades from the table, trying to watch, but a strong hand on my shoulder jerked me back down, finding the underside of my chin to hook my gaze backward. "Eyes on me, Sparrow," he said, holding me

hostage with his icy stare as Rook sliced my panties off, exposing me to the air.

“*Fuck*,” Grey groaned and I felt fingers on my thighs, but had no idea whose they were. “She’s so wet for us.”

“Are you ready to come, Sparrow?”

A hot breath gushed from my lungs, laced with a need so strong it made black spots dance at the edges of my vision. “Yes.”

Corvus broke eye-contact to give a tight-jawed nod to his brothers.

My eyes rolled back as mouths closed over the sensitive parts of me. A hot tongue circled my swollen clit. Teeth grazed over my nipples. Hands grasped and groped. And all the while, Corvus watched me, his own breathing growing heavier to match mine as he fed off my bliss.

I licked my lips, eyeing the upside down swollen bulge just inches from my face. “Fuck my mouth,” I asked him, squirming as fingers joined the tongue lapping at my clit, adding the perfect amount of pressure to the mix. I strained, holding back a cry as a tiny cut opened up on the outside of my thigh, the sting of it meeting the humid air making my head spin.

“What do you say?” Corvus asked, his hair falling forward as he stared down at me, cocking his head to one side, eyes filled with fire.

“*Please*,” I begged, fighting against the straps holding my arms down.

He bent forward, his palm on the base of my chin moving lower to hold me lightly by the throat as he kissed me. I moaned into his mouth as his brothers continued their slow torture of my body.

When his lips left mine, his cock replaced them. Corvus moved to brace the back of my neck, tugging me as close to the edge as he could, giving me the angle I needed to take him in. The wide, salty girth of him slid down my tongue, pressing

deeply at the back of my throat, holding there until I choked before pulling back to repeat the motion.

My eyes watered, the beginning of my orgasm built as Rook cut me again, and whoever was between my legs, *Grey* I suspected, increased his tempo. My body trembled against the table, and I could hardly catch my breath as Corvus began to fuck my mouth in earnest. I opened up my throat for him, taking breath when I could to keep the blackness at the edges of my vision from seeping any further in.

I cried out on his cock as my climax spun up from within unlike anything I'd experienced before. It crashed over me like a wave, centered around my breasts before ripping down the length of my torso to set fire to my core, making my clit pulse beneath Grey's mouth.

Had I just...had a nipplegasm?

"Fuck," I choked out as Corvus slid his cock from my throat, and I strained, catching my breath, squirming against the binds holding me down as Grey and Rook coaxed the orgasm to its fullest, making me scream. Colorful stars burst behind my eyelids until my entire body tightened so completely that I was on the brink of cramping.

Corvus grabbed my throat anew, pulling my heavy gaze back to him as my climax crested and began to fade, leaving me sated but still craving *more*. I would never get my fill of these men.

Not ever.

"Tell me what you want, Sparrow," he said, his teeth bared, cock just out of reach of my lips, glistening with a bead of precum on its perfect head.

"You," I told him, jerking from his grasp to look at the others. Grey between my legs, his lips wet, and Rook hovering over my body like a wraith, his black eyes savage in the red light. "I want all of you."

I didn't care if that made me the biggest slut on the planet. I wanted to feel all of them inside of me.

“Spin it,” Corvus said, and confusedly, I craned my neck up to see him, but then he was whisked away.

No, *I* was whisked away, my stomach flattening against my spine as the table spun viciously and I was left with Grey at my head and Corvus at my hips.

“Careful what you wish for, Ghost,” Rook taunted, biting his lip ring, distracting me so that when Corvus thrust into my dripping cunt with one strong stroke of his hips, I didn’t see it coming. My stomach lurched to my throat at the fullness of him seated inside of me, and my head tipped back. My cry of pain and pleasure stolen from my lips by Grey’s kiss.

Corvus fucked me hard and fast, grunting into his thrusts as Grey stroked my breasts, his tongue meeting mine. When he pulled away, leaving me gasping, I found Rook touching himself beside the table, his dark stare tracking Corvus’ movements. Looking equal parts like he wanted to skin Corvus alive and join him.

“Spin,” Rook demanded, his upper lip curling as he was brought to the edge of his need. He gripped the nearest spoke to him and jerked it, giving Corvus no choice but to pull out of me as I was spun toward Rook.

Rook slapped my cunt before moving in between my legs, making me buck against the strap tight around my waist with a gasp rushing down my throat. He took me swiftly, lifting a knee to brace himself on the edge of the table to deepen the angle of his thrusts.

He slapped against my thighs until I felt them begin to bruise, felt my next orgasm building like a wave, rolling, growing, cresting.

He flicked my clit, bringing me to my edge with an animal grunt on his lips.

“Spin,” Grey said, his tone dripping danger.

But Rook didn’t let me go, holding tight to the spokes on the outside of his knees as he fucked me through my orgasm.

“I said *spin*,” Grey hissed, and the table shuddered beneath me as the sound of snapping wood assaulted my ears.

I craned my neck back to see a busted wooden spoke in Grey's lifted hand. He'd ripped it clean off the table.

Rook gave in to his brother, spinning the table hard, making Grey have to catch me by the knee before I could soar past him. He leaned over me, his normally playful, kind eyes, heated to cracking. He bent his head, pressing a kiss to my stomach. Then lower.

"Untie my hand," I said, my voice more a moan than words as I tipped my head to the left, finding Corvus' bright eyes roaming the surface of my naked flesh. Looking everywhere but at Grey and what he'd begun to do between my legs, dipping his fingers into my wet cunt before gently prodding them against my ass.

I shuddered as he pushed inside with his thumb, slowly stretching me for him.

Corvus untied my left hand, and I stretched the extra few inches over the edge of the table to grab his cock in my hand, still slippery from my wetness. I stroked his length, watching his face closely until I had the pressure just right.

Grey removed his thumb and lifted my legs, pushing them together before tucking them over his right shoulder. He pressed his cock into my cunt for a second before moving it lower, pushing it into my ass.

I tipped my head up, finding Rook stroking his cock.

I licked my lips, and he took the cue, moving in closer, grabbing my jaw with his rough fingers to jerk my chin up, forcing my mouth open to push his cock inside.

Grey eased all the way into my ass, and I moaned around Rook's cock in my mouth, impressed with my ability to keep up a continuous stroking of Corvus' cock with my left hand.

"Holy fuck," Grey croaked. "You're so fucking tight, AJ."

I moaned in response, opening up my throat for Rook as he lengthened his strokes, fucking my mouth with a sort of slow gentleness I didn't know he possessed. His rough fingers holding my face steady so at odds with the torturous pace he

was forcing himself to maintain, grimacing with each easy thrust into my mouth.

Grey gripped me by the hips, quickening his pace until he was pummeling my ass with his cock, hitting something deep inside that made fire race up my back and tingles fall down my legs.

Another climax began to build, my already battered nervous system shooting sparks into my blood at the oncoming storm, but I was powerless to do anything to stop it. To lessen the force of impact as Grey slipped a hand between my legs and added the pad of his thumb to the mix, rubbing my clit as he fucked my ass.

“I’m coming,” I said around Rook’s cock, and it triggered something in them all.

Rook wrapped a tight fist around my throat, blocking my airway, fucking my mouth faster. Corvus moved his hips in time with the strokes of my hands, shuddering, bending over the table, wide palms splayed over its surface next to me. His face pinched and breaking.

“AJ,” Grey said, breathless. “Come on, baby. Come for me.”

My body responded, as though on his command alone, I came again, this time, the black spots dancing around the edges of my eyes crowded in, and I sagged, my muscles spasming and screaming as the orgasm tore through me, making my legs go numb.

Grey grunted as he came, his hands gripping tight to my thighs like life rafts at the same time Rook released my throat, coating my tongue with the salt of his release.

“*Fuck, Sparrow,*” Corvus growled, curling in against the table as his heat spilled down my knuckles, dripping onto the table.

“Untie me,” I croaked as Grey slid out of my ass, lowering my legs.

“You good, Ghost?” Rook asked, his chest heaving as he caught his breath, his cock still steel stiff, jutting out from the

top of his jeans.

I swallowed past the dryness in my throat, wincing at the ache.

“Get her a drink,” Grey said, and I heard movement, and then Corvus was there, lifting my head from the table to feed me a sip of water from a freshly cracked bottle. It sloshed over my cheeks and down my neck as I drank greedily, but I didn’t care.

“Better?”

“Yeah,” I sighed.

I felt Grey’s hands flying over my waist, undoing the wide strap there while Corvus and Rook worked the ones at my wrists.

I pulled my legs and arms in to my chest, luxuriating in the feel of my muscles recoiling back to where they belonged. As the creeping fingers of oblivion retracted their claws and I regained full consciousness.

“Are you hurt?” Corvus asked, peeling my knees back to get a better look at me.

I grabbed his wrist, and when he moved back, I went with him, letting myself be drawn from the edge of the table, unsteady on my heels for a second before my head stopped spinning. He held me there until I was good.

“That was...”

“Insane?” Corvus supplied.

“Incredible,” I corrected him, sex drunk and grinning from ear to ear.

Rook slipped me a soft towel and I took it, cleaning the evidence of them from my body as I swayed toward the sofa.

“What is that?” Grey asked, and we turned in time to see him zipping up his jeans again, his head cocked to one side, listening.

Immediately, I was on edge, my fingers tripping down my calf for the blade at my ankle, still shaky.

But then I heard it, too.

Vibrating.

Corvus cursed, grabbing his jeans from the floor to retrieve his phone, but it'd already stopped ringing.

“Dies,” he said, flicking over his phone screen.

The vibrating started again, and I looked down to find my phone screen lit up where it had fallen to the floor sometime since we'd entered this room.

I bent and picked it up, putting it to my ear while I jammed a finger in the other to hear over the subdued noise coming from outside the Red Room.

“Hello?”

“Jesus fucking Christ, does *no one* answer their goddamned phone anymore?”

“Diesel?”

“Shut up and listen. They're coming. You need to—”

“*What?*”

“Sparrow, what is it?”

“The Aces and the Dead Men, they're coming right fucking now,” Diesel shouted down the line. “Do you hear me? Get ready. Our man just spotted them turning down the Dock road. We're still twenty-minutes out and they're right on fucking top of you.”

CHAPTER

Thirty-One

AVA JADE

I TOSSED my cell to Corvus with Diesel still screaming down the line, rushing to kick off my heels and pull my bra and black dress back on over my naked body.

“We’ve got company,” I said to Grey and Rook just as a loud bang resounded in the Red Room. I jumped, drawing a blade as the bang came a second time, louder. Someone was battering themselves against the door, trying to get in.

Becca was out there.

Grey drew his gun, lifting it to take aim at the door as it burst wide open and Axel came flying through.

“*Fuck, Axe,*” Grey said on a breath. “I almost fucking shot you.”

“They’re coming,” Axel said, practically frothing at the mouth, his own gun held tightly in his right hand, aimed low to the ground. “We need to get these kids out of here.”

“It’s too late,” I told Axel, shaking my head. “If they’re already on the dock road they’re going to be here any minute.”

“Get as many of them as you can into this room,” Corvus ordered. “Move the rest out back along the dock. We’ll keep them as far away from the line of fire as possible.”

Axel hesitated.

“Fucking *now*, Axel.”

“Becca,” I said, panicked, racing after Axel through the door. “Where the fuck is—”

“Aves!”

My breath caught when I saw her, standing with her arms tight around herself by the couch. “Becca!”

I went to her, flipping my blade into my palm to take her by the shoulders without cutting her. Her eyes were wild with fear. “It’s okay,” I told her. “You’re going to be okay. Come with me.”

“Sparrow,” I heard Corvus shout behind me just as the music was cut and a loud gunshot rang through the room, soliciting screams from the crowd. I shoved Becca behind me and lifted my blade, but it was only Axel getting everyone’s attention.

“*Everyone shut the fuck up,*” Axel bellowed, surprising me with the level of volume he was able to put out from his smaller frame.

The crowd quieted and Corvus took over, storming to the edge of the stage. “Listen up,” he hollered. “There are some really bad fucking people on their way here right now. Hey! Hey you, *stop*. Don’t try to leave, there’s no time. These people don’t have qualms about laying out a few innocent people to get what they want.”

Somewhere to my right, several girls began to cry.

“*Calmly,*” Corvus said, injecting the single word with enough venom to put even the strongest man into a state of paralysis. “I need everyone to make their way to the Red Room. Hey! Did I say to fucking move yet?”

Those who’d already begun to push forward stopped, whispers and cries rising from the throng.

“You will *not* all fit. Once the room is full, lock the door. The rest of you make your way out onto the back deck. Spread yourselves out, but stay behind the wall of the warehouse. Keep low.”

“Aves,” Becca said, her eyes glinting in the still-blinking and sweeping lights carving paths over the floor.

I squeezed her hand in mine, trying to keep her calm.

“Okay now move,” Corvus said and as one the crowd rushed the stage, pushed through and around us to get to the Red Room. Some people already running for the docks out the back door.

I pulled Becca through the oncoming stampede, barely able to hear her over the panicked voices clogging my ears when she asked me where I was taking her.

I could sense more than see or hear the guys hot on my tail as I weaved a path toward the back office. Unable to wait for a key, I kicked the door in when I got there and dragged Becca through.

When I let her hand go she shakily came around the bar, reaching for the shot glass and bottle of whiskey that had been left there. She poured herself an ounce and knocked it back, breathing out through her mouth.

I unzipped the closest duffel to me and dug inside, past an AR and a shotgun to find what I was looking for.

I tucked one Glock into a strappy holster and threw it over my chest, carrying its twin to Becca.

She looked between me and the gun in my outstretched hand like I’d lost my damn mind.

“Don’t worry,” I told her as the guys entered behind us and I heard the flinch-inducing sounds of guns being prepped for killing. “You probably won’t have to use it but there’s no fucking way I’m leaving you unarmed.”

“*Oh god,*” she said, her chest heaving, tits swelling over the shelf of her corset top as she accepted the gun into her hand.

“This is the safety,” I showed her. “You don’t have to cock it. This is safety on. This is to turn it off. Got it?”

She blinked, clearly overwhelmed. She wasn’t hearing me. She was going to fucking die.

Without thinking, I slapped her across the face and she cried out. All sound behind me ceased for a second before resuming.

Becca blinked, her shoulders settling, eyes clearing. “Fuck,” she said. “I needed that.”

“Safety,” I repeated, and she swallowed, flicking it on and off with her thumb, a red handprint coming through on her cheek.

“Got it.”

“You shoot anything that comes through that door.”

“But what if—”

“We’ll announce ourselves first if it’s us,” I assured her. “You can’t afford to hesitate, Becks. Do you understand?”

“I think I’m going to be sick.”

She bent, lifting a small black trash can to her face, the gun still tight in her manicured fingers pressed against the side of it as she hurled and then set the can down to run the back of her hand over her mouth.

“Do you think he’s going to be here,” she asked.

I knew who she meant, and a sharp cold bit into my bones. If the guy who’d been after my Crows was here...

“If he is, I’m going to kill him,” I promised her. “He won’t get to you.”

She nodded. “Okay,” she said, repeating the word again and again, nodding as she backed up to the wall, stopping only when it blocked her from going any further.

I pointed a finger to the corner. “Stay over there, by the couch. From there you should be able to see someone coming in before they see you—”

“Ghost,” Rook growled behind me. “We have to move.”

“Remember,” I told Becca as she shakily moved to tuck herself by the couch in the corner of the room.

“Shoot first, ask questions later,” Becca finished for me.

“You got this.”

Grey held out two extra magazines to me, and I fed them into their places in the holster strapped over my chest as he snapped the buckle at my back, locking the whole mechanism in place. I was absolute shit with a handgun, but I only had so many blades.

“I see headlights!” We heard Axel outside the office.

“How long?” I asked, the question obvious. The only one that mattered. How fucking long did we have to hold out until Diesel and the others got here?

Corvus’ eyes darkened, and he tossed me my phone back. I tucked it deep into the left cup of my bra. “About sixteen minutes.”

It was going to feel like a goddamned decade.

I let my darkness rise within, felt it fill my chest with toxic air, breathe extra strength into my muscles as it danced with the adrenaline pumping through my veins.

I tipped my head to one side, cracking my neck as I double checked the mag in the Glock and slid it back into the chamber, pulling the slide back.

A delicious shiver rolled down my spine, and for one blissful second, I felt fucking bulletproof.

“Let’s go fuck up some Aces,” I said and Rook smiled wildly, his tongue trapped between his teeth as he sucked a breath in, his savage excitement ramping up my own.

“We hold out,” Corvus said, his tone stern. “No hero shit. We hold the fucking fort until Diesel gets here. No one’s dying tonight. Not on our fucking side.”

Grey nodded his agreement, but Rook and I shared a look. A dangerous understanding passing between us.

If I had my way, there wouldn’t be a single enemy soul remaining on this earth come dawn.

We moved, and I ignored the little choking sob of Becca behind me, needing to focus to get through this. To keep her

and every other innocent person here tonight safe.

The silence in the booze scented room was so complete you could hear a pin drop as we moved through it toward the front bay door. Light flashed over the front of the building, blinding me for an instant as I dropped low, moving to stand in against the inside wall, peering out down the docks.

My pulse thudded violently in my chest at what I saw.

Car after car after car came screeching into the lot, stopping to let the Aces and Dead Men come pouring out.

We'd been so certain they wouldn't try an attack here, but now, looking at them, it made sense. They knew the Crows held this territory and partied here for every full moon. If they took us out before Diesel could get here, then they could hold the Docks, and all the hostages trapped within it.

And Diesel, having more honor in his pinkie finger than Lenny Ace did, would give him what he wanted to stop a slaughter.

It was the perfect plan.

I vowed in that moment to *never* underestimate my enemy's ability to be even more ruthless than I was.

"There are too many," Derrik shouted, light on the balls of his feet across from us against the other side of the bay door opening like he might flee. "We'll never hold them off."

He wasn't wrong.

We were almost too late to move out of the way as an automatic weapon pumped lead into the bay door from way down at the other end of the long pier. Some of the bullets pushed through the worn wood, leaving smoking holes for the moonlight to filter through.

"Anyone hit?" Axel asked.

No one answered.

But they would be soon.

This building wasn't going to hold up to that much gunfire and they were already slowly making their way up the dock

toward us.

Rook took a running step and launched himself across the bay door opening, opening fire as he went, tucking in his chest to roll the last few feet to the other side, bullets missing him by a hair.

I peered through a bullet hole and saw that he'd gotten two of the bastards, but there were already six more there to replace them.

"*Watch out,*" Grey bellowed, knocking me to the floor, the air stolen from my lungs as another line of gunfire punched holes in a long line down the side of the wall right where my fucking head had been.

I crawled closer to the opening and made a snap decision.

They weren't going to stop coming.

Even as slowly and carefully as they made their advance down the dock, they'd be on top of us in the next two minutes, the group quickly growing as more vehicles arrived, Dead Men and Aces walking shoulder to shoulder, heel to toe.

We needed to stop their advance.

There wasn't time or the equipment required to blow the dock, but there might have been something else I could do.

I tore myself from Grey's grasp, my dress tearing as I ran like a shot back the way we'd come.

"Sparrow!" I heard Corvus call after me, but I wasn't stopping.

This had to work.

A gunshot sent me dropping to my knees as I slingshotted myself through the office door.

"*Jesus.*"

"Oh my god, Aves! *You said!* You said you would announce yourself."

Her hand shook on the gun. "It's okay. You did good."

I grabbed the sniper bag from the floor next to the bar and took off. “Just keep doing what you’re doing!”

She shouted a stream of curses after me, but I was past hearing her, rushing to the back of the building.

“AJ, what are you doing!” Grey shouted, but no one followed me as I shoved through the back door to the shouts of the teenagers huddled against the wall.

“Hold still,” I told the tallest looking one, stepping up onto their back to get a handhold on the old rusted ladder that was busted off at the bottom. I hauled myself up, my shoulders screaming their protest until I got a foothold and cleared the top of the ladder, throwing my legs over onto the roof.

I kept low as I raced over the debris, avoiding the soft looking spots where water was puddled, algae foaming around the edges.

My fingers fumbled with the zipper only for a second before I got it down, pulled out the sniper and yanked the tripod free, feeding bullets into the slot like Grey taught me.

I cocked it back to the sound of a cry below, my heart in my throat. It wasn’t one of them. It wasn’t one of them.

They’re fine.

I lifted the barrel over the wide edge of the roof, butting the rifle to my shoulder, staring down the scope, adjusting it.

There was a flurry of movement as the enemy reached the entrance to the Docks and I heard Rook’s throaty bellow as he went ape on the ones who’d managed to get inside.

I was too late to stop them, but I wouldn’t be too late to slow the flow.

I breathed in, settled on a moving target, breathed out, and fired.

He jerked back, falling in a heap.

Heads snapped up.

I took aim. Fired again.

Again.

Two more shots.

Reload.

It wasn't enough.

They were still coming. Pouring over the docks like ants.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

I reloaded, lifted back onto the ledge.

Found a face I recognized.

I twisted the dial on top of the gun, turning on the red dot sight. It pierced Lenny Ace square in the chest.

I saw the instant he noticed, his body going deathly still as he stared down at it, hands raising.

He shouted something, but I couldn't hear him from here.

Sweat dripped down my forehead, and I squinted, trying to keep it from getting in my eye, keeping steady.

Like dominos, the Dead Men and Aces stopped their advance. Guns were lowered.

"Stop!" I heard Lenny this time as he shouted, still raising his hands ever higher as three more gunshots inside the warehouse below me signaled the deaths of three more of his men.

My finger brushed the trigger, the darkness within beckoning, whispering violence in my ears. Kill him.

Kill him.

All shooting ceased, and I breathed slow out a small opening in my lips, my arm starting to shake from holding the heavy weapon steady.

If I killed him, one of two things would happen.

Either they would all disperse, or I would have created a martyr. Given the Dead Men's leader a chance to double the size of his gang by taking in Lenny's as his own.

There was the other option, of course. I could hold until Diesel got here. Clean up this mess for good.

My phone vibrated forcefully against my left tit, and I jerked, almost losing my aim, but able to right it again.

Carefully, I held the sniper in place with one hand while I fingered out my phone with the other, tapping blindly at the screen until the call was answered and on speaker phone.

“Sparrow?”

“I’m a little busy at the moment, Bones. Call me back later?”

“Don’t shoot.”

I ground my teeth.

This fucker tried to kill my guys.

He’d gotten each of them shot on fight night.

Those wounds had yet to heal.

He didn’t deserve to live.

“Sparrow?”

“He needs to die.”

“Can you hold?”

Fire flooded my belly. “Yeah,” I gritted out. “I can hold.”

But Lenny Ace, waiting for the others to do all the work for him at the far end of the long dock, stepped backward. One small step.

I dropped the barrel of the sniper half an inch and shot the pavement at his feet before immediately lifting it back to his chest. He started, lifting the leg nearest the smoking ground like a fucking flamingo before setting it back down.

His mouth moved, and I strained to hear what he was shouting.

“What the fuck is he saying?”

“He wants to leave.”

“Fuck that.”

“*Sparrow*,” Corvus warned. “If you kill him, the rest of them are going to rush the pier. The Dead Men didn’t join with the Aces to lay down arms and give up whatever they were offered. If Lenny’s dead, they’ll try to take it and more. They won’t ever get another opportunity like this. I need you to *hold*.”

I growled my frustration, stroking the trigger, a shiver rolling down my back.

Just a little more pressure and we could kiss this bastard goodbye for good.

Was Corvus right?

Hold, the rational part of my brain argued, buffing my biceps and shoulder, lending them more strength to keep holding the long weapon in place.

But the darkness was still whispering, and I wanted to feed it the blood it craved.

“Five minutes,” Corvus’ promised. “They should be here in five minutes, Sparrow. Hold.”

The wind quieted enough that the next time Lenny Ace’s vile mouth opened I could hear him. “We’re going to leave,” he shouted, his voice echoing across the lake.

Fucking coward.

“No one else needs to die tonight,” he continued, his voice cracking, arms beginning to lower. “I’m going to back up now.”

“The fuck you are!” I roared, uncaring if he could hear me or not.

Lenny took a step back.

“*Corvus*,” I hissed.

“Don’t, Sparrow. It’ll be a bloodbath. We can end this another time. On our terms.”

I clamped my mouth shut, breathing in and out rapidly through my nose as I watched Lenny slip back a step. Then another.

Someone opened the side door of a van a few paces away from him and climbed inside, beckoning for him to follow.

NO.

We were *not* going to let them get away.

“Diesel and the others can stop them on their way out,” Corvus promised, but if Dies was still five minutes away, they could take the dirt road leading around the Deadwood. They could get to the highway before he could intercept them. *They could get away.*

I watched Lenny through the scope as he dragged his foot another step back, but it wasn't his movement that made me do it. It was the look in his eyes as he tipped his head up, the moonlight catching on a wicked gleam there. Carving a little gray shadow where the edge of his lips were creased in a vile smirk.

No.

I don't fucking think so.

My arm tightened on the rifle, I breathed in. Breathed out.

And shot Lenny Ace through the heart.

CHAPTER

Thirty-Two

CORVUS

THE *CRACK* of the rifle shot rebounded from the cliffs cuffing the edges of Spirit Lake. Time stopped. For one blissful second I enjoyed the fact that Lenny Ace was dead. Then that second ended and all fucking hell broke loose.

“*Damnit,*” I growled through my teeth, dropping my cell phone to the wooden floorboards in exchange for my second weapon, lifting both guns to fire two shots at once, sending two Aces to their graves as the wave of them resurfaced, stampeding down the docks towards us now, the vibrations of their pounding footfalls ricocheting up my legs.

“Get ready,” I yelled to the others, rolling out of the path of a bullet to put myself deeper into the warehouse, waiting for them to come rushing through so I could pick them off one by one. The opening was wide, but not wide enough for more than five to get through at once.

If we did this just right, none would make it further than a few feet inside.

A female grunt came from outside and someone shrieked on the docks.

“Ghost,” Rook roared, rushing out into the opening, out into the night onto the docks to meet our enemies, foiling my plan completely.

“Fucking hell,” I ran after him, my stomach vaulting into my throat at the deafening staccato of gunfire swelling in the

atmosphere.

My Sparrow had jumped down, and I watched her swipe her blade over a throat, her other hand tossing a blade in the air to catch it with the business end pointed the opposite direction as she stabbed another attacker in the thigh, swinging her body low to avoid his flying fist before she danced around his back and stabbed him in the side of his neck.

A barrel raised in my direction, and I ducked low, sweeping feet out from under a body, pumping a well-placed piece of lead between his eyes.

They were still coming, and I saw the shine of a longer weapon, sharp angled and whistled hard and sharp, letting the others know we were about to be playing an entirely different sort of game.

“*Get inside,*” I bellowed. “Keep them back!”

I took out two more before I needed to change a mag and a Dead Man got the jump on me, butting the hard metal handle of his weapon into the side of my temple, making flares of light pop into my vision as I careened to one side.

I shook my head, trying to clear my eyes, alert and ready for another attack, but when I opened my eyes again, it was to look down the barrel of a gun.

My lips parted.

He fired.

Click.

He was out of bullets, the idiot. I disarmed him, throwing my entire body into the hit as I pistol whipped his ass unconscious.

Grey, Rook, and Ava Jade were almost all the way into the warehouse, and I grimaced, looking down the dock to the storm blowing our way. All the Aces and Dead Men who'd been hanging out by the vehicles, waiting, were coming this way now, too. A guy I recognized to be the leader of the Dead Men was at their helm. He roared, lifting an AK high over his head.

Shit.

I took a second to turn my attention beyond them, to the road curving up and away into the trees. There was still no sign of Diesel. Not even the faintest glow of headlights or even the rumble of engines approaching.

This wasn't good.

“Corvus!” Ava Jade shouted, and I turned, heat rushing through me as I raced back into the warehouse, quick, jerking movement making something in my belly pinch uncomfortably.

A warm wetness was seeping into my jeans, sticking against my thigh.

I pressed the side of my weapon and my knuckles to my stomach, my hand coming away vivid red in the flashing lights inside the pier.

I grimaced, baring my teeth as I growled through the pain, searching for Ava Jade in the fray as our people fought to keep any more of the enemy from entering the building.

I caught a flash of dark hair and went for it, keeping a wary eye trained on the door, picking off Aces and Dead Men at will as I made my way over to her.

She ducked to avoid a blow and came up like a fucking springboard, her eyes going wide at something over my head. The *zip* of her blade arcing just next to my head filled my right ear before someone behind me fell with a watery croak.

My Sparrow drew her Glock and fired toward the bay door, backing up over the pile of dead strewn over the wooden planks at our feet.

We were fending them off as well as we could.

Then Crowley went down, his brains exploding out the back of his head as he fell.

Derrick was next.

What had she done?

My chest squeezed painfully at the sound of Rook screaming through his own pain as he was hit, not for the first time.

I ran out of bullets. Out of magazines.

AJ's gun kicked back in her hand. Her too.

Fear flashed over her eyes as she searched the ground for something, *anything* to use.

This was it.

Lenny Ace was dead.

But my Sparrow had condemned us to die with him.

“Look!” Grey cried, pointing down the docks, to the headlights bouncing against the shoreline. The sound of squealing tires reached my ears, and I dropped to the ground, pinching a shotgun from a Dead Man's dead fingers, cocking it back and firing.

He was here.

We could survive this.

I rushed to stand closer to my brothers, closer to my Sparrow.

Grey whooped, firing the last few shots in this clip. “Fuck yeah, motherfuck—”

His head whipped back, his body crumpling to the wooden floor.

“*Grey!*”

He didn't move. I fired again. “Grey, get up!”

The shotgun kicked back into my shoulder, sending a violent wave of pain all the way down to the bullet wound still steadily seeping my life's blood down the front of my jeans.

“*Brother!*” Rook roared.

Guns fired further afield and our enemies turned their attention to the Saints and Kings now boxing them in from the other end of the dock, trapping them in the middle.

I dropped the shotgun, reaching for a discarded pistol, raising it as I backward walked my way toward where Grey had fallen.

Please, no.

Ava Jade screamed, and I chanced taking my eyes off the Aces and Dead Men now engaged in a firefight with the entirety of my father's force.

Rook's face was bent over Grey's, blowing into his mouth before he started compressions.

...compressions...?

My brain struggled to make sense of what it was seeing.

Couldn't unseen the garish wound where his right eye used to be.

...used to be...?

My body sagged, knees making impact with the wood, my heart beating out of rhythm.

"*Please,*" Sparrow was saying, her entire body shaking like a leaf in a hurricane as she hovered over Rook and Grey amid the carnage. "No, please! No. *No.*"

Numbly, I lifted my head, trying to see through the burning saltwater coating my eyes.

I let this happen.

My fault.

My fault.

Something inside of me snapped.

"*Why?*"

Sparrow turned her horrified gaze to me, her lower lip quivering as tears streaked twin paths through the blood and dirt on her face.

"Why couldn't you fucking listen to me?"

She crumpled. Something in her eyes cracking. Breaking. *Shattering.*

Ava Jade was shaking her head, muttering something I couldn't hear to herself over and over again as Rook continued his assault of Grey's chest.

His still body lurched from the movements and bile rose up the back of my throat at the *snap* of his rib bones.

"Fuck you!" Rook was screaming at Grey's lifeless face. "Wake. The. Fuck. Up."

He stopped pumping Grey's chest and slapped him instead, first with one palm and then the other, leaving red on both his cheeks. "*You don't get to fucking die. Not tonight.*"

He slapped him again and I couldn't watch anymore. "Rook, stop," I said, my voice laced with warning.

But then a choking cough spluttered from Grey's lips and Rook hefted him onto his side as Grey choked up blood, spattering the floor with it as he racked his lungs, his one eye opening wide, bloodshot, and strained from the pain.

I didn't know how I got there, but there I was, rolling him back to his back, prying his one eye open, checking his pupil dilation. Jabbing two fingers below his chin to take his pulse, the feel of it hard and strong against the pads of my fingers better than anything I'd ever felt in my whole miserable fucking existence.

I fell back onto my ass, a broken breath falling from my lips, my head spinning.

He was okay. He was going to live.

Ava Jade crawled to his side, reaching for him, and I saw red.

I checked her advance, cutting her off from getting any closer as he came slowly back to full consciousness. "Don't fucking touch him."

She recoiled from my words, falling backward onto her elbows, her eyes filled with hurt.

Rook was asking Grey if he could count the number of fingers he was holding up. Behind Ava Jade, I saw the stern

face of my father leaving a trail of corpses in his wake as he burrowed a path through flesh and bone to get to us.

Ava Jade got shakily to her feet, dropping the useless gun still in her hand to the ground. “I’m s-sorry,” she said, her watery stare fixed on Grey, who had lifted a hand as though he might be trying to touch her.

“He’ll be okay, right?” Rook asked me, still crouched beside Grey’s head, his bloody fingers brushing debris from the garish wound to his brother’s eye. “He’s going to live?”

Diesel brushed past Ava Jade, assessing the situation, rushing to Grey.

“Hey, where the fuck does she think she’s going?” Rook said, and when I looked back up, Ava Jade was already halfway down the dock, jumping over corpses, ignoring the Saints calling out to her as she passed them. Running away.

“Ghost!” Rook called out to her, his voice hoarse. He tried to stand, but his leg was fucked, and he fell back to one knee, baring his teeth before trying again. “Ghost!”

I bowed my head. *Fuck.*

“What the fuck did you say to her?” Rook demanded, taking a shaky step forward, his left boot glinting crimson.

What had I said to her?

I could barely remember.

My heart faltered a beat, vision darkening. Beneath my knees, the docks were slick with a puddle of my blood.

I needed to go after her.

She couldn’t be out there alone.

“I didn’t mean...” I trailed off, my tongue heavy in my mouth, muscles unlocking from bone until I could hardly hold myself up.

“*Shit,*” I heard someone curse and then hands were holding me up. “Diesel!”

I let my head fall back and looked up into mismatched eyes. Something about that seemed weird, but I couldn't seem to hold onto the thought as Drake called for Diesel a second time. "He's been shot," Drake said. "I think he's hemorrhaging."

Diesel pushed something against my lower stomach, and I shuddered, grimacing at the pain.

"We need to get him to the vet," Diesel announced, and he and Axel shuffled Drake out of the way as they lifted me from the floor despite my grouching.

"Wait," I said through gritted teeth, reaching out to grab Drake, haul him close.

He looked down at me, confused, edgy.

"Find her."

His gaze narrowed on me. "Who?"

"She took off," Rook supplied for me as Diesel set me on a plank of wood, my makeshift stretcher.

"Find her," I implored Drake. "Bring her... bring her..."

I could feel myself fading and fought it with everything I had.

"Don't worry," Drake said, peeling my rigid fingers from his forearm. "I'll find her."

CHAPTER

Thirty-Three

AVA JADE

I HAD TO SHOOT HIM.

I had to.

He was going to get away.

A chill rushed up my arms, and I shivered, trying to ignore the throb in the side of my thigh where a bullet had gone through and through. It wasn't so bad. I could keep walking.

Didn't matter.

So what if I collapsed?

So what if I fucking died right here in the road?

I'd almost killed them.

If Diesel had been even another minute later, I would've.

But he needed to die.

No.

I could've held. I could've let him go.

No.

I beat my fists against the sides of my head, growling my frustration, bending to a crouch.

Corvus was right. This was all my fault. Axel was still alive, but I'd seen the others among the dead. Crowley and Derrik. They wouldn't be going home to their families. Grey

would never see right again. Rook was shot at least twice, if not more, his older bullet-wounds still healing. Corvus had been shot in the stomach, and even if he seemed all right, the recovery from that would be brutal.

My Crows.

I'd always thought *they* would be the death of me. Maybe it was me who was always destined to be the death of them.

The tears came hot and fast, welling from a spring deep down inside that I thought had rusted over a long time ago.

I beat my fist against my skull again, relishing in the pain.

I deserved it.

I deserved every bad thing that ever happened to me. That ever would happen.

My fingernails bit into my scalp as I rocked there at the side of the road in the dark, stuck between wanting to run and keep running and never come back...

...and turning my ass around and marching back there, to the place where I belonged.

I choked on a painful sob, swiping the backs of my palms over my eyes as I pushed myself back to standing, wincing at the wound in my leg. It could just fucking get in line with all the other aches and pains on the surface that did nothing to distract me from the deeper ache.

The one quivering in my chest like a dying thing.

Grey was going to live.

He would live and Corvus would live and Rook would live.

Diesel was alive.

The Aces and the Dead Men were dead.

I inhaled deeply, taking in the scent of the dry dirt along with the earthy tang of dried blood coating the inside of my nose. The crispness of mountain trees.

My stomach dropped at the realization that I would need to go back. I had to face them.

And fuck...*Becca*.

I'd completely forgotten about Becca.

She was probably catatonic right about now.

The twin beams of headlights swept up the road from behind me, and I turned, instinctively reaching for a blade that I didn't have. I didn't have any of my blades left. They were all sunk into the corpses of our enemies now. At least one of them permanently lost to the sea with an Ace I'd sent right over the edge of the dock.

My hands glared red in the headlights as I backed up further onto the side of the road, bending to conceal myself in the bushes. I squeezed my fists, blood making them stick like that, crimson stuffed into every crevice, dried onto the backs of my knuckles.

A van barreled past, Diesel at the wheel. Another van followed.

I stepped out of the shadows.

"Wait!"

A Jeep blared its horn at me and a familiar voice called out the open window, mostly lost to the wind. "Angel!"

"Drake?"

He pulled up alongside me, leaning over to shove the passenger door open. "Get in. Corvus needs a surgeon. We're headed to the vet."

I hesitated, my mind reeling, feeling sick all over again at my mistake. *My mistake*. I pressed a hand to my stomach. "Is he..."

"Come on, Angel, get in. We'll meet them there."

I climbed into the Jeep, sitting up high to see if I could still see the van ahead of us around the next bend as Drake tore off down the road after them, his blond hair catching with strands of silver in the moonlight.

Drake cursed as he reached over my chest and grabbed the seatbelt, pulling it across my body to belt me in.

“This is all my fault,” the words fell from my lips, the truth of them forming a hard ball in my throat.

Drake nodded, shifting gears, the back tires spinning against the dirt road as he pushed the vehicle to its limits.

Fuck. He could at least lie to me. I opened my mouth on a sharp remark, but stopped.

Drake’s hands tightened on the wheel, an unnamable thing charging the air around him.

Something changed, like the plates of the earth beneath our feet were shifting all out of place, and I was losing my balance.

“Can I tell you a secret?” Drake said, his cheekbones flaring. His eyes seemed brighter, I thought, something in my stomach turning.

No. Just one eye.

He’d had brown eyes, though. I was sure of it. But right now, one was blue.

My pulse picked up.

There were brown roots peeking through the strands of his blond hair.

My breath caught in my throat, my hand inching slowly toward the buckle holding me in, readying myself to strike.

Could I survive a crash at this speed?

“Drake?”

He turned to face me, his expression unreadable, the carefree mask of Drake gone.

“I hope he dies.”

A stinging pain bit into my thigh, heat spreading like wildfire up and down my leg.

The Jeep kicked out to the left as Drake wheeled right, putting us onto the dirt road leading through the Deadwood

and away from the convoy of Saints.

I fumbled with the seatbelt, my fingers numb and sloppy, the back of my palm hitting something in my leg.

A knife.

No.

Something much worse.

My thoughts turned sluggish. Blood rushed in my ears, deafening.

In my leg was the plunger end of a syringe. I blinked, and a riot of colors were thrown over the back of my eyelids, blinding me. An odd smell stuck in my nose. Like limes and rotting flowers. I sagged against the seat, gravity churning my belly until I couldn't hold my head up any longer.

The syringe was yanked from my leg.

My eyes crossed, and I drowned in an all-encompassing dark.

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PLAYLIST

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XX