



WARPED

Minds

BOYS OF BRIAR HALL
BOOK FOUR

ELENA LAWSON

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CHAPTER

One

CORVUS

GREY STIRRED atop the thin cot, his face pinching as he woke.

His skin puckered where the surgical tape held the clean bandage against the garish wound where his right eye used to be.

Rook jerked his chin up, discarding the blade he'd been using to carve twelve more kill lines into the flesh of his right forearm. We left our silent vigil by the front window of Sanctum now allowing cold dawn light to filter through the tinted glass.

"He's waking up," Rook rumbled, lurching in Grey's direction, his leg fucked from not one but two bullet-wounds, one that would've shattered his knee-cap if it had hit just a few inches higher.

Grey coughed and Rook bent to slide a hand beneath his shoulders, helping him sit up. I moved for the glass of water set on the floor beside the cot and passed it over, concealing a wince at the sharp pain in my abdomen. "Drink," I ordered, not caring that the noise was waking the other injured Saints laid up on cots throughout the entire floor of the bar.

The smell of lead and injury was so strong it managed to overpower the usual reek of stale liquor permeating these walls.

Grey choked down some of the water, his one eye focusing slowly on us as he pushed through the haze of drugs our vet had to use to keep his ass down.

I pressed a hand to the bandage on my lower stomach, feeling the ridge of wiry stitches through the gauze as I rose back to my full height. I couldn't remember the vet digging out the bullet, but I could feel the phantom memory of his sharp tools where they'd scraped and nudged and pulled between major organs. Sewing back together bits of my insides and my outsides.

"Where is she?" Grey croaked and my jaw tightened, teeth clicking from the pressure.

Rook's fingers curled over Grey's shoulder, squeezing, but our youngest brother's eye remained trained squarely on me. As if he somehow knew her leaving was my fault regardless of the fact he was unconscious, near fucking death, when I'd said what I said to her.

"She took off. Isn't answering any of our calls," I said in a low voice, struggling to keep it steady. "I sent Drake to look for her hours ago. He texted just before dawn to say he couldn't find her."

Grey nodded solemnly, his eye narrowing as he considered that.

"She blamed herself for this," he said, lifting a hand to gently brush the bandage with a grimace.

"She had help," Rook hissed, his dark gaze sliding to me before returning to Grey.

Anger flared Grey's nostrils and tightened the lines around his mouth as he shook his head slow. "She'll come back. She won't leave us," he said with conviction. "She can't."

Rook nodded his agreement. "Yeah, man. She'll be back when she's ready."

Grey's shoulders sagged and for the first time he allowed himself to see the quiet chaos surrounding us all. "How many did we lose?"

"Eight," Rook replied.

"*Fuck.*"

"Injured?"

“What you see here. Vet says everyone’ll make it, but Vance won’t walk again.”

I turned to the window, staring out into the early morning as though I could will Ava Jade to appear through the thin fog still clinging to the street.

She would be back.

She had to come back.

My throat burned, and I swallowed hard to snuff the aching, licking my dry lips and tasting blood. No way of telling if it belonged to myself or someone else.

Since we got back, none of us left this space save for Diesel and a small group of uninjured Saints and Kings. They went to see to the clean-up, make sure no one escaped alive.

“Hey,” Becca said weakly, her voice thin and groggy as she padded barefoot through the cots of sleeping gangsters from the back room where we’d put her. She winced when she saw Grey but quickly covered it up with a small smile. “You’re awake,” she said. “Does that mean...”

“He’s going to be fine,” Rook confirmed gruffly, the words carrying with them a finality, as though Grey’s survival was entirely up to him and he’d already made the call. Daring the reaper to *try* to come and claim a soul that was ours.

Grey’s lips turned up at one corner. He cocked his head at Becca as she tucked a long strand of dark hair behind her ear. “Does it look that bad?” he asked.

She started, shaking her head vehemently. “What? No. No, it’s, *um...*”

“It looks badass,” Rook filled in, giving Becca a glare that could’ve damn near reduced her to ash.

“Yeah,” Becca agreed, swallowing. “I just—it just looks like it hurts, that’s all.”

“It does,” Grey confirmed, clearing his throat. “Feels like I got kicked in the head by a horse.”

My guts twisted.

“And then a zombie with dull fingernails dug out my eye.”

Rook’s upper lips twitched. “Thanks for that visual, man,” Rook deadpanned, going dead-eyed to cover up how bothered he was by his brother’s pain. He patted Grey on the thigh. “I’ll go get you some more morphine, you big baby.”

Becca wrapped her arms around herself, tiptoeing toward where I stood back at the front window. She looked out into the morning, at the streets slowly waking for another gorgeous day in Thorn Valley. None of them aware that only miles away, just out of earshot, a battle left at least forty men dead by the shores of Spirit Lake.

“She still hasn’t come back,” Becca said.

It wasn’t a question, so I didn’t answer.

She shivered, her fingers tightening on her shoulders.

It was hot as fucking balls in here, so I knew it wasn’t from the cold.

“Have you tried calling?” she asked.

I lifted a brow at her, and she deflated. “Sorry, stupid question. Of course you have.”

“I take it you’ve tried too?”

She nodded and my stomach twisted.

Ava Jade would ignore us if she was upset, me especially, but Becca? If she wasn’t answering calls or texts from her best friend either, that meant she was more hurt than I realized.

That or she’d lost her damn phone.

Or something far *far* worse.

I wished I’d had Grey install the tracking app on her new phone, but I was trying to let go of my need to control her. Giving her, her freedom. Look what fucking good it did me.

My fists clenched and not for the first time this morning, the urge to hit something until my knuckles cracked and bled raced up my arms like lightning, heat pulsing through my core.

I shut my eyes against the sensations, a ragged breath slinking past my lips.

A hand gingerly touched my shoulder, and I flinched, gripping the window ledge to keep from throwing my girl's best friend across the damn room.

"She's fine," Becca said, though her tone lacked conviction. "She's always fine, no matter what happens. I'm pretty convinced that girl can't die."

....*die?*

Why the fuck did she have to say that?

I scrubbed a palm over the sharp stubble on my jaw, pulling away from Becca's touch.

The back door of Sanctum opened, and I had my gun out and aimed, Becca swept behind me, in the span of a single second.

"What took you so long?" I heard Rook say quietly, and my pulse steadied as Diesel strode into the main bar with a few men on his heels.

I tucked my gun back into the waistband of my jeans, avoiding the injury still singing agony through my core.

Our father took in the injured around him, the storm of his face not calming until he found Grey.

"I'm good," Grey confirmed and Diesel's Adam's apple bobbed as he cleared the space between them, sinking to one knee to check the wound and Grey's state himself. He nodded once he was satisfied, and some of the ice in his eyes melted away, leaving a glint on the surface before he blinked, sniffing hard and the tears were gone.

"You scared me, Son."

Grey smirked. "About time. I've been trying for years."

Diesel shook his head, rising back to his feet. "Smart-ass."

He lifted something from his back pocket and turned, throwing the slim phone in my direction. I caught it, my lips parting in surprise and dread.

“Found it on the roof at the Docks,” Diesel explained as I pressed the side button, lighting up the screen to a barrage of missed call and text notifications. The battery almost dead. “Someone was trying to call it off the hook. Thought Grey could check it, make sure it’s not one of theirs, or—”

“It’s not,” I interrupted him. “It’s Ava Jade’s.”

I walked it to Grey, and he took it eagerly.

“It’s locked. Can you get into it?”

Rook returned with a single tiny pill, but Grey didn’t take it, staring at the lock screen like he could figure out her passcode just by staring at it.

“Do you need a laptop?”

He shook his head, thumb hesitating over the screen before he tapped five times and then sighed in relief.

“How did you know her passcode?”

“Saw her enter the first two numbers once. Wasn’t hard to figure out the rest.”

I resisted trying to pry the phone out of his hands as he scrolled through all our missed calls and texts.

“What do you mean?” Becca asked, confused.

“The numbers were two and seven. C. R. It wasn’t hard to figure out the rest. It’s a thumbprint entry, but her backup passcode spelled *Crows*.”

His words were a sucker punch to the gut.

I didn’t know how, but I was going to make this up to her. I’d fucking beg for forgiveness on my knees. I’d grovel at her feet for as long as it took.

She shouldn’t have fired that shot, but I shouldn’t have put the blame for Grey, for everything, on her shoulders.

And then there was the other possibility.

That I was wrong.

If Ava Jade hadn’t taken the shot, it was possible Lenny Ace could’ve come back even stronger, with a better plan, and

killed us all.

We lost good men, but *we* were still here.

Diesel was still here.

Maybe it was the right call. The call I was too hesitant to make.

“*Damn*,” Grey cursed, his thumbs lifting from the screen as he paused his scrolling, staring down at something with his lips in a hard line.

“What is it?” Rook asked, but I was already pulling the phone from Grey’s stiff grip.

It wasn’t a text he was looking at but an email.

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.

“WHEN DID SHE SEND THAT?” Rook asked, trying to scroll back up on the phone over my shoulder.

We both looked at the time stamp. It was sent days ago, and she’d received no reply.

“She was fucking taunting him,” Grey said.

“Who?” Diesel asked, a knot forming between his brows.

“Let me see,” Becca demanded, rushing over to stand on tiptoe to see the screen.

“Are we really surprised?” Rook asked gruffly as Becca let out a little gasp after reading the message.

“No,” Becca replied to the rhetorical question. “But... you don’t think she would go after him, do you?”

Heat surged through my chest, making my breaths come heavier.

I knew she *would*. But did she? After everything that happened, was that where her head would be right now?

“I don’t think she can,” Grey answered Becca. “I’ve exhausted every resource we have looking for this fucker. As smart as Ava Jade is, she couldn’t find him alone.”

“That’s the fucking problem,” I growled, struggling to regulate my breathing at the idea of this piece of shit’s hands touching what was ours. “She’s *alone*. And that’s exactly what he wants.”

“What the fuck are you talking about? *Who* are you talking about?” Diesel asked, reminding me he was still standing there, the other Saints who’d been with him scattered around the bar, checking on their injured brothers.

I met my father’s cold eyes, lifting my chin. “We meant to tell you,” I said, unable to sound even the tiniest bit apologetic. I had bigger fucking problems. “We were going to last night before—”

“Before you lost your shit on Ghost over a fucking jacket,” Rook supplied, reaching over the empty bar to scoop a bottle of Jack from the other side and take a swig straight from its mouth.

Diesel pinched the bridge of his nose. “Mind explaining *now*?”

“AJ has a stalker,” Grey started, and when Diesel shifted his hard stare to my brother, he lost his nerve, sagging at the raw emotion in Grey’s eye. The fear. The pain.

He wore his worry plain on his face, not bothering to try to conceal it.

Diesel dragged a stool from the bar and set it down near Grey’s cot, falling onto it, leaning his elbows over his knees. “Go on.”

Grey told Diesel almost everything, not glazing over the gritty details. There wasn't any point. Once he caught wind of it, Diesel would find out all of those details for himself one way or another. And he needed to know. This person, whoever it was, had threatened not only Ava Jade, but us too.

If it were reversed, I'd want to know.

"You should've come to me sooner," Diesel said when Grey was finished, his icy blue eyes pacing the floor.

"You weren't—"

"You should've fucking told me," he cut me off, his tone sharp as he pushed to his feet. "Where is she now?"

My brows furrowed.

"Ava Jade," he clarified. "Where is she?"

"We don't know," Rook said, leaving the bottle on the bar. "This idiot told her all that shit down at the Docks was her fault."

I flinched, but I would own that.

"She took off," Grey added.

Diesel nodded. "I saw her storm down the dock. I remember."

"We should look for her," Becca said, piping up for the first time in thirty minutes.

Diesel's gaze slid to her like he was only just remembering she was there. "There's no reason to believe that this... *this filth* has her. She was upset. She left. She doesn't know you're here to come looking."

"She'd figure it out," Grey argued.

Rook shook his head. "She won't be ready to come looking. Not yet."

"Becca's right," I said, two words I never thought I'd utter. "We should look for her. I don't care if she's ready or not. She shouldn't be out there alone."

“Give her the day,” Diesel suggested. “If she isn’t here by nightfall, we’ll find her. Send out teams of three to every place you think she might’ve gone.”

I cocked my head at him. *We?* He was going to use our men to aid in the search for her?

“She’s one of us,” Diesel said plainly, looking at me as though I should’ve understood that. “And she’s important to the three most important people to me. That makes her problems *my* problems. But I got to say, boys, the timing of this shit...”

He trailed off, not needing to finish the thought.

We all hoped the war with the Aces and Dead Men was at an end after the slaughter at the Docks, but we needed to be cautious. We needed to rebuild. Strengthen our ranks. With the Kings here to help bolster us, we were all right. We wouldn’t be perceived as weak or vulnerable to attack any who wanted a piece of our territory.

But did that alliance still hold now that the threat was dealt with?

“Tonight, then,” Rook said with a note of finality in his tone.

Diesel shook his head. “You three aren’t going anywhere. The vet said Grey shouldn’t be moving around for a couple days at least. You either, Rook. In fact, I recall him saying not to put any pressure whatsoever on that leg.”

Diesel eyed Rook’s torn off jeans and the bandages cuffing his thigh and calf. Blood was already showing through the starchy white gauze even though I’d changed the dressings for him twice. Unless I tied him down, he wouldn’t stay sitting.

“And you,” Diesel added, gaze sliding my way. “You’re lucky the internal bleeding didn’t put your ass in a casket. You need fluids and rest.”

“Then we’ll rest,” I said through gritted teeth. “...until the sun goes down.”

He threw his hands up, scoffing as he rolled his eyes. “Have kids she said,” he muttered to himself. “It’ll be fucking fun, she said.”

Grey snorted, and I couldn’t help the tiniest smirk at the reminder of the reason Diesel St. Crow took in three strays and made them family. His wife, who couldn’t have children, but always wanted them. The woman who resolved to adopt... just before her life was ended.

“All right. Rest then,” Diesel said after a moment. “We’ll be back in a few hours. Got some things to check up on and Maverick wants to have a meet.”

“You need us there for that?” Rook asked.

“It’ll happen at Sanctum. I’ll be back before he gets here.”

“Wait,” I said before Diesel could take off again, remembering the other thing we’d wanted to talk to Diesel about during his party. “Aries.”

He quirked a brow.

“Maverick’s man,” I explained. “His clean-up guy. Ava Jade thought he might be the guy. Her stalker. He took off a couple days ago, after the newsletter was sent to the entire school about my... origin. We haven’t seen him since.”

Diesel’s mouth pressed into a thin line as he thought through the new problem. Asking a gang leader to hand over one of his own men wasn’t going to be pleasant, but Maverick could either give him over or let us hunt him down. If he was smart, he’d prefer the former.

“I’ll bring it up at the meet,” Diesel said finally. “You think it’s him?”

I rolled the question around in my mouth.

“No,” Rook answered for me. “The guy’s a creep, but not a monster.” He sneered. “Too weak. Besides, he’s probably a hundred pounds soaking wet.”

“AJ said—” Grey started, but Rook cut him off.

“Which is why we’ll look into it. You actually telling me you think that little shit is the guy?”

Grey didn’t have anything to say to that, falling silent.

“We just want to ask him a few questions,” I supplied.

“A few questions?” Diesel scoffed, knowing exactly what that meant. He shook his head. “I’ll speak to Maverick.”

He whistled low and lifted his hand, making a circular motion with his ring and index fingers. The others who’d been with him gathered back to his side, following him from the bar. The conversation finished for the moment.

“Where the fuck do you think you’re going?” Rook asked as I lifted my jacket from the back of a chair with my pinkie and slid it on, ignoring the pain of the movement.

“I can’t just sit here.”

“*Where are you going?*” he repeated.

“To check on Julia.” I didn’t have a specific place in mind, but the words rolled off my tongue anyway. It was as good a place as any. She wasn’t answering our requests for updates on our humanitarian projects the last couple weeks or so. And hadn’t Sparrow said something about that girl in Williams’ class trying to call the hotline but not getting through?

Yes. I would check on Julia.

It was as good a thing to do as any if I was meant to fucking wait another two hours to hunt my Sparrow.

By the time I got back, no force on this earth, not even Diesel St. Crow, was going to stop me from finding her. I prayed she’d be back before I was. I didn’t want to, but I would drag her back if that was what it took. Kicking and fucking screaming.

“*Fuck.* Wait,” Rook huffed, a snarl on his lips as he put weight on his fucked up leg. “I’ll come with you.”

His leg buckled when he moved forward, and he caught himself on a table, cursing.

“No you won’t. I don’t need your gimp ass slowing me down.”

“Fuck you.”

“Besides, you and Grey need to be here with the others. Just in case.”

“That’s what the sentries are for,” Grey argued, swinging his legs from the cot.

He wasn’t wrong. Diesel left a team of men guarding Sanctum. There were five around the building and two on the roof. No one would even get close.

“You need to lie down,” I reminded Grey. “And, Rook, you’re already bleeding through your fucking bandages.”

“You aren’t going out there alone, man,” Grey argued.

“I’ll go with him.”

At once, our heads turned on a swivel to where Becca was still standing quietly by a high-top table. She flushed, swallowing hard as she tried to appear confident, nearly succeeding.

I... didn’t know what to say.

Fuck no seemed a good option, but I knew Sparrow wouldn’t like that. “You should stay here,” I said instead. “Where you’ll be safe.”

“Fuck that. I can’t sit here anymore, either. Let me help. I’m a shitty shot, but I know how a gun works. I’ll cover you.”

I ran my tongue over my teeth, holding back another response I knew my Sparrow wouldn’t like. “Rebecca...”

“Look, either you let me help you or I’m just going to go and start looking for her.”

“No, you’re not,” Rook warned. “Not alone.”

“If anything happened to you, AJ’d have our balls,” Grey added.

She strengthened her resolve, lifting through her hips to stand taller, looking more like someone who could be Ava

Jade's equal than I ever gave her credit for. "Then you're taking me with you."

CHAPTER

Two

AVA JADE

THE SHARP SOUND of a breath in my ear woke me, my limbs jerking against a hard wall. An even harder floor.

Streaky light slashed across my eyes, and I grunted, squeezing them shut only to force them open again, panic swelling in my chest as the feeling returned to my bones.

I pushed my back flush against the wall I'd been dumped against, blinking rapidly to force my eyes to see. The persistent rush of adrenaline in my bloodstream helped burn off whatever shit still clogged my veins, making everything feel sluggish. Forced. Harder than it should've been.

Pain ricocheted through my thigh when I tried to claw my way up the wall to standing, making me sink back down to land hard on my ass, a dizziness making my breaths come heavier.

"Fuck," I slurred, my surroundings dipping and spinning in a wild dance around me as they tried to come into focus.

Black spots bloomed in front of me like shadows come to life, and I weakly threw an arm out, trying to shove them back.

I coughed, the weak, wet sound of it rattling my lungs.

A room. I was in a room.

No. A box.

The thing in my chest squeezed at the sight of the gray walls. Four. In a square. No windows. A solid ceiling. A cold cement floor.

A door.

I pushed through the pain in my thigh, dragging my body in a sad attempt at a crawl, cursing the whole way as I tried to kick off the last of the drugs still in my system like a heavy blanket keeping me down.

I slapped a palm against the cool metal of the door, my forehead connecting next as I craned my neck to look up at the smooth surface. Entirely smooth.

No door handle.

No window.

I let my hand fall down the thin seam of the door.

No hinges.

No big deal.

There was always a way out.

Always.

My body seemed to disagree with me, my chest rising and falling faster, fingers vibrating with a tremor that coursed all the way up both arms.

Drake.

My slow mind slogged to catch up, piecing together everything that led me to this fucking box.

I remembered him. Drake. The wind tugging at his hair as we sped through the Deadwood. The malice in his eyes when he plunged a syringe into my leg. When he told me he hoped Corvus died.

Bones...

Oh god.

Grey.

The searing memory of him lying amid the carnage at the Docks, Rook bent over him, screaming. Screaming so fucking loud as he pressed his palms against Grey's chest over and over.

He'd woken, but that didn't mean he was okay.

And Corvus. I'd seen Diesel speed past like a bat out of fucking hell. And Drake said...

I couldn't believe anything Drake said.

Corvus was probably fine.

He would be fine.

He had to be.

None of them could die because of me.

Why hadn't I just listened?

Stupid. *So fucking stupid.*

My fault. *My fault.*

I clenched my teeth so hard I heard them click in protest, my fist shaking as I beat it against the door, heat rising in my face.

"Open this fucking door," I shouted, my voice hoarse and breaking. "You fucking coward!"

I listened for a reply, my heart a jackhammer against my ribcage. The darkness within pooled, sparking with rage.

I beat the door again, the hit reverberating down my arm. "*Hey!*"

Again. "*Hey!*"

Drake was a dead man. If that was even his name.

He could keep this door locked all he wanted. They would come for me.

They would come for me, right?

My stomach turned and a stinging ravaged my throat, bringing hot tears to my eyes.

Would they?

After what I'd done?

The darkness drained away, taking with it the last dregs of adrenaline still pulsing through me.

I wouldn't come for me.

The truth settled in my stomach like lead. "I'm on my own."

My eyes traveled the four walls, no more than seven feet in length each. The gray color wasn't painted. Not cement, I realized, squinting through the remaining haze still making the edges of my vision foggy.

I winced, pulling myself to the side to push my hand against the nearest wall. The spongy surface cushioned my fingers.

A padded cell?

No.

This wasn't padding. Not the kind you'd find in an insane asylum. I'd seen foam like this before. On the walls of the closet in Corvus' bedroom. In the little recording studio he'd built there. Soundproofing.

Wherever I was, Drake worried someone might hear me.

I dug my fingernails into the foam, the *shush* sound of it splitting as I peeled it from the wall making me shiver.

"Hey!" I shouted again, coughing.

I didn't stop there, making myself move, I frantically began tearing all the foam from the walls, ripping it off in great swaths and little chunks where it was glued down more heavily. I screamed as I worked. As the foam piled on the floor at my feet and I had to kick through it, rushing to do the next wall, and the next, ignoring the way my body protested the movements.

Ignoring the screaming pain in my thigh until I couldn't anymore, growling as I collapsed to my knees, a sharp cry on my lips as the impact tore something.

I pressed a hand to my leg and it came away red.

For the first time, I noticed the way my pants were hanging off my one leg. Torn from my ankle all the way up past my knee. The once white bandage wrapped tightly around my

thigh was now stained every shade of red with blood. It was too much for the bandage to contain anymore and ran in wispy streaks down my leg.

I felt around my thigh, pressing gingerly on the exit wound around the other side.

Through and through.

Right.

I remembered.

But I didn't remember how this bandage got here.

Or the wiry ridge of stitches I could feel poking through the soiled gauze.

What else hadn't I felt?

I swallowed back bile, grimacing.

Somewhere outside the door, the loud clamor of another slamming shut echoed into the room.

Shit!

I got back to my feet, holding back a sound of pain as I spun through the foam, looking for something. Anything to use aside from the spongy material that would do *nothing* to help me unless I wanted to start a fucking pillow fight with a sadistic fuck like Drake.

My necklace. My hands flew to my chest, to the black diamond resting there. No. The dainty chain wouldn't be strong enough.

My gaze caught on the hem of my black dress, and I remembered the laces running up the back.

Heavy footsteps rang in my ears from somewhere far off, getting nearer.

I let my ass fall onto the pillow of foam and wasted no time twisting my arms behind me to the point of pulling them from their sockets, tugging the laces free. My fingers plucked and pulled until I had the full length of thin cord between my hands. I grinned, scrambling backward to the wall where the

door was until I was close enough to use it to aid me in standing.

The bones of my back pressed flat against the tacky wall just next to the door, and I held my breath, winding the lace around each fist, pulling the length between them taut, praying it was strong enough. I shook my head, practically foaming at the mouth as the darkness woke once more, pushing back at the drugs trying to drag me down.

I won't kill him, I decided. That would be too easy.

Just choke him out, the darkness whispered. *So we can play with him later.*

Yes.

I smiled despite the whisper of my sanity begging to be heard as we threw it in a closet and locked the fucking door.

The steady rhythm of his strides in the hall meant he hadn't heard me screaming. Didn't know I was awake. That I was ready for him.

If I didn't take him down now, I doubted he would give me the opportunity of taking another stab at him. Not if he was as smart as he seemed to be.

It was a wonder he even left me with the laces in my dress. Either he needed to take off quickly, or he didn't expect me to wake up before he returned. Either way, his mistake.

His fucking funeral.

I stretched the cord between my fists, closing my eyes as his footfalls approached the door. Swallowed and breathed deep through my nose to calm my galloping heart.

An electronic chirp. A click.

The door swept open and he stepped in, his back going rigid at the foamy carnage coating the floor. His momentary shock was enough to take him by surprise.

I cried out as I launched at him, the pain in my leg forgotten as I wrapped them around his middle the same time I pulled the cord tight around his neck, dragging my fists back

and down as though if I just pulled hard enough I could take his head clean off his shoulders.

He choked, clawing at his neck, his hard body flexing with bone and muscle as he fought to shake me off. The acrid scent of rotting limes filling my nose, making me gag.

I twisted my fists behind his neck, feeling the cord cut into my flesh.

“Come on,” I hissed in his ear. *“Go to sleep, motherfucker.”*

My stomach lurched as he pushed us backward until my back connected with the wall, a sliver where there was still enough foam to cushion the blow, but still the air left my lungs in a gush and I fought to maintain my hold on the cord, stars in my eyes.

He spluttered, almost no sound escaping his lips as he hunched, pressing his neck harder into the cord before he slammed me back again.

My sight darkened as the back of my skull connected with the sticky cement wall and my fists loosened, fingers slipping as I was thrown, my body flipping over Drake’s to bounce hard on the foamy floor.

Somewhere, he was coughing. I could feel him, his nearness as I fought with everything I had to come out of the semi-unconscious state, trying to see through the black. To feel through the numbness.

No.

No.

I reached out blindly, wavering as I found my feet, claws slashing, ready to tear his face clean from his skull.

“Come at me,” I screeched, the pitch of my own voice painful in my ears.

He did, the blackness abating just enough for me to dodge his attack and land a violent hit to the back of his neck, sending him careening forward to catch himself on the wall.

I slid my right leg behind me, lowering my body in a fighting stance as he turned back to me. I launched into a full attack before he could make his first move, but he deftly deflected my advance and suddenly there were two of him. The twin Drakes moving together and apart and together again.

“Stop,” he growled hoarsely, and his voice in my ears only spurred the darkness into a feral frenzy.

I attacked again, and he knocked me away.

“You’ve lost too much blood, Angel,” he continued, shoving me hard enough to send me to the floor on my next advance. I pushed myself up on my arms and the traitorous things shook beneath me, my palms slipping on something wet and thick beneath the foam.

Blood. It was blood. My blood.

I glanced down, finding my leg entirely red with it. A puddle of crimson forming in the foam around my knee.

Shit.

It didn’t matter.

I roared as I went for his ankle in the tight space, pulling it in a sharp motion to make him fall. His back connected with the ground for barely a second before he was pulling his ankle away, pulling me through the foam, flipping me onto my back, my wrists pinned as I stared half consciously into his brown eyes.

“Stop fighting,” he roared.

“*Never,*” I growled, spitting into his face.

He released my wrist, and I struck his nose, crunching it under my palm, but not before I felt the familiar sting of a needle sliding out of my neck.

NO.

A scalding tear rolled from the edge of my eye and down into my hairline as I felt the warm gush of whatever he injected me with sliding down my collarbone and into my

chest. Filling me with a numbness so complete I thought it might paralyze my lungs. That I may not be able to breathe.

Was I breathing?

My vision doubled again, and I fought to hold onto consciousness.

“I miscalculated the dose last time.” Drake’s voice spoke to me as though from another dimension, coming across muffled as though spoken through cotton.

“That won’t happen again,” he promised as my heavy eyelids blinked up at the ceiling and my mouth fell slack.

My leg was moved and distantly, from the feel of pressure alone, I discerned that he was removing my panties.

Tugging at my dress.

“Clothes are a privilege, Angel.”

“I’ll kill you,” I tried to tell him, but the words came out a garbled, wet moan.

“Hush. You need rest.”

He slipped the black diamond necklace from my neck.

“Mother... fucker...”

My eyes crossed and the last strings tethering my mind to my body snapped, leaving me to fall back into the dark.

CHAPTER

Three

GREY

I NEEDED to see it for myself.

I eased the bathroom door shut behind me, flipping the lock. With a bar full of Saints, it should have been assured that I'd be interrupted, but not today.

Not when the majority could barely roll themselves off the cots and pool tables where they were laid up to heal, most passed out from all the pain killers in their system.

Not me.

I'd gummed the little morphine pill Rook all but forced into my mouth and spit it out when he wasn't looking. I wasn't going back to sleep until Ava Jade was back. Until I knew she was safe.

A shaky breath filled my lungs as I turned, carrying the fresh bandages and clean cloth to the bank of stainless steel sinks. I took the time to wipe down the scratched surface before setting down the sterile materials and pressing my palms down against the cool metal.

I looked up, feeling a chill roll down my spine at the reflection staring back at me in the mirror.

It was unmistakably me, which was a sort of relief I supposed. But *fuck* did I ever look like shit.

The bandage taped over my eye was a gruesome shade of yellowish pink, soiled, bits of gray dust and debris discoloring the edges of the clear surgical tape holding it in place. My face was gaunt. Paler than I'd ever seen it. With dark purplish skin

beneath the one eye I still had and the veins in my temple a striking blue against the thin skin covering them.

I'd managed to change out of my blood-covered clothes into gym shorts and a baggy t-shirt, one of the few extra sets of workout attire I kept here in the basement, but even the clean clothes couldn't cover up how absolutely *not clean* I was. There was still blood in the shallow wrinkles slashing across my neck. In my dirty blonde hair sticking out at every angle.

I needed a fucking shower, but that would have to wait. We'd planned to use one of the working girls' rooms upstairs to clean ourselves up after the meet. But without knowing exactly when Dies and Maverick would be showing up, we'd kept holding out.

I wanted to be there. Put the pressure on Mav if he even thought for a second about denying our request to hand over that little shit, Aries.

Rook was right, I didn't really think it was him, either. But then why run?

Why was he even there to fucking begin with? He was the clean-up crew, not a frontman. If he wasn't the guy, maybe he knew something that could help us at the very least. Something he wasn't keen to share.

I coughed to clear my throat, giving my head a slight shake to bring myself back to the reason I came in here. I was procrastinating, and it wasn't going to fucking help anything.

I licked my dry lips and gave my hands one final scrub under the hot water, drying them as well as I could before I set to work.

The bandages were practically fucking glued in place, and I cursed as I eased the edges of the surgical tape off my skin, leaving red marks behind.

"Grey," Rook's voice came through the door, followed by a soft double tap. "You good?"

"Fine."

“Sure you don’t want help, Bro? You shouldn’t be standing yet.”

“Look who’s fucking talking. How’s the peg leg?”

No reply, but I could imagine his face on the other side of the locked door.

“I’m good, Rook,” I cemented. “I need to do this myself.”

I heard the faint sound of his hobbled footsteps retreating and finished lifting the last bit of tape from my skin, jostling the bandage enough to cause a sharp pain to shoot all the way back through my skull, setting off a persistent throbbing ache once it subsided.

I gritted my teeth, rethinking the fucking morphine for half a second before I forced myself to pull the bandage the rest of the way off, not stopping once I began to pull despite the agony making my fingers shake.

“*Fuck,*” I gritted out, tossing the bandage into the sink and squeezing my one eye shut. The muscles around the missing one tried to flex as well, only serving to worsen the aching.

I slammed a fist against the countertop, the pain in my hand helping to dull the sharpness of the pain in my ocular cavity.

From the look of the bandage in the sink, it wasn’t going to be fucking pretty, but I made myself look again.

I blew out a breath, finding something other than what I imagined.

Not a garish crater-like wound that was caving in half my skull.

Stitches ran down the middle of my upper-eyelid, sewing it back together. The skin of my eyelids and around my eye screamed in shades of purple, red, and yellow. Swollen and brutal.

The thin wet red slash between my eyelids where my eye used to be looked like something out of a horror movie. Just really good special effects.

An all red contact lens.

But I knew the truth. I knew there was no eye there, and what I was seeing was the backside of an ocular cavity injured by the force of a bullet.

It had to be a ricochet. That was the only way the bullet wouldn't have continued to travel, past my ocular cavity and deeper into my most vital organ.

The guys were right. I was lucky.

My chest squeezed at the thought of Ava Jade ever seeing this.

Not only would she always blame herself for it, but...

I was fucking hideous.

Maybe when the swelling went down... when it began to heal.

I laughed darkly. No. Not even then.

I'd wear a patch for the rest of my life. I'd make sure she never saw it.

All that would be left would be to learn a really good fucking pirate voice and buy a parrot that could ride shotty on my shoulder and the look would be complete.

I choked on the next laugh, swallowing past the bile rising in my throat.

Vance would never walk again, I reminded myself.

This was nothing.

But I'm already the weakest of us, my mind whispered. Now Rook and Corv will only have to pick up even more slack for my sorry ass.

Would I still be able to shoot with one eye?

Drive?

Would I have to relearn everything?

Before I could fall too deeply into a bullshit well of self-pity, I picked up the clean cloth and let the water from the tap

run piping hot before soaking it under the stream.

I cleaned the wound, scrubbing off bits of dried blood and some other substance I'd rather not know well enough to name. Once the clean bandage was in place, I felt better, even if the soreness around the wound had only tripled as I cleaned it.

I took the antibiotics the vet gave me, scooping water from the tap to help ease them down my dry throat.

A fist pounded once on the door to the bathroom, and I jerked, hissing, "*What?*"

"Dies just pulled up," Rook said through the door. "You done? Mav should be here any minute for the meet."

"Yeah."

I dumped all my shit in the garbage and swiped the back of my hand over my wet lips before striding out, Rook watching me with a hawk's eye as I passed him, moving back to the front of Sanctum.

"How bad was it?" he asked as the sound of our father and the other Saints entering from the back door through the kitchen floated to us in the main bar.

I shrugged a shoulder. "It's fine."

"That's a bullshit answer."

I clenched my teeth. "It's not as bad as I thought it would be."

It was the truth but that didn't negate the fact I was missing an entire fucking eyeball. That I'd never get it back.

"Good."

From the way he was looking at me, I could tell. "You've already seen it, haven't you?"

"Course I have. Corv was passed out while the vet worked on you, but I watched the whole thing. He said you may be able to be fitted with a glass eye if it heals right."

So I could actually look like Frankenstein's monster.

Diesel pushed in through the door to the kitchen with a few Saints on his tail, scanning the bar until he found us.

“Mav’s on his way,” he said, striding over, trying to covertly get a look at us.

He dragged a stool from the bar and shoved Rook into it, dragging out another and patting the seat. “Lift your leg.”

“*Dies*,” Rook groaned.

“Lift your goddamned leg, or I’ll do it for you.”

Rook’s face soured as he lifted his leg, but he barely got it more than a couple feet off the ground before it dropped and he cursed, his body jerking forward.

Diesel grabbed the underside of Rook’s calf, below the bandage there and lifted it into place on the stool, his hand coming away red.

He glared at Rook, not needing to say a damn word, Rook knew he was being stupid. Now, whether or not he cared was another thing.

“Have either of you slept?”

I looked away.

Rook jerked his chin to Pinkie. “Grab me the Jack, would you?”

“No,” Dies hissed, making Pinkie stop in his tracks. “You’ll bleed out if your blood thins anymore.”

Rook’s upper lip twitched, but he didn’t argue.

“No Ava Jade yet?” Dies questioned, his gaze tracking around the quiet pub.

The wrinkles in his forehead deepened. “Where the fuck is Corvus?”

I pressed my lips shut.

If Corv hadn’t threatened the sentries Dies had placed at all the exits, they would’ve notified him Corvus left hours ago.

I assumed Corv planned to be back before Diesel was.

He texted an hour ago to say he wouldn't make it.

He was only digging his own grave.

“Goddammit,” Diesel said between clenched teeth. “When did he leave?”

“Ten minutes after you did,” Rook admitted, knowing Diesel would find out anyway. Besides, I got the feeling Rook was done covering for our big brother. His slight with Ava Jade wouldn't soon be forgiven. By either of us.

And if she didn't come back...

“Where did he go?” Diesel demanded.

“To check on a friend,” I supplied. “We haven't heard from her in a while.”

“Becca went with him,” Rook added. “His *backup*.”

Diesel tipped his head back, exasperated as he dragged a palm down his chin.

“The boy is fucking lucky we already swept the entire city. What was he thinking? With his injuries? Taking off into the streets still sour with the smell of spilled blood...”

It was a rhetorical question, and he lifted a hand to silence Pinkie when he tried to say something, lifting his cell phone from his pocket to dial Corvus.

I winced for my brother as the quiet sound of the line ringing filled my ears.

After a moment, the impersonal automated voicemail message from the service provider sounded, rattling off the phone number with a request to leave a message at the tone.

Diesel growled as he hung up, his thumbs flying over the screen as he typed what I knew would be a vicious text message. For a guy who expected us to reply to him immediately, he really did have a double standard with that shit.

Dies stuffed the phone back into his pocket and sighed, resetting himself as he stood at his full height. Out of the skin

of an angry parent and back where he fit best, into the battle-hardened flesh of a gang leader.

“Let’s do this downstairs,” he decided. “We don’t need Mav seeing this mess.”

He indicated the broken men around us, not needing to point out the obvious. That the majority of the injured were Saints. Not Kings.

They didn’t quite outnumber us now, but it was close.

Too close for Diesel’s comfort.

Rook lifted his leg off the stool.

“Not you,” Dies hissed at him. “You park your ass there and keep that shit elevated.”

“You know he’s just going to follow us,” I protested.

Diesel glared at Rook, and my brother gave him a plaintive shrug.

“Not if I make you stay,” he challenged, jerking his chin at Pinkie, who stepped forward.

Rook lifted his gun from his waistband and set it on the stool where his leg was only a second ago, between him and Pinkie.

“Try me, big guy.”

Pinkie looked back at Dies. “Boss?”

Diesel’s eyes glinted with malice as he sucked a breath in through his teeth. “So fucking stubborn,” he said. “You remind me of her.”

Rook smirked, replacing the gun back into his waistband, hobbling on his one leg. “It’s why you adopted my ass, remember?”

“Help him down the stairs,” Dies ordered Pinkie. “And see that he sits his ass down and elevates that leg.”

“You got it, boss.”

Rook allowed Pinkie to help him through the bar to the back stairs, and I followed behind them.

“You don’t have to be such a fucking cunt all the time,” Pinkie grunted without any real animosity, taking the brunt of Rook’s weight.

Rook laughed hollowly. “You know I wouldn’t really hurt my Pinkie Pie,” Rook crooned, and Pinkie shoved him into the wall, making him groan.

“*Oops,*” Pinkie muttered, only drawing another laugh from Rook as they made their way at a snail’s pace down the stairs to the underbelly of Sanctum.

CHAPTER

Four

CORVUS

BECCA'S ARMS squeezed tight around my waist as I drove us to Julia's. I removed a hand from the handlebars to lift her arms higher, away from the bullet wound.

"Sorry!" I heard her muffled voice through the glass fronted helmet on her head and the wind rushing over us, followed by a squeal as I took the next turn too sharply for her liking.

I'd wanted to be back for the meet with Maverick, but it didn't look like that was going to happen anymore.

We had to stop for food. If seeing Becca's pale complexion in the sunlight wasn't enough, the fact that she could barely stand on her own two feet cemented it. She needed food and water or she was going to pass the fuck out.

And I supposed I needed to eat, too.

We couldn't go get breakfast with blood and gore all over us, which meant we needed to shower.

Standing in Ava Jade's shower at Briar Hall, the safest place we could think to go, was harder than I'd thought it'd be.

Her room smelled of her, even after all the time she'd spent with us at the Crow's Nest. Her cheap shampoo, near empty conditioner, and bar soap scattered on the shower floor were so *her*.

And all right, if I was being honest, the only reason I thought to put off checking on Julia and risk being late to the meet was because there was a chance she might've been here.

Alone. Waiting for us to come and find her.

Walking in to absolute silence was like being shot all over again.

Where are you, Sparrow?

My Ducati's engine revved as I pulled us up alongside Julia's place, and Becca couldn't climb off fast enough.

"I'm sorry," she repeated as she pulled the oversized helmet off, letting her still damp dark hair fall down her back. "I didn't mean to hurt—"

"You're good," I interrupted her, trying and failing not to be agitated with her presence.

Ava Jade would be glad I'd taken her with me. That I'd fed her and saw that she got herself cleaned up.

It was one small step toward my redemption.

One of many.

My phone vibrated in my pocket and I took it out, jaw clenching at the screen. The missed call from Dies and the text message.

Diesel: Get your ass back here. Now.

I tucked the phone back in my pocket without replying. "Come on," I told Becca. "Let's get this over with."

"Um, do I, like, need a weapon... or...?"

I stopped, turning back to face her, quirking a brow.

"Okay. Gotcha. I'll just follow."

My nostrils flared.

I bent to pull the blade I kept at my ankle out of its sheath and handed it to her.

"I didn't know blades were your thing," she said, taking it carefully at first, like it might bite her, before she got the tang properly placed and held it with confidence.

"They're not," I replied. "You know how to use that?"

“Stick ’em with the pointy end,” she said, a small smile on her lips.

If there was trouble up there, we were dead.

“Yeah. You do that.”

Her smile faltered, and she fell into step behind me.

“Keep that thing pointed down if you aren’t using it.”

“Oh. Right. So, um, who lives here exactly?”

We walked up the drive to the small two story house set apart from the others farther up the street. Julia rented the upstairs apartment, despite our offer to put her up somewhere far nicer. She insisted she loved the view of the dense redwoods in the backyard and didn’t need any more space.

Before I could take the first step, the *bang* of a screen door around the house stopped me, startling Becca into a little chirp of surprise.

My gun was out in an instant, but when the small stout woman who lived downstairs came stomping around the edge of the house in a huff, I hurriedly put it behind my back.

“*Oh,*” she exclaimed, seeing me and Becca on the stairs. “I thought you were Julia,” she said, her face pinching, looking irritated and disappointed all at once.

“Have you seen her recently?” I asked.

The woman gave me another look, scrutinizing more closely. She was suspicious.

I put on my smooth voice and forced a worried expression of my own. “I’m her cousin. The family’s been trying to reach her, but she hasn’t been taking anyone’s calls. We’re starting to worry.”

The woman’s gaze slid to Becca.

“We were hoping to check on her,” Becca lied smoothly. “You know, make sure she’s okay.”

This time, the woman’s flustered demeanor melted, and she nodded sadly at Becca. “I’m sorry, dear, but I haven’t seen

her in weeks. She's past due with her rent and there's an awful stink coming from up there. I think she might've gone someplace and forgot to take out her trash."

"You haven't seen her in weeks?" I repeated. "And you didn't think to call the police?"

The woman looked taken aback at the question. "Well, no. Julia keeps to herself. She's gone out of town for a couple weeks before without telling me. And you know her, with that landline ringing all hours of the day and night. I don't think she had a cell phone."

She did.

But clearly she never thought to share the number with her landlady.

My stomach turned with unease.

"Would you happen to have a key?" Becca asked the woman, moving toward her. "Maybe we could find some clue to where she's gone."

The woman frowned. "I... well, yes. I do keep a spare, but I couldn't possibly—"

"Please," Becca pleaded. "We'll be in and out."

Becca paused.

"And maybe we could arrange for the payment of the rent she owed you in the meantime?"

This seemed to spark something in the woman's eyes, and her pursed lips slackened.

"It's twelve hundred," she said. "And I'll take next month's too in case she doesn't show."

Becca turned to look at me for confirmation.

Greedy old cunt.

I nodded.

"We can do that," Becca said.

The woman made a show of thinking it through before vanishing to find the key. She was back in less than five

minutes, holding the key just out of Becca's reach.

I strode up to them, reaching into the inside pocket of my leather jacket for the short stack of bills there.

I counted out twelve hundred, packing the other four or five hundred back into the pocket.

"That's only one month," the woman protested.

"And you'll get the other month's rent when it's due," I told her. "And only if our being here today stays between us."

Her lips parted, perhaps finally recognizing me for who I was.

Maybe not my face or my name, but I needed neither to pull weight in Thorn Valley. My face screamed Saint, and if she knew what was good for her, she wouldn't refuse me.

She was lucky I played along at all instead of turning over her entire house to find the key myself.

"A-all right. That seems fair."

She backed away. "I'll just be inside if there's anything else you need. Just... just slip the key back through the mail slot when you're finished, will you?"

She didn't wait for a reply before taking off back the way she'd come.

"See," Becca said, lifting the key to dangle it in my direction. "I can be useful."

She dropped the key into my hand and took the blade back out from where she'd hidden it in her tits. How she'd managed to not slice one off was beyond me.

"Let's go, Hart. I'm already late getting back."

She hurried to keep up as I took the stairs two at a time, the feeling of unease only growing in the pit of my stomach the nearer we got to Julia's door.

Something was definitely wrong.

Julia knew the risks when she agreed to take this job.

Even with her identity concealed from the kids who called in for help, there was a possibility someone could figure out who she was. All it would take was one guilty child admitting who they called for help. One angry parent with a cop friend to trace the call back to her.

These were violent, sadistic pieces of abusive trash.

But having been abused herself as a teen, Julia knew the risks and didn't give two fucks about them. The way she saw it, if she could even help one of them out of a bad situation, it was worth it.

The smell hit us before I could finish feeding the key into the slot and I cursed, my nose wrinkling as I flicked the safety off my gun and pushed inside.

"Don't touch anything," I growled to Becca behind me.

"Oh god," she croaked, her voice nasally. No doubt plugging her nose. "What is that?"

I would know that smell anywhere. Flashes of time-tainted memory of my parents dead on the floor, their blood soaking into the carpets assaulted my mind.

I pushed through them, lifting the neckline of my t-shirt to cover my mouth and nose with my gun hand extended.

My eyes watered from the force of the odor, and I kicked past mail piled on the floor in front of her door and into the dusty apartment.

"*Christ, Julia,*" I hissed, knowing what I would find as I cautiously stepped through the kitchen, noting the upturned retro chair and the molding coffee in the antique mug on the table.

Everything in here was so outdated. Julia wasn't fucking around when she said she didn't need much. Everything in the whole place appeared to be thrifted if not dived for out of dumpsters. What the fuck did she do with all the money we paid her?

"Corvus," Becca said in a quiet voice behind me. "I-I don't think I can go in there."

“You wanted to come with me,” I reminded her in a hushed tone. “Get over here. Stay close or I won’t be able to protect you.”

Her light feet rushed over, sticking to my ass like she was told.

“What *is* that?” she whined, choking on the smell no doubt coating her throat like it was coating mine.

There was only one thing it could be.

I peered through to the left and right, toward the open living room and bedroom, but nothing seemed amiss in either. Just more old furniture. Several stacks of yellowing paperbacks towering around her bed and filling the side tables.

In front of us were two doors. One no doubt led to a bathroom, but the other... the other would be her office. It was a stipulation of the job offer. She needed to have a separate office. One that could be locked. With a safe to keep her notes in and the ability to connect a landline phone.

I opened the door on the left.

Bathroom. Untouched.

Becca moved closer to my side. I couldn’t hear her breathing anymore as I opened the other door, twisting the knob with two fingers before shoving it the rest of the way open.

I already knew what I’d find, but that didn’t make it any easier to swallow.

“Fuck,” I cursed, giving the room a quick once over before lowering my gun.

Behind me, Becca vomited on the floor, gripping on to my arm to keep herself from falling over.

I waited until she was finished and returned to standing.

The reek of her corpse was nearly enough to make me follow Becca’s lead, but I’d smelled worse. Seen worse.

Though that didn’t mean the gruesome picture of violence in front of us didn’t unsettle the absolute fuck out of me.

Julia sat in the wooden chair in front of her wooden desk by the curtained window. Her head bent over a desk covered in scattered blank note paper. Motionless.

Her skin was tinted in shades of red and green, slipping in places where it should've been sedentary. But it wasn't the disgust of her corpse itself that made my stomach squeeze. It was the objects sticking out of her flesh. Hanging out now that time had worn her body down.

The sharp ends of pencils and pens and little silver bits I thought might've been paper clips.

A line of what looked like staples ran down the back of one of her arms.

But the piece de resistance, the cause of her death, appeared to be the cord from the ancient landline phone wrapped threefold around her thin neck, the skin bloated now around the tight beige coiled line.

"Oh my god, I just dumped my DNA all over this crime scene," Becca said, still trying to catch her breath from retching so hard.

"Don't worry about it," I told her, moving deeper into the small office space. "I'll be sending a clean up crew to take care of this. Cops won't touch it."

I noticed the safe to the side of the desk, open, papers spilling out. All Julia's notes on the kids who called. Meticulously taken by hand in black ink, areas highlighted, circled and underlined.

I nudged the safe closed with my foot and found blood on the dial.

Whoever did this forced her to open it.

I leaned over Julia, pressing my shirt harder into my mouth and nose to find the cord of the landline phone had been ripped from the wall.

Her cell phone was left on the desk. I tapped the screen, but it was dead. I picked it up and slipped it into my jacket's

inner pocket, hoping there was something, anything on it that might lead us to the person responsible for this.

Maybe she'd started to type out a message to one of us. Or left a voice memo. Recorded the attack. *Something*.

Julia was smart, but was she that smart? Was she able to act that fast or had whoever did this snuck up on her?

My hand hovered over Julia's shoulder. I couldn't bring myself to touch her.

I let the hollow sadness of her loss fill me, but only for a second. She deserved for someone to grieve for her. She was only twenty-six and she had no family left that cared for her.

"I'm sorry," I whispered to her. "I'll find the person who did this and I'll make them pay."

I clenched my hand into a fist and lowered it.

"Make yourself useful," I told Becca. "Grab all those notes from the safe. Whoever did this will have taken the notes she had on them to avoid being caught."

"What?"

I forgot Becca didn't know about our humanitarian project.

There was a lot she didn't know.

Even more she shouldn't.

If she knew what was good for her, she would get the fuck out of dodge the instant Ava Jade came back. Maybe her friend could convince her to.

When I didn't answer her, she bent to her knees and began scraping the papers together, keeping as much of a distance from Julia's corpse as she could.

Once she had them all in a neat stack, she rose to her feet shakily and tucked them under her arm.

I checked the rest of the room for any other evidence, but my gaze kept falling back on Julia.

Something about her death, the nature of it, didn't sit right with me.

The assholes we visited vengeance on in Thorn Valley didn't seem capable of it.

They were drunks. Assholes. And one in maybe every fifty was truly unhinged, but all of those were dead.

Whoever did this appeared to be playing with her. Fuck, they turned her into a human fucking pin cushion. Sickly, it reminded me of something Rook could've done, though he never would've served this level of pain on an innocent person.

On a monster, sure.

But not to a girl like Julia.

Not on purpose.

And this was *very* fucking purposeful.

There was something here, and I was missing it.

“Corv,” Becca said, gagging again. “Can we go?”

“What’s that?”

“What’s what?”

My brows furrowed at the rough scrape in the dark wood desk beneath a sheet of the note paper next to Julia’s head.

I pushed the sheet of paper out of the way and found the carved line in the wood had a curve to it.

Quickly, I began to tear the sheets of paper from the surface of the desk, revealing jagged lettering carved into its surface.

“Sorry, Julia,” I uttered, lifting her heavy head off the desk to hang back in her chair. A smear of her putrefied remains clung to the pages, gluing them to the surface of the desk, and I had to scrape them free, swallowing the taste of bile as it rose up the back of my throat.

I swiped what remained from the desk with my forearm and stood back to read the message left for me.

No, not for me.

For *us*.

No more carrion for the Crows

Below the hastily scratched in text were smaller letters. A signature.

I roared, rage singing in my veins, exploding in my eyes, tinting my vision red as I flipped the desk and spun, storming out of the office and through the kitchen, back to the front door. To the air I needed to get a hold on myself.

My fingers curled around the wooden banister, flexing the old wood to the point of snapping as I pushed the rage down. Swallowed it back.

Controlled it.

Control it.

“C-Corvus?” Becca hedged, hovering in the apartment. “What did it say?”

I whirled on her, taking the papers from under her arm, making her yelp as I threw them back into the apartment. “We don’t need those,” I seethed. “I know who did this.”

CHAPTER

Five

ROOK

MAVERICK and a small group of his men entered the underground fight club, chins raised like the Kings they thought they were. Mav went straight for Dies, his hand extended, a carefully placed grin on his lips.

“A righteous win, St. Crow,” Mav said. “My boys and I just finished sweeping the area west of Spirit Lake. None escaped.”

Dies nodded, continuing the pre-meeting conversation with Maverick. Going over which areas specifically Mav and his men covered as well as several other things that needed to be seen to.

I spied Drake beside his leader and caught his eye.

He lifted his chin in greeting, excusing himself from Mav’s side to come over to the edge of the room near the bar where Grey and I sat at one of the high top tables. The three chairs already occupied by both of us and my bum fucking leg.

I wouldn’t be moving it for Drake’s ass, either.

“Hey,” he said, waving the bartender Dies called on short notice behind the bar for a beer. “Heard anything from your girl, yet?”

He pushed his sandy blond hair away from his forehead, leaning over the table to look between us.

“Nothing,” Grey said, his tone clipped.

Drake shook his head. “I don’t get it. I searched the entire Deadwood for her. She couldn’t have gotten that far on foot.”

“Wouldn’t surprise me if she jacked one of the Kings’ cars or bikes,” I put in, also waving to the bartender for a whiskey.

Her jaw clenched and she stilled, brown eyes jerking between my father across the room and me.

“I’m only supposed to give you water,” she said tensely after a second.

I ran my tongue over my teeth, sending Dies a glare.

Did he *want* me to take the painkillers?

Because taking away the only thing dulling the aching in my leg would’ve made most people turn to the drugs as the only other viable option for fucking pain management. As it was, antibiotics were all I was allowed, though I doubted those would work if I drank too much, either.

“Make you a deal sweetheart,” I told her with a wicked smirk. “You give me two fingers of whiskey, neat, and I’ll drink all the water you put on this table.”

She grimaced, hesitating before pulling down that good Canadian rye whiskey I liked from the top shelf and pouring it into a short glass.

“Atta girl.”

“Thanks,” Drake muttered after the bartender dropped the drinks off at the table, including two brimming glasses of water next to my whiskey.

“If you haven’t heard from her at all by now...” He trailed off, pursing his lips.

“*What?*” Grey growled.

“Well, I mean, she’s probably gone for good then, yeah? Maybe this life wasn’t for her after all—”

Grey tensed, but it was me who acted, dragging Drake across the table by his jacket, making the zipper done all the way up to his throat come partially undone.

“You don’t know what you’re fucking talking about,” I seethed, seeing something in his blue eyes tighten, the fear I was used to seeing reflected back at me absent.

He gripped the hand knotted in his jacket and pried it off, keeping eye contact. “I’m not your enemy, man,” he said. “I didn’t mean anything by it. Just... if she still isn’t back, then where is she?”

Neither of us could answer that and instead of savoring my whiskey like I planned to, I downed it in one, baring my teeth at the glorious burn chasing the darkness back down my throat.

Behind Drake, Mav and Dies seemed to have begun the formal meeting, sitting opposite one another in the long table Dies had brought down and placed just next to the fighting ring. Pinkie sat next to Dies where Corvus would’ve been sitting if he’d made it back in time and three other seats sat empty on the right of the table.

Mav’s men sat next to him, one empty seat near the edge of the table remained, and I assumed it was meant for Drake. I hadn’t realized he was part of Mav’s main men.

“Here,” Drake offered, jerking his head. “Let me help you.”

I snarled angrily, hating that I needed to be helped to my fucking seat like some goddamned senior citizen.

“I’m good,” I retorted, nostrils flaring as I eased my leg down from the chair and went to take a step and nearly fell on my face as all the blood drained from my upper body to congregate in my leg, filling it so it felt near bursting.

“Fucking hell,” I ground out, clutching the table.

“Come on, big guy,” I barely heard Drake say as he dragged one of my arms over his shoulder and Grey took my other arm, leading us all to the table for the meet.

They deposited me in my chair next to Pinkie, and I sniffed, catching the scent of Pinkie’s rum and Coke on the table in front of him.

I slid it over to myself, giving him a warning look when he opened his mouth to protest. He rolled his eyes, staying silent like a good Pinkie Pie.

“We all know why this meet was called,” Mav began, and I studied him over the rim of my drink as I sipped away.

He was a big guy. At least two-twenty, most of it muscle, with tattoos up the right side of his neck and a teardrop tat beneath his right eye that looked pretty sick in combination with the word *SUBMIT* scribbled above his brow.

But I’d pegged him as a weak ally from the first moment I’d seen him.

His men were a different story—some of them were true warriors, but this guy? He looked the part but that was where it ended. Underneath that jerky gaze and all those pounds of muscle was a man who had no fucking idea what he was doing.

He lacked the confidence a man in his position should have. Lacked the sort of vicious bearing he needed to properly lead a gang of his size.

It was a wonder he’d managed for as many years as he had.

“We do,” Diesel agreed. “But I’ll hear your concerns properly voiced all the same.”

Mav nodded, his gaze slipping to his men down the table beside him. “I need to know what this win means for our alliance.”

I tuned them out, playing with the condensation on my glass, the alcohol working against me now. My vision blurred, and I shook my head sharply, regaining focus.

Unlike my brothers, I hadn’t had the luxury of passing out from my wounds, and I couldn’t fucking sleep until my Ghost was back where she belonged.

“Can I get some fucking food,” I piped up, shouting across the space to the bartender, interrupting the pointless talks going on at the table.

Diesel eyed me, and I lifted a brow. “What?”

They went on with their conversation, and I sat back in my chair, ignoring Grey’s quiet pleas to get my attention with his elbow jamming into my ribs.

“I’m fine,” I hissed at him, finishing the cocktail only to get a bit more sugar into my bloodstream.

“We’d like to offer for the alliance to continue,” Diesel said. “We have the arms connections you need and you have the clientele we need to get rid of the last of our smack. Besides, not having to circumvent Lennox to get to our arms dealers would save us a fuckload of time and resources.”

Mav nodded as Diesel spoke, and I ripped the corn nuts from the bartender’s hands as she brought them to the table, tearing into the packaging to dump the contents into my mouth.

“We accept,” Mav said, like we all knew he would. He’d be an idiot to turn down Diesel’s offer. And Dies would be the even bigger fool not to have offered for the alliance to continue in the face of our current losses.

“This isn’t a permanent situation,” Diesel added. “We’ll continue the alliance on a trial basis. Temporary. For now.”

It was the *for now* that gave Mav the hope he needed to conclude this meeting with any measure of triumph. A permanent alliance with the Saints would cement him and his gang among the top predators of this great nation. It wouldn’t be given or won so easily.

Mav nodded again, slowly, to show he understood.

I nudged Dies, and his jaw ticked.

“There’s one more thing, a condition of this alliance’s continuance.”

“A condition?” Mav repeated, his brows pulling together, gaze slipping down the table again, making me wonder if he was the one calling the shots here or if they formed more of a council between the four of them seated at the table.

I put a cigarette to my lips, cursing as I flicked my zippo and nothing but sparks came out.

“Your man, *Aries*.”

Surprise registered in Mav’s eyes, but he didn’t reply.

“We have reason to believe he may have less than honorable intent toward one of my Saints.”

I flicked again, a tremor of annoyance scraping up the back of my skull.

“How so?”

Diesel set his jaw again. He didn’t have to explain himself to Mav, and it seemed, in this case, he wouldn’t. It was a power move. He wanted to see if Mav would fight him on it or if he would bend, giving Diesel what he wanted without him having to work for it.

“What do you want with him?” Maverick asked after an uncomfortable silence.

A lighter slid noisily across the table between us and I glanced up to see Drake had tossed me his. I gave him a nod, abandoning mine as I lifted his to light my smoke, finding a set of initials engraved in the worn silver surface.

I inhaled greedily, shoving the lighter back across to him, catching a mean side eye from Diesel that asked me without the need for words if I was fucking finished.

I nodded.

“I want you to call him in,” Diesel continued his conversation with Mav. “Me and my boys would like to have a little... *conversation*... with him.”

“What sort of conversation?”

“The kind where I will determine whether a man like him has a place allied to my crew.”

“And if he doesn’t?”

The silence carried with it the threat no one needed spoken.

If Aries turned out to be the monster my Ghost thought him to be, there was nowhere on this earth he would be safe from us.

Fuck, I would be just as likely to chase his ass to hell and torment him for the rest of his miserable fucking afterlife too.

Maverick glanced at his men at the table once again before nodding to Diesel. "I'd gladly give him up to you for your questioning," Maverick said, sighing even though his body only grew more tense. "But we haven't seen Aries in a few days. We thought he might've been spooked knowing it was going to come to a firefight with the Aces. I told my men it would be all hands on deck for the fight. Even his sorry ass. The kid's better with corpses than he is with the living."

Diesel visibly tensed. He wasn't all right with this answer.

"I don't give a fuck where he is. He's your man, and I want him. Find him and bring him here, or I'll be forced to reconsider our position."

Mav bit the inside of his cheek.

If he wanted to keep his fucking head, he should be saying *yes fucking sir*, right now.

"I think I can find him, Mav," Drake said from down the table. "I know where he likes to hang out. Let me take a couple guys. We should be able to get a hold of him pretty quick."

Mav nodded, visibly relieved. "Will that satisfy?" he asked Diesel.

"For now," Diesel deadpanned, and I stubbed out my cigarette, glad to be done with this bullshit.

The thunder of steps rushing down the stairs from the street entrance interrupted the tepid silence and as one, Saint and King alike stood, guns out.

All except for my ass.

It was Corv.

Obviously.

But that didn't mean I didn't also hear the urgency in his hurried steps. Or that it didn't coil something tightly in my gut, souring the meager snack I'd just managed to choke down.

My fist clenched beneath the table as he burst into the room, the door banging like a gunshot against the opposite wall as he stormed through. His eyes laser focused as they found Diesel. Us next to him.

"A *word*," Corvus snarled, his face a battlefield of barely contained rage. I'd never seen him this wound up. He didn't let anyone see him like this. Control was his mountain, and he never gave up the climb.

"Thought you were too busy to join us, Son," Diesel said smoothly, thumbing the safety back on his gun before tucking it away. The Kings opposite us sat, all except Drake, who looked like he was ready to go to war if only Corvus would give the order.

Maybe we'd keep him once this alliance came to its inevitable end.

"*Diesel*," Corvus all but yelled, his teeth bared.

"Excuse me for just a moment, would you, gentlemen?" Diesel said, giving Corvus a warning look as he caught my ass when I tried to stand and dragged my arm over his shoulder.

Corvus stalked through the club to a barrage of whispers from our guests, not stopping until we were all through to the back room where our guys counted the cash from fight nights.

Grey closed the door behind us all once we were inside.

"Interrupting a sanctioned meeting, Corv—" Dies began but Corvus laid a glare on him so heavy it made our adopted father stop whatever he was about to say.

"What happened?" he demanded instead. "Are you hurt? Where's the girl?"

Corvus paced the small space, throwing a fist through his hair. His face all sharp angles. "She's fine," he said. "She's upstairs."

“Then what the fuck—” I started but Corvus continued, talking over me.

“We found Julia,” he said, a hollow laugh on his lips. “Dead. Dead for fucking weeks.”

“She answered the phones, right? She had to know there would be risks with that job.”

The dark parts of me flickered within, aching for retribution for the taking of a life that was *ours* to protect.

“How?” I demanded.

“She died badly.”

Then so would the person who did it.

But that didn’t explain why Corv was so riled up. He didn’t give a fuck about anyone outside this room save for Ava Jade. Not really. Not in any way that would get him this fired up.

“That’s not the worst part, is it?” Grey asked, catching on only a second after I did.

Corv stopped pacing, his head bent as he shook it, still trying to regain control. “It was him,” he said, his voice so low I wondered if I heard him right.

“What?” Diesel pressed. “Who?”

“He left his fucking signature,” Corv replied. “*No more carrion for the Crows,*” he added with another dark laugh. Signed *Crow Killer.*”

Fire. Liquid fire raced through my veins, and I ached to spread it. Spread it so vastly that everything would burn. Every tree. Every car. Every motherfucking building. Leaving him no place to hide from me.

“Wait, this was the stalker?” Diesel asked, his gaze jerking back and forth, not really seeing anything as he thought it through.

I stood, unable to sit anymore as the animal inside awoke, on the prowl.

“Rook, sit the fuck down,” Diesel said, reaching for me, but I smacked his hand away.

“*Don’t*,” I warned at the same time Corvus growled, “*Leave him.*”

“*AJ*,” Grey’s soft whisper somehow managed to cut through all the shouting and my eldest brother and I froze in place.

I met Grey’s eye, and it was like all the breath was snatched from my lungs.

My Ghost.

What if...

“We need to find her,” Grey said in a rush. “We need to find her *now*.”

“Hold up, now,” Diesel started. “This doesn’t mean anything. You said yourself this happened weeks ago.”

“I don’t give a fuck what I said,” Corvus replied. “Grey is right. We can’t wait any more. *Fuck!* We shouldn’t have waited at all.”

Diesel thought through the problem, his one worry showing through the careful mask he always wore. “All right. We bring this to the table. Get the guys on it. All of them. Yeah?”

I didn’t like the idea of bringing the Kings into this, but it made sense to get as much help as we could. The more people looking, the faster we would be likely to find her.

Even if the dark beast within whispered that we didn’t need any help. That we would be the one to find her. To eviscerate this filth so slowly that he would be pushed to madness before he would finally die.

“Yeah,” Grey agreed.

“Yeah,” Corvus put in.

Diesel waited for my word. I gave him a nod.

“I’ll go with Drake,” Grey offered. “He was going to put together a small team to try to find Aries. That’s who AJ thought it was. It’s as good a place as any to start looking.”

“Fine,” Corv said. “Then Rook and I will lead two other teams.”

“Rook can’t lead anyone right now,” Diesel said. “I can—”

“The fuck I can’t,” I barked. “Corv will lead a team to search all the locations she could be. I’ll lead a patrol team. You drive, I’ll ride shotty. I want at least five cars on the streets until she’s found. We’ll connect with the radios. Divide into wards for patrol.”

Diesel’s mouth tightened, but he nodded. “All right. That’ll work.” He sighed. “So much for fucking resting, huh boys?”

“Rest is for the weak,” Grey said.

“I’ll rest when I’m dead,” I added.

Corvus chewed his bottom lip, lifting his icy eyes to ours. “I’ll rest when our girl is home and not a fucking second sooner.”

We all moved to leave, the pain in my leg seeming to have leveled out to a static hum of discomfort after the crescendo of pain earlier. Good. I’d need to be able to walk. To run.

To fucking *chase* if I needed to.

“Ugh, fuck, wait,” Corv said, making us pause. “What about Rebecca?”

“What about her?” I asked.

“The fuck do we do with her if everyone’s out looking for Sparrow?”

She’d want to come, but judging by the look on Diesel’s face he wasn’t keen to involve her any more than we already had. We didn’t need to tango with Mr. Hart if anything happened to his precious daughter.

Although... I’d never sampled the fear of a blue blood.

“She can stay here for now if she wishes,” Diesel said finally. “But our protection ends there. She doesn’t need it anymore. The Aces are dead and with them her boyfriend. If she’s ready, send her home.”

“Who’s going to tell her?” Corvus asked, at his limit for patience.

Grey sighed behind me. “I’ll do it.”

I slapped a hand on his shoulder. He really was the best of us. In more ways than one.

CHAPTER

Six

AVA JADE

I RAN through the dappled moonlight, my bare feet flying over uneven terrain. A laugh grew in my chest, and I couldn't fully contain it as it slipped past my lips. I'd missed this.

The sensation of flying as the still-warm Cali night air coursed over my body, twisting and braiding my long hair into a tangle. The exertion. The burn in my legs. So potent. So fucking perfect.

Another laugh escaped.

Shit.

They'd hear me.

My pursuers were close behind me, but they'd never catch me, not unless I wanted them to. And honestly? I did want them to. But I had to at least make them work for it, right?

I stopped dead, craning my neck to listen. I could hear them, but barely. They were still *way* the fuck back there. Damn tortoises.

"You want me?" I shouted, breathless, my hand curling into fists as more laughter ached for freedom from my lungs. "Come and get me, fuckers!"

A grunt somewhere far off, close to the Nest we'd all started this race from. Corvus. He was catching up.

A wicked idea curved my lips into a twisted smile, and I started running again, tugging my tank top off to discard it on the forest floor behind me.

My bra went next and I sucked in a breath at the sensation of the warm air rushing over my nipples, turning them to hard pebbles as my breasts bounced almost painfully.

I slowed to a hop to get my shorts off, tossing those behind me, too, leaving a trail for them to find.

My panties were already wet with anticipation as I pulled them off, running ass naked through the dark trees between the Nest and Briar Hall.

“*Sparrow,*” Corvus growled in the distance, angry as he found my clothes. I roared with laughter, pushing my legs harder. I didn’t think I’d ever run faster, with nothing between me and the air. Nothing between me and the sky. If I just spread my arms and closed my eyes, I was willing to bet good money I could straight up fucking fly.

I closed my eyes, relishing the feeling.

When I opened them again, I recognized the small space coming up through the trees. I’d run through it tens of times since Grey and I shared our first kiss here. It was perfect.

I peered over my shoulder and slowed, waiting for them to catch me.

The anticipation sent little shivers rushing all over the surface of my skin, made the space between my legs hot, pulsing with an electric need that sent currents racing up through my belly.

The crash of footfalls got louder in my ears and my breathing picked up to an uneven, heavy pace, my eyes narrowing to slits.

Corvus’ dark shadow wove through the trees, bursting into the space where I stood, naked in the moonlight.

He skidded to a stop, his light blue eyes catching in the silver light like reflective glass as he stared at me. Hungry like an animal who’d just sighted its prey.

The others were right behind him; Grey and Rook appeared through the dense foliage at the same time, rushing up to stand to either side of Corvus. Rook’s lips parted as he

caught his breath, his dark eyes devouring every inch of my body.

Grey licked his lips, his shoulders rising and falling, hands in hard fists at his sides.

“Well...” I beckoned, pulling my lower lip in between my teeth. “What are you waiting for?”

A vicious growl left Rook’s lips as he stalked forward, not stopping until all the space between us had been annihilated. He twisted his fist into my hair, jerking my chin up until my lips had nowhere else they could go but to meet his in a feral kiss.

My heart twisted in my chest, and I let out a little moan of surprise, jerking as a hand that was not Rook’s ran down the length of my spine, making my back arch.

Feather-light kisses trailed over the ridge of my shoulders from behind, turning harder, more insistent, until they weren’t kisses at all, but bites. Hard bites that would leave marks for days to come.

I moaned, and Rook bit my lower lip, adding to the pleasure pain mix only to lick the pain away a moment later, diving into my mouth with his wicked tongue as though he could inhale my soul.

Hands wrapped around my ribs, reaching between Rook and me to find my breasts. They squeezed, rolling my nipples between the pads of thumb and index finger.

“*More,*” I managed between fevered kisses.

I wanted them to use me until I was so spent they had to carry my ass back to the nest.

“*More,*” I demanded a second time, pulling roughly away from Rook to look him in the eyes. He needed to know I meant business.

“Tell me what you want, Ghost,” he said, lips swollen from our kiss, eyes so black I could fall into them and never come out again. “And it’s yours.”

“You,” I said on a breath, grabbing Grey’s hand on my breast. “And you,” I told him, spinning until I found Corvus standing just a few feet away, his hand pawing at the erection begging for release from his jeans. “And you.”

“That’s a lot of cock, AJ. Sure you can handle it?” Grey crooned against the base of my neck, making me shudder.

I nodded. I never backed down from a challenge.

I yelped as Corvus lifted me high, tossing me over his shoulder. The yelp turning to a laugh as he spanked my ass. “Not hard enough?” he asked.

He spanked me again, and I jerked against his shoulder, the breath rushing out of me.

“That’s a good girl.”

My head spun as he threw me forward, catching me before I could fly into the dirt. I noticed the fallen tree he’d brought me to. No doubt to fuck me on, but I wanted to taste him first.

I immediately fell to my knees, unbuckling his jeans, letting that magnificent cock free. I took him into my mouth, the warm salty taste of him sliding over my tongue.

He groaned, his palm pressing on the back of my skull. “That’s it,” he said. “Open that throat for me.”

I did as I was told and he pushed in deeper, his tight ass muscles flexing against my hands as he filled my throat, holding himself there until I choked on him. Choosing his cock over air.

Corvus barely waited for me to catch my breath before driving into my mouth again, fucking my tight little throat until it was raw.

Out of the corner of my eye, I found Grey striding over, his shorts discarded somewhere, his cock in his hand. Stroking himself.

The sight made my pussy quake, and I moaned on Corvus’ cock, making him curse.

I reached for Grey, wanting to touch him. He obliged, pressing his cock into my hand. I pumped him, rubbing my thumb over that sensitive spot just below the tip on his underside. He shook in my hand, tipping his head back to close his eyes.

Corvus' cock popped free of my lips, and he dragged me to Grey. "Open," he said and I did, letting Corvus push my mouth onto Grey's cock.

I found Corvus' massive length again, stroking him while I let Grey have his turn in my mouth. But there was someone missing.

Rook lifted my ass, forcing me to balance on my knees as he reached between my legs, finding my wetness.

The first stroke raced through me like fire and I bucked, whimpering.

The flick of a blade opening made me sharply aware of everything around me, something in my chest tightening in a way that only Rook could untie.

Rook pressed his palm flat against the base of my spine, trying to keep my lower body still. He removed his fingers from their teasing stroked between my legs only long enough to flick open a small cut on my hip.

I sucked in a breath, only managing to inhale Grey's cock even further at the sting.

"More," I tried to say around Grey's cock, never relenting my pumping of Corvus' with my right hand.

Little flicks of the knife opened shallow wounds curving around the bone of my hip. I didn't realize what he was doing until he was nearly finished.

Grey pulled out of my mouth, and I took the opportunity to crane my neck backward, finding Rook admiring his handiwork. The name *Rook* bled against my moonlit skin, and I hoped he'd cut deep enough for it to scar because it was the most beautiful tattoo I could even imagine having.

"It's perfect," I said, voice hoarse.

“Enough of this,” Corvus growled, snapping at Grey as he indicated the fallen tree. “Sit.”

Grey’s brows furrowed, but he did as he was told, sitting on the rough bark.

“Ready, Sparrow?”

I nodded, letting Corvus lift me from my knees, Rook following suit.

The sound of tearing fabric rushed in my ears, and I clenched my teeth as a strip of Rook’s black t-shirt pressed against the fresh cuts in my hip, and he fastened it tightly into place to stop the bleeding.

“You said you wanted all of us,” Rook whispered against my neck, biting the skin beneath my ear.

“You say that like it’s a threat...” I trailed off, letting them see that it was the exact opposite.

“Step back, Sparrow.”

I did, feeling Grey’s hands wrap around my middle, drawing me onto him from behind. “Give me your ass, AJ.”

The tiny hairs on my arms rose as I held myself up, letting him slowly work himself into my ass until I was grimacing at the initial pain and how it evened out to a glorious sort of fullness that I knew would only grow.

I used Grey’s thighs to prop myself up, opening my legs for one of the others to enter me from the front.

Fear skated down my spine, but nowhere near as great as the dizzying drug of ecstasy pulsing in my blood, making my vision blur at the edges.

I tipped my head back as Grey adjusted himself inside me, getting even deeper. Strong arms wrapped around mine, pulling them back, securing them. Grey trapped me against his body, and I laid my head against his shoulder.

My greedy cunt throbbed, waiting for Corvus.

“What are you waiting for?” I all but growled, unable to handle another second of the anticipation.

Why was he making me wait?

I squinted into the dark to find him and something in my belly tightened, setting me on edge.

He... was fully dressed again.

So was Rook.

The pressure of Grey's cock thrust deep in my ass vanished, and I felt the textured fabric of denim against my bare ass. But still, he held me against him, not allowing me to move.

Corvus' eyes seemed to glow in the dark as he watched me, not with a hungry passion, but with something far more sinister.

What...

Somewhere, the sound of something dripping reached my ears and each little slap of water sent my heart into a faster rhythm.

Something wasn't right.

"Grey?"

I struggled to pull my arms free.

"Grey, let me go."

My pulse pounded in my ears.

"Rook?"

"Corvus?"

I glanced between them, between their shadows.

They were the monsters in the dark again, but this time I didn't want them to chase me. Had no desire for them to catch me.

"Step into the light," I shouted at them, needing to see their faces. Needing to make sure it was them.

That it wasn't...

Corvus moved first, taking two strong steps into the light.

I frowned, trying to make sense of the pained expression on his face. At the rage in his eyes, barely contained.

“What happe—”

I gasped, seeing the blooming rose of fresh blood turning his gray shirt a wet red just above his waistline. Blood poured from the wound, darkening the denim of his jeans, draining all the color from his face.

“C-Corvus?”

His upper lip curled into a sneer, and when he tried to take another step forward, he nearly collapsed, catching himself on the thick branch of a tree to hold himself up.

No.

Rook emerged from the dark and into the moonlight like the ghost he named me for, his face pale. But on his second step, he fell to one knee, a sort of anger I’d never seen from him before shaping his face into someone I couldn’t recognize. He held my gaze, radiating hate as I began to notice the wounds in his leg. The gaping bullet holes, leaking blood so black it couldn’t have been human.

“He’ll never walk right again,” Corvus rasped, looking so faint it made my heart nearly stop.

Something warm dripped on my shoulder, and I jerked my head away from Grey, twisting my neck until I could see him. See the garish wound where his eye used to be. The blood dripping down his perfect face, carving lines of darkest crimson against the pale skin of his cheek.

I screamed, the adrenaline in my veins giving me the feral strength I needed to pull out of his grasp. “No!”

I fell onto my front in the dirt, my chin and breasts scraping against the rough ground.

“No, no, no,” I muttered, scrambling to get to my feet.

“Yes, *Sparrow*,” Corvus hissed, his nickname for me a poisonous threat on his lips as he shoved me back down until I tasted dirt.

“Your fault,” Grey added, and a booted foot collided with my rib cage, stealing all the breath from my lungs.

“Your fault!” Another kick and I coughed, seeing stars.

“*Your fault.*”

A great stabbing pain in my back made me scream, and the rush of blood leaking from the wound made me lightheaded.

I tried to stand, but something solid as a rock collided with my jaw, sending me back down, making my vision go dark. Making sound come to me slower. Muffled.

A gun cocked.

Through double vision, I watched him lift the gun. Watched The Bone Man’s jaw clench until he looked like the skeleton I first fell in love with. Before I knew who he was.

“I won’t let you hurt us anymore,” he promised me, and I closed my eyes when he pressed the barrel of the gun to my forehead.

“It’s okay,” I told him. “Do it. I’m ready.”

My darkness swirled, but I pushed her down.

Hush.

It’s us or them.

“Goodbye, Sparrow.”

“I’m sorry.”

A loud *bang!* rang in my ears, and I tried to make sense of my surroundings.

Not a dark forest.

Bright. So fucking bright.

Heaven?

I groaned, rolling over to vomit onto the cold cement floor, my head spinning as my lungs struggled to fill enough to eradicate the fog shrouding my thoughts.

My eyes adjusted to the light, and I stared at my naked tits, my lips parting as I struggled to make sense of them. Make

sense of anything.

My skin tingled everywhere it touched the floor, and everywhere it didn't. My throat burned with bile, but I managed to keep the next bout of nausea from turning up anything more I didn't have to give to the floor.

The hollowness in my stomach felt like an expanding universe. A black hole that would consume me if I didn't try to fill it.

Not heaven.

Hell.

I was in hell.

I scraped myself to a seated position against the wall, swiping the back of my hand over my lips only for my arm to fall back heavily to my lap. The drugs in my system not allowing me more than the tiniest of movements without a massive amount of effort.

Blinking, I noticed the bandage wrapped around my leg and willed myself to feel the pain of the wound there, but there was nothing.

Numb.

I was numb and utterly naked save for that bandage.

My eyes burned and my lips tightened, but I would *not* fucking cry. The bastard that stuck me in this cell didn't deserve to see that.

Vivid imagery from what my mind cooked up in my sleep assaulted me. How good it felt to have them. To touch them. To be touched by them.

How those touches soured. Turned violent. How it hurt.

How badly it fucking *hurt*.

I rolled my head to the left, finding the door to my cell.

It looked different, and I felt my brows try to furrow. Twitch instead.

It looked different because it was different. Drake had replaced the old door with a new one. One with a small plate glass window in the top so he could look in. And a slot near the bottom.

Things rested against the spotless cement floor there. A saturated paper bowl filled with something gray that I thought was porridge. Wedges of peeled orange on another paper plate, partially dried up from sitting too long. A paper cup.

My stomach ached at the sight, and I squeezed my eyes tight, ignoring the pain.

I couldn't eat that.

Who fucking knew what he put in it.

But...

Much longer without any food or water and I'd be useless no matter what.

And eventually... eventually I wouldn't be here at all.

I dragged myself over to the food, lifting a piece of orange to my nose, trying to smell the presence of drugs like Rook could.

I smelled only the pithy scent of orange peel and the juice waiting beneath. The porridge would be easy to spike. So would the small cup of water. But the oranges?

It was the best bet.

That's what I kept telling myself as I stuffed each sliver into my mouth, one after another, until they were all gone and I was licking the remnants of their juice from my fingertips.

I became aware of the drip dripping sound somewhere outside the cell again, and heat spread across my back, fizzling out under the pressure of the drugs in my system before annoyance could turn to rage.

I threw the bowl of porridge at the door. The congealed mixture ran down the stainless steel in clumps. "*Shut up,*" I hollered, pressing my palms to my ears, the back of my head against the floor. My skin tightened with gooseflesh against

the cold concrete and I tried harder than I ever tried anything not to think about the fact that I've been naked in this room for fuck knew how long.

Not just naked, but passed out. Drugged.

Everything looked the same, but that didn't mean he didn't touch me.

My stomach rebelled against the orange slices, and I swallowed hard to keep them down.

I gasped, removing my hands from my ears at the sound of something else. Something new.

The dripping was still there, but.

"Hello?" I called tentatively, dragging my half numb ass closer to the door. "Is someone out there?"

I pressed my ear to a spot not coated in porridge, waiting.

Nothing.

I banged the side of my fist against the door. "Hey!"

A whisper, too close, filled my ears. Indeterminate. A string of word-like sounds that my sluggish mind couldn't make sense of.

"No."

I shook my head, pulling my knees to my chest to hug them close, pressing my head between them. There wasn't anyone outside.

It's just the drugs, I told myself when another indistinct whisper filled my ears despite them being firmly cut off by my knees. *Not real.*

I was *not* going crazy.

I wasn't.

CHAPTER

Seven

GREY

BECCA SAT RIGIDLY in a stool at the bar upstairs, staring at something on her phone that made tension radiate up her arms. She sighed, all but tossing her phone face down on the bar in favor of the glass of clear liquid I didn't think was water.

“Hey.”

She jumped as I dragged out the stool next to her.

“I-I swear I'm going to pay for this,” she stammered, indicating the vodka. “I just lost my wallet somewhere at the Docks and—”

“Becca, I don't give a fuck about the vodka, drink as much as you want.”

Her cheekbones flared, but she nodded. “I just wanted the one. To take the edge off, you know?”

“Corv said it was bad.”

“She was... until the Docks, I'd never seen a dead person you know. Well, not unless you count my mom, but they had her all made-up and pumped full of whatever the fuck they put in dead people to make them look alive at a wake. Julia was way worse than the Aces at the Docks. She died badly.”

She was rambling, and she realized it before I could say anything, sighing before she sipped the vodka, her hands trembling slightly.

“What were you looking at just now?” I asked her. “Before I came up here.”

Becca shook her head, snorting derisively. “Nothing from Ava Jade if that’s what you’re thinking.”

It was hard to keep the disappointment off my face, but it was clear whatever it was upset her. If AJ were here, she’d ask her friend what was wrong. I didn’t have a lot of time, but after all the shit Becca had had to endure over the past few months, deserved or not, I owed her at least a few minutes of my time.

“What was it?”

She bit the inside of her cheek, flipping her phone over to flick open the screen and slide it over to me.

On the screen was an open email. An acceptance letter to CalArts. No, it was a scholarship. As if Becca Hart needed scholarship money.

I’d all but forgotten her love of art. She was leagues better than me and my notebook scratchings. Her talent was probably what had gotten her in.

“Congrats.”

“A couple months ago, I would have been over the fucking moon if I saw this. Now, I just... I don’t *feel* anything.” She sipped her vodka. “Doesn’t matter anyway. I’m going to tell them to give the scholarship to someone else. My dad would never let me go. He expects me to follow in his footsteps. Already has an in for me at fucking MIT.”

“But that isn’t you.”

“Tell him that.”

She finished her drink and set the glass down, fixing me with a hard stare. “So?”

I lifted a brow.

“You didn’t come up here to talk to me about potential colleges. What’s up? Corvus didn’t speak to me at all on the way back here, but I could tell something was up.”

I reached over the bar to grab a glass and fill it with OJ from the hose, needing some sugar in my system before I

crashed.

“We’re going to look for AJ.”

She sagged in relief. “Thank fuck. When do we go?”

I fixed her with a look.

“When you say *we*?”

I licked my dry lips. “I mean the Saints.”

“I can help. You *know* I can.”

I nodded, mostly to myself, because she probably could. She’d just seen a mangled body and was still here. Waiting to be helpful. Becca was more than I ever gave her credit for, and I was starting to see what AJ probably saw in her friend. Someone much stronger than met the eye.

“This is Saint business,” I started, trying to hold a gentle tone. The one I used when I needed to do the sweet talking Corvus and Rook weren’t always capable of. “And since your Ace is dead now, you no longer need our protection.”

She stiffened at that. “How do you know?”

“They’re all dead, Becca. We triple checked. And we don’t think any got away.”

She shook her head, swallowing before she spoke again, pushing the curtain of long straight hair back behind her ear. “I looked at every face, Grey.”

“What?”

“When one of the Saints led me out of the Docks. I *made myself* look at every face. Every bloody, awful dead face. I didn’t see him. What if he’s still out there?”

She pressed her hands between her knees, shoulders drawing in until she looked very small.

“It’s not possible.”

“Isn’t it?” she all but snapped. “He wasn’t there.”

I had to admit, it was odd, and kudos to her for being able to look at so much death and still be sitting here mostly stable.

But her guy had to be dead. We left none alive, and Mav said himself they'd checked for any who might've escaped.

"All right," I said decisively. "Then I'll send you back to Briar Hall with a guard."

"I want to help."

"You will be helping. If you're at Briar Hall, we won't have to do rounds checking the academy. That way if AJ shows up you can call us."

She looked like she wanted to argue some more but also knew I wasn't wrong. And she wasn't going to get what she wanted this time no matter how hard she pushed.

"I guess."

Something scratched at the back of my mind, and I struggled to grasp it, remembering what Becca did to get herself tangled up in all of this to begin with.

Her boyfriend.

Her Ace boyfriend who she swears wasn't among the dead at the Docks.

One of them is staying with her tonight at Briar Hall, Becca said in Diesel's recordings.

I could text her to find out.

My mind raced, trying to recall the exact words.

I just don't see how feeding you information on my friend is going to help you do all that.

"Becca?"

"Yeah?"

"Your Ace boyfriend—"

"He's *not* my boyfriend."

"You said you had no pictures of him."

A knot formed between her brows. "I already told you that, he wouldn't let me take any. I gave Diesel his description and everything else I knew."

I waved off her concern, ignoring the defensive tone.

“Did he ask about Ava Jade a lot?”

Her jaw clenched. “He asked about all of you.”

“Yes, but did he ask about *her* specifically?”

“Ow.”

I released her wrist, not even realizing I’d grabbed it or how my knuckles were white against her perfectly tanned skin. “Sorry,” I muttered. “Becca, I need you to answer the question.”

Becca rubbed her wrist, thinking. “I mean, yeah, but that was because she was a direct line to you three.”

“Was it?” I asked, the question more for myself than her.

She opened her mouth to say something, but I stopped her with a look. “You’re absolutely sure you didn’t see him among the fallen at the Docks?”

She nodded slowly, going pale. “You don’t actually think that Jericho and Ava Jade’s stalker are...”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “But it fucking tracks, doesn’t it?”

I bit my lip, trying to connect the dots even though the pain in my fractured skull was reaching a breaking point. It was usually the others who figured out shit like this. The chances that *I* realized something this monumental before either of them were slim to none.

It could’ve been nothing.

It could be everything.

To find this guy and crush him once and for all.

“You don’t have any pictures,” I repeated.

“I already told you—”

“I wasn’t finished. You don’t have any pictures, but you’re an artist. Can you draw him? Paint him?”

Her expression soured, but I could tell she would do it. No matter how much it would repulse her. “I can.”

My fingernails dug into my palm. Why hadn’t we thought to ask her to do that before?

Oh yeah, because before he was only a threat to *her*. Now, maybe, he was a threat to our girl, too. To us.

The door at the front of Sanctum opened, and I fixed Becca with a hard stare. “Keep this between us,” I said before Corvus, Diesel, and Pinkie could reach us at the bar.

“But...”

I shook my head *no* to drive my point home, and Becca shut her mouth.

There was a damn good chance this would lead absolutely nowhere. That I was more than just wrong, wasting brain power on something so completely useless when I needed to be focusing on more important things. I didn’t need to distract the others too if this was a dead end. Right now we needed to find Ava Jade. Once she was back here safe, we’d have a meet about it.

“We need to get moving,” Corvus announced before they reached us. “We’ll have one of the patrol’s take Becca back to Briar Hall.”

Another Saint ran into the bar, bringing a wrapped cloth to Corvus. “Only found three,” the guy said, and I couldn’t be bothered to recall his name right now, my head still spinning with possibility.

“There should be four,” Corvus growled, unwrapping AJ’s blades, still stained with blood.

The crow handled one, and two from her father rested in Corv’s hand.

“That’s all we found,” the Saint shrugged, leaving the way he came in.

“She’s going to be pissed,” Becca said, leaning over the bar to put her used glass in the bar sink.

“We’ll replace it.”

Corvus’ pocket vibrated, and he cursed, stuffing his oversized hand into it to wrench his phone free.

He clicked the side button and slipped it back in without answering.

“Who’s that?” I asked, not able to interpret the look on his face.

“Max.”

“You’ve been ignoring her calls for ages.”

“Think there’s more important shit to worry about right now, don’t you?”

“Max,” Diesel said. “That’s your manager, right?”

Corvus didn’t answer.

“Don’t waste your talent, Son. Call her back.”

I didn’t have time to consider the fact that our father just basically gave his blessing before Corvus was snapping at him. “Not. The. Time.”

Diesel lifted his hands in a placating gesture.

Becca hopped down off the stool, a little unsteady.

“I’m sending a guard with Becca,” I announced, sliding off my stool as well. Corvus was already on his way back to the front of the bar but paused to peer over his shoulder at me with a questioning stare.

“We can’t spare anyone,” Corvus answered before Diesel could. “She doesn’t need a guard. Her shit stain of a boyfriend is dead.”

“I’ll go with her.”

As one, we turned to find Axel getting up from a cot, gritting his teeth as he did.

He managed to escape with moderate injuries even though he was there with us from the start, when our odds were a million to fucking one.

His shoulder was all kinds of fucked up, and the gunshot wound had nicked an artery, making him lose a fuck ton of blood, but he'd be okay *with rest*.

“You need fluids.”

No sooner had Diesel said it than Axel removed the IV needle from the back of his hand and tossed it aside.

I shared a look with Axel, realizing he'd heard at least some of what Becca and I had been talking about from where his cot near the bar.

He may have been injured, but he was also probably the one who would take watching over her seriously. And the only one who Diesel and Corvus would consider sparing.

“Let me go, Dies. I'm not going to be useful anywhere else.”

“You could've taken the fucking IV bag with you, genius,” Diesel said, pinching the bridge of his nose.

I nodded to Axel and he nodded back. “I'll keep an eye on her,” he promised.

“Thanks, Axe.”

I turned to Becca, listening to the front door bang closed behind Corvus, who'd clearly grown tired of waiting. “And you, *uh*... you'll work on that thing for me. Tonight?”

Her brown eyes met mine. “I will.”

CHAPTER

Eight

AVA JADE

SOMETHING SHIFTED BESIDE ME, and I let out a weak noise, my eyelids trying and failing to flutter open.

“I was wondering what you’d choose.”

His voice sent my mind rocketing to an alertness my drug-addled body couldn’t keep up with. I tried harder to force my eyes open, seeing a blurry form next to me, sitting against the wall with an elbow resting on one knee. Looking for all the world like nothing was wrong.

My chest squeezed.

I squinted, the fuzzy outline of my dark prince coming in and out of focus. I could smell him. I reached a hand in his direction, but couldn’t move it more than a few inches as the drugs wore off achingly slow.

“I half expected you to starve yourself, but I figured if you’d pick something, it would be the oranges. Probably seemed the safest. Which is why they had the most Haldol in them.”

Of course he would know that. But why was he so far away? Why weren’t we leaving?

“Rook,” I tried to call to him, but my voice was nothing more than a muted rasp.

“Shh,” he said, his hands wrapping around my arms to drag me closer, to lay my head in his lap. “I’ve got you now, Angel.”

Angel?

He stroked my ratty hair, not with his fingers, but with a brush, taming the knots back to some semblance of smoothness.

His hand lay on my shoulder. My naked shoulder.

“Rook,” I tried again, my body beginning to shake all on its own. Convulsing from trying and failing to fight the drugs in my system. Was this what he felt like in that place? The sanatorium where they kept him in line with so many different drugs he was only a shell of himself. Until Grey got him out. Or was it Diesel who’d done that?

“Rook,” I tried a third time and this time his name came out a bit more clearly and the brush stroking through my hair paused.

“What did you say?”

The sharp edge to his voice threw me, and I realized the smell in my nose wasn’t Rook at all. It was citrusy, concealed with some sort of musk cologne.

I’d smelled something like it before.

“Rook?”

This time, his name was a question I was afraid to know the answer to.

“No.”

My stomach turned.

“Fucking... kill... you... motherfuck—”

“Save your energy, Angel.”

I tried to heave my body away from him but only managed to put myself face down on the cement, arms flopping uselessly, unable to hold myself up.

Everything tingled as though a thousand insects crawled over the surface of my skin.

“I think it’s time for another dose,” he said easily, and I rolled my head to the side to see him opening a long stainless

steel case, saw the syringe inside.

“No,” I managed around the lump in my throat, struggling to pull myself away with fingernails digging into the concrete.

“Then behave yourself.”

I stopped struggling.

He dropped the syringe back into the case and set it next to him. I looked away from it quickly, not wanting him to catch me staring. If I could just keep him talking. Get my strength back. Then maybe I could give him a taste of his own medicine.

I opened my mouth to ask him something. Anything. But my tongue still felt fat in my mouth, uncooperative.

Drake lifted a brow at my sad attempt, blowing out a breath as he messed with his hair. I had no sense of time in here. No idea how long I’d been stuck in this cell. But he looked worn as fuck.

With dark circles under his bloodshot eyes—so maybe it was night then.

I noticed the color of his eyes, remembering how one was blue and the other brown that night at the Docks. How the roots of his hair had appeared darker than the ends. How, if this man wore a good pair of contact lenses and dyed his hair, he could be someone else entirely.

He seemed content to just sit there and watch me lie, naked and pathetic against the cold floor, but I needed to know if the theory trying to stick in my slippery thoughts was right.

“Jericho,” I managed, butchering the name, but I knew he understood me.

His face lit up with a wide smile, showing two rows of perfectly straight white teeth.

“I knew you’d be the first one to figure it out.”

So, this was the *Ace* Becca was ‘dating.’

My stomach flipped, and I groaned, trying to hold in whatever was still in there when I remembered how I’d felt

about *Drake* not that fucking long ago.

Whatever I thought... whatever I felt...

It was long gone.

“Drake?” I asked. The feeling was returning to my tongue, but I slurred the word anyway. He needed to think I still couldn’t move. Couldn’t speak properly.

I never pretended to be a great actress, even during the height of mine and Dad’s con days, but I needed this to be an Oscar-worthy performance for it to work.

He narrowed his eyes at me in reply. Of course that wasn’t his name, either.

“Who?” I asked.

“Shhh,” he hushed softly, smirking. “There will be time for all that later.”

Pain sliced through my lower stomach, and I tried to pull my knees in.

“Bathroom?” Drake asked, and I realized that was exactly what the pain was.

No sooner did I realize it than my bladder completely lost control and warmth ran down my thighs, pooling around my middle.

“Oops, too late.”

“Fuck... you.”

His eyes roved over my naked body with a promise and I swallowed back bile.

“You know who I was with today?” he asked, changing the subject, seeming to be completely unfazed by the fact I’d just pissed myself and the stink of it was quickly filling the room despite the small drain in the middle of the floor slowly sucking it all away.

“Grey.”

My heart shuddered to a stop, fire stirring from the dormant coals in my belly.

“We spent hours together. Searching for Aries.”

I watched his face, looking for any sign of something more he might not have been saying, but the smug look was still in place as he returned the favor, searching my stare for information of his own.

“We didn’t find him, of course. And we won’t. I paid him to disappear. All part of the plan.”

Something in my eyes must’ve flagged my worry because he crooked his head to the left. “Don’t worry, Angel. Grey’s fine. I *did* spend the evening dreaming up some very creative ways of killing him, but there were others with us and it’s not time yet. Besides, he’s the one I hate the least. And now, *pfffft*, I mean, he’s not exactly a threat with just one eye. It’s pathetic really. He could barely walk a straight line.”

Grief and anger warred in my chest, flushing my cheeks with fresh blood, making my fingers curl in like talons.

At least he’s alive, I reminded myself.

You can’t believe a word he says, the darkness reminded me.

“Plan?”

“But I *will* kill him,” Drake continued, ignoring me, his gaze unfocusing as he imagined it. I took the opportunity to wiggle my fingers and toes, see how far up my limbs the feeling went. “When the time is right. Once things have calmed down and the Kings have Diesel’s trust, that’s when we’ll make our move. Take the territory that *I* should’ve inherited.”

His gaze refocused on me, and I let my body sink heavily into the floor. “That’s when the real work will begin for you, Angel. To remake you. But you’ll have to wait your turn. I can only orchestrate so many masterpieces at a time.”

I snorted. “Fuck, you’re pathetic.”

His brows drew together, and in his eyes, I saw a lick of something I hadn’t noticed there before. Or maybe just hadn’t been paying close enough attention to. There was a darkness

there. A sickness. Like mine but also not. His sent a tremor of revulsion rolling down my spine.

“Don’t resist this, Angel,” he said, the hard edge to his stare never waning. “You will be mine or you will be no one’s.”

“Yep,” I said, coughing against the cement. “Pathetic.”

His lips pressed into a thin line.

“I can’t... belong to a corpse,” I said with a smile, forcing the words out sluggishly, making them sound weak. “And that’s all you’ll... be... soon. My guys will... come for me.”

That struck a nerve. The sickness flashed in his gaze and goose flesh rose on his arms.

“Not *yours*,” he corrected me, his gaze lifting to someplace above me as he considered something. The air in the room felt heavier as I readied myself to strike.

“Yes *mine*. And me... theirs. I’ll never belong... to you.”

“Hmmm,” he said, rubbing his forefinger over his chin. “You have a point. They don’t appear to want to give up looking for you, and I hadn’t expected that. I thought once you were gone...”

I didn’t hear the rest of what he said, the rush of blood in my ears as my body sang back to life blocked out all other sound.

They’re looking for me.

They didn’t abandon me. They didn’t wish me dead. *They were looking for me.*

My eyes burned as precious H₂O leaked down my face and my rib cage squeezed me tight. The tiny cell expanded around me, filled with possibility. My fists clenched and a reawakened resolve to get the fuck out of this hole filled me.

A shaky breath passed my quivering lips before I clenched my teeth.

“Oh well, it doesn’t matter. They’ll give up eventually.”

They wouldn't.

Drake lifted the metal tin from the ground and removed the syringe.

I forced my body to stay very, *very* still. Dead girl still.

A slow, steady breath passed between my lips, and as he rolled off his backside to his knees, arm outstretched, I came back to life.

I pushed myself up from the ground and grabbed his wrist, pulling hard to bring him off balance.

He jerked forward, and my grip slackened as dark spots crowded my vision, trying to keep me down. I dodged a strike from him on a fluke and staggered back, almost slipping on the wet floor.

“So fucking crafty,” he growled through gritted teeth as he lunged at me, lifting his right hand high.

I let the backhand connect with my face to focus all my energy on ripping the syringe from his other hand. I grunted when his knuckles knocked across my cheekbone and the piercing tip of the needle went straight through my hand.

I blinked rapidly, seeing the pointy end through the backside of my palm, a perfect teardrop of bad medicine hanging there, about to fall.

My mouth opened.

Drake paused.

Before I could think, I closed my hand around the syringe, the needle through my hand feeling so disgustingly foreign as my muscles and tendons worked around it.

I screeched as I ripped it away from him, my fingers slipping on the plunger, accidentally spewing all the sedative over my bare chest.

Fuck.

My heart lurched in my chest, feeling like it might give out at any second. The lingering sedative and adrenaline in my veins did *not* want to play nice together.

I shook my head fiercely, the useless syringe in my hand forgotten as I attacked, throwing myself at Drake with claws and venom. Ready to use teeth if I needed to.

I landed a hit to his jaw, and he grunted, deftly avoiding my next blow and delivering one of his own.

The fist in my stomach pushed all the air from my lungs, and I couldn't get air back into them fast enough, choking as stars danced with the dark spots in my eyes. As the taste of blood coated the back of my tongue.

His elbow jabbed hard into my kidneys, and I went down hard, gasping against the concrete.

“Someone needs to be taught a lesson.”

A booted foot connected with my middle, and I hunched in, coughing as a cramping pain spread and vomit joined the blood in my mouth. He kicked me again, lower, below where my arms protected the soft flesh of my belly. The sharp pain in my cervix erased all other pain, and I bit my teeth together against a scream he didn't deserve.

“Had enough?”

“That all you got?”

He kicked me again and again. Until I couldn't breathe. Until it felt like my insides were liquified. But the pain reminded me I was still alive. And as long as I was, I could kill him.

Blood splattered from my mouth onto the cement on his next kick, and he stopped. I rolled onto my back, barely conscious, a hand over my broken, beaten, bleeding body.

I coughed, finding his face through the heavy curtain of unconsciousness snaking its way over my eyes.

Drake's body heaved with each breath he took, the bite of insanity in his eyes clear even in my state. But the lines in his forehead told me he didn't mean to take it this far. That poisonous stare roamed my body, angry, as though I'd done this to myself.

I smiled up at him, but my face twitched, not cooperating with my command. “Didn’t think—”

My words were choked off when a sharp, stabbing pain stabbed into my belly and I groaned, a blanket of white searing through my eyes.

I thought he’d stabbed me, but when I blinked through the brightness, I found him still standing there, staring down at me with something like worry.

He knelt, reaching a hand toward my middle.

I knocked it away with a snarl. “Don’t fucking touch me.”

“I’m sorry, Angel—”

“I’m not your *fucking* Angel.” I spat at his feet. “I’m a Crow. Always have been. Always will be. I belong to *them*.”

He stared into my eyes, reading the truth there before rising steadily to his feet. “Not as long as they’re still alive.”

Cold fear and white hot rage curled opposing fists in my chest.

“I see that now.” He threw a hand through his hair, nodding to himself. “Fine. They’ll die first. It’ll make taking back what rightfully belongs to me that much easier, anyway.”

“They’ll eat you alive.”

Drake grinned at me. “No, Angel. I don’t think they will. They won’t even see me coming.”

I clawed back to my stomach, trying and failing to drag myself to him. To stop him, cursing at the spoiled floor.

“Don’t touch them!”

Drake stepped out the door, leaving it ajar.

I clambered to my feet, off balance, my belly aching with a persistent throb, the flesh there already turning fifty shades of blue.

My hand closed on the threshold, and I stepped out into the hall for half a second before he was there again, snatching my wrist, peeling my hand from the doorframe.

I threw a weak fist into his chin, but he ignored it, sticking a fresh syringe deep into the side of my neck.

“If it makes you feel any better,” Drake said in a smooth voice, catching my body against his when my knees buckled. “There’s one other problem I have to take care of first. Your *scavengers* have at least one more night to live.”

I moaned, sickness roiling in my stomach as my face fell against his chest. He ran a knuckle down my cheek, and I felt the press of his mouth against my temple before the sedative stole my sight, his next words a garbled mess of sound in my ears. “Hush, now, Angel. It’ll be over soon.”

CHAPTER

Nine

BECCA

I COULDN'T SEEM to get his hair right. The way it sometimes fell over to the side of his forehead, casting a shadow over his brown eyes. I dipped the thin brush back into one of the brown colors I'd made especially for this purpose, and painted in the lowlights.

A sour taste in the back of my throat made me reach for the gin and lemonade on my bedside table, taking a long swallow. Cringing.

The ice melted hours ago, and it was piss warm. I knocked it back onto the table, trying to swallow away the taste.

A soft double rap on my closed door sent a shiver rolling up my spine. "Axel?"

I winced at the panic in my tone.

"Just checking. Thought I heard something."

"I'm good," I replied, the tension across my back starting to relax again.

"You should try to get some sleep."

"On my way," I lied, tapping my phone screen.

It was almost three in the morning and there was still no way I'd be able to sleep. At least not until this was finished.

"All right," Axel said through the door. "I'm here if you need me. I'll do your check-ins for the rest of the night."

I rolled my eyes, but shouted a polite *thanks* back to him before I heard him retreat back to his place on the couch and the TV turned back on to a low drone.

Grey asked me to check in every hour on the hour. He said it was to make sure I was good, but I knew it was mostly because they wanted updates on Ava Jade. If she was here. To confirm she wasn't.

I bit the inside of my cheek, sighing at the watercolor pad in my lap and the face staring up at me from it.

Jericho.

It was him all right, even though it wasn't quite finished. What I'd managed to remember surprised me. The exact cut of his jaw. The way his eyes slanted down at the edges, just slightly. The tiny scar at the side of his straight nose. The way his brows arched, in a way that most girls would kill for.

And his lips. Full. Soft.

I shut my eyes against a wave of nausea, evicting the line of thought from my mind, convinced I was the most naive bitch on the fucking planet.

He used me.

Betrayed me.

Manipulated me.

Jericho almost talked me into hurting the Crows. Into hurting Ava Jade. And I almost let him. For what?

My mom was a big girl. She knew what she was getting herself into when she let herself get mixed up with Damien St. Vincent. She knew what could happen and she did it anyway. It didn't make me hate the guy or the criminal organization he stood for any less, but I could see now what I couldn't before—my mother wasn't blameless. She chose to be involved with him, even knowing it could mean my losing her. Growing up without her.

Love did fucked up things to people.

I didn't even *love* Jericho and look how messed up that shit got.

Fuck love. And fuck monogamy. Fuck the whole damn institution of it all. I'd marry when I was forty and found the perfect dick, with a padded bank account to go with it and not a second sooner.

I thought Jericho loved me, or at least that he was headed in that direction. But you didn't play with people you loved like dolls, only to toss them in the trash once they'd served their purpose.

If what Grey was thinking was true, then Jericho really hadn't felt anything at all for me. I was a tool. Something to be used to get closer to his true mark. My best friend.

My fist clenched around the thin brush in my hand, and I felt it snap in my palm, that acid-eaten pit of guilt in my stomach growing even more.

“Fuck.”

The alarm on my phone went off, but I ignored the reminder to send a text check-in to Grey. Let Axel do it.

I tossed the broken paint brush to the trash bin in the corner of my room, missing it by a foot.

I snorted at myself. At how useless I was in this whole mess. I would've sent my ass home too. What good was I? I couldn't shoot a gun. Couldn't throw a knife. I couldn't even hold my breakfast down. Grey didn't need to know it, but I'd vomited twice on my way out of the Docks, escorted by Diesel's men back to Sanctum.

But I needed to know. I needed to see Jericho's face. I didn't think there was any way I'd ever feel safe again. Knowing he was dead would be the only way.

He is dead.

He had to be.

Then why are you painting him?

I lifted my phone, thumbing back to messenger to send off another message to Ava Jade. We knew the guys had her phone, but she could still check messenger without it.

Rebecca Hart: You've made your point, babe. PLEASE come back now? They sent Axel McFuckMeEyes here to keep an eye on me. Save me?

Rebecca Hart: I'm worried about you. So are your guys.

Rebecca Hart: Love you, bitch.

I scrolled back up through the fifteen other unanswered messages I'd sent. Re-reading each one only compounded the cold dread in my blood until I needed to pull the covers around myself to stave off the chill.

When she got back, I'd help her disappear if she wanted to. We could both vanish. Get as far away from Thorn Valley as we could. A large cash advance from Daddy's credit card to get us started and then we'd figure it out from there.

Fuck college. If Daddy couldn't find me, then he couldn't make me go to MIT. It would hurt to let the CalArts scholarship go to someone else, but...

I could get a job.

I almost laughed at the image of me in some fast food uniform, apron stained with grease. Ava Jade wielding a stainless steel spatula like a weapon of mass destruction. Slaying burgers all day.

We could do it.

If she wanted.

I flicked a fresh brush over Jericho's lash line, pretending I was painting literally anyone else as I filled in his short lashes.

A door opened outside my room, and my heart lifted, paint brush stilling in my hand as I listened keenly.

I'd already run out there four times thinking I might've heard Ava Jade come in only to be disappointed. I wasn't

going out there again. Not to have Axel fuss over me and ask me ten *more* times if I wanted to talk.

The low rumble of two male voices came muffled through my door and I sagged, discarding the paint brush on my duvet to push my hair away from my face with a huff.

I stared down at the painting, deciding it was as good as it was going to get. I snatched it up, accidentally tossing the covers over the still wet paints. Shit.

A loud thud outside made me jump, my pulse skittering.

I rushed to the door, but my hand paused on the handle, listening to what was unmistakably the sounds of a struggle on the other side. An icy cold stole over my chest, and I held my breath.

Another crash.

Axel cursing.

I couldn't move.

Couldn't think.

Shit. Fuck.

No.

No. No. *No.*

“Becca, get out of here!” came Axel’s roaring command from the other side of the door, and I broke free of the ice coating my skin. My hand shook where it held the painting.

I dashed for my bed and the phone I’d left there, but the unmistakable sound of a silenced gunshot whispered in my ears and I stopped.

The painting.

What if...

Oh god.

I looked around, the panic a raging storm in my chest. A drumbeat echo in my skull.

I raced back across the room, my stare fixed on the massive self-portrait hanging on my wall. My shaking fingers lifted the base of the canvas and I shoved the sheet of paper with Jericho's face on it into the hollow behind the painting, running back to my bed.

Phone.

I threw the duvet cover back, rustling in the heavy fabric to find it, a scream rising in my chest.

Where the fuck was my...

The door to my room opened, and I froze, my legs heavier than lead as I looked up. Fingers of dread crawled up the back of my neck as I recognized the man beneath the mask. Behind the contact lenses. Under the dye coating each strand of his hair. I'd know that smirk anywhere.

"Miss me, darlin?" "

CHAPTER

Ten

CORVUS

“THE FUCK you think you’re doing?” I asked Rook as he pushed the passenger side door of the Rover open.

He hobbled out into the parking lot at Briar Hall, stretching out his lower back with a groan.

“I can’t sit anymore, man.”

“Too fucking bad, park your ass on the hood until I get back.”

“Nah. I’m with you.”

I shook my head, pushing down the swell of heat in my chest. It’s been there ever since we found Julia’s body, just below the surface, aching for release. Everything I’d worked almost my whole damn life to swallow—to control—was teetering on the edge of release. And no one wanted to see that shit.

A long breath and I sent my gaze skyward to the slowly brightening sky. The navy blanket of night already turning the purple of a fresh bruise. In an hour it would shift to shades of rust and roses.

Another night without Ava Jade.

She wasn’t in any place I thought to look for her, and I’d considered every fucking possibility.

Diesel continued the patrol, rotating out the most tired Saints for fresher stock, but they’d searched every nook and cranny of Thorn Valley and had even sent a contingent of

Kings to Lennox to check there, too. It was where she'd grown up. Maybe she'd wanted to go home.

They didn't turn anything up, but as soon as we were done here, that was where Rook and I were headed. I wanted to walk the train tracks. Check the trailer she grew up in. Her school. Find her old friend Dom. And that instructor she had a thing with. Kit?

If she went to him...

I'd fucking kill him.

"In and out," I told Rook, jerking my chin to the back entrance of Briar Hall.

He slammed the door to the Rover.

"Hey. Use the crutches."

Rook's back tensed, but a second later he reached into the open window and dragged the crutches out, a dark shadow over his eyes as he struggled to get them into place.

I worked to keep my pace slow so Rook could keep up, even though it felt like wading through fucking water. I just wanted to get this over with.

Grey said Becca and Axel missed the last text check-in and neither was answering their phone. It meant one of two things. Either they both fell asleep, which I was banking on, or they were fucking. I wouldn't put either past Axel. And I had it on good authority Becca had a thing for dangerous men. And apparently, also for older guys if what people said about her and the substitute English teacher last year was true.

We took the elevator up to the third floor.

A text came in from Grey along the way, and I growled as I took it out. He was probably texting to say they finally checked-in and this whole goddamned side trip was a total waste of our fucking time.

Why he was even so insistent on sending Axel with her was beyond me. There was no danger, not for Becca, not anymore.

Grey: You there yet? Still haven't heard anything.

Corvus: Just got here? Find anything on the cams?

Grey: Nothing.

“Fuck.”

“What?” Rook asked as the elevator doors slid open on the third floor.

I pocketed my phone. “Grey. He still hasn't found anything.”

What good was having access to all the local security cameras and the ability to hack traffic cams if it gave us absolutely nothing?

Sparrow, where are you?

My stomach twisted as we made our way down the quiet corridor. So quiet I had to wonder what fucking day it was. A weekday? Weekend? I'd lost track.

Either way, the dead silence only broken by the sound of our footfalls and Rook's crutches clicking against the marble tile was enough to set my teeth on edge.

Something wasn't right.

I lifted a hand to signal Rook to slow down, stay quiet.

I turned back to see him ditching his crutches against the wall in favor of his gun and a nasty limp. I drew mine, too, flicking the safety off.

Rook nodded to the door at the end of the hall.

Fire raced over the back of my neck when I saw what he was looking at. It was open. Just slightly. The low lighting from inside stained a slice of the floor with its hazy orange glow.

I quietly fingered my phone back out of my pocket, moving steadily, stealthily forward.

Rook knocked into my elbow as he passed me, rushing toward the door.

“We need to call for backup,” I hissed, making a grab for him, but he was already gone, all attempts to remain silent abandoned as he shoved into the room.

I followed right on his tail, sweeping the hall, the living room, the kitchen.

“Axel,” Rook roared, running to the kitchen, almost slipping on the trail of blood mopped over the floor from the living room to the coffee bar. *“Watch my six.”*

I swept the rest of the living room and kitchen, kicking Ava Jade’s door in to sweep the inside of her room and bathroom before returning to the kitchen where Rook was hunched over Axel’s still form.

He lightly ran his thumb and index finger over Axel’s eyelids, shutting them. Blood puddled around Axel’s head. He was shot in the temple. The bruising around his jaw and over his knuckles told me he didn’t go down without a fight.

“Fucker didn’t deserve this,” Rook said on a sigh, pushing back to standing.

My gaze fixed on the door across the living room and the blood in my veins went cold.

Rook looked there, too.

“Rebecca?” I called, raising my gun back to eye level.

My phone started to ring in my pocket, but I ignored it as Rook and I pushed forward, stepping over Axel, around the kitchen island, until we were standing at her door.

I met Rook’s stare. He nodded.

Ready.

I kicked the door down and we ran in, guns raised.

“Becca,” Rook called out, putting his gun away to rush to her ..

What the fuck happened?

Why?

Who?

I watched Rook ball up a wad of what looked like satin pajamas and push them against Rebecca's chest, his hands immediately soaked red.

Her skin glowed pale white in the lamplight. If you didn't know she usually had a perfect golden tan, you could almost believe she was asleep. With her eyelids fluttered gently closed. Her lips parted just slightly. Arms splayed above her head.

I failed her.

Rook slapped Rebecca's cheek, leaving a red stain behind on her skin. "Hey!" he shouted at her placid face. "Becca, *wake up.*"

"She's gone, Rook."

"No she's not."

He slapped her again, pressing so hard against the bullet wound in her chest that I'd be shocked if he wasn't cracking ribs.

"Why are you just standing there?" Rook growled at me. "Help me."

I couldn't look at her anymore, my rage-stained thoughts making ration an elusive thing I couldn't quite grasp.

Come on, Corv. Make sense of this.

Rebecca should've been safe. Her boyfriend was dead with all the other Aces.

Who else would want her gone?

Diesel?

No.

He wouldn't make the same mistake twice. He wouldn't hurt someone Ava Jade cared about. Not anymore. Not now that she was one of us.

Then who?

Why?

My phone rang again, jostling my line of thought.

It cracked against the opposite wall of Rebecca's room, shattering onto the ground after I threw it. I didn't remember deciding to throw it.

“Corvus!”

Whoever did this had to have wanted her dead badly. No. *Needed* her dead.

Why?

Why?

“Corvus!”

“What?” I bellowed, my nostril flaring as I lost my train of thought again, ripples of vicious rage rolling up my arms.

“Call an ambulance, man. The fuck you doing?”

I blinked, my red-stained gaze refocusing on Rook. On Becca. He tipped her chin back and blew into her lungs. Rebecca's fingers twitched.

Jesus fucking Christ.

She's still alive.

“Corv!”

I raced to the busted up remnants of my phone, kicking them aside with a curse.

“Back pocket,” Rook shouted between rounds of blowing air into the half dead girl at his knees.

I found his phone, but my fingers paused on the dialpad.

Ambulance?

I couldn't call an ambulance. Protocol was always the vet.

Hospital records were too difficult to scrub and surgeons too wealthy to afford to pay off.

“*Now*, Corv.” Rook commanded, his black eyes fixing on mine with the promise of violence. “There's no time. She won't make it to the vet.”

No. She wouldn't.

And we couldn't let her die.

"I need you to hold this."

I bent, ignoring the stab of pain in my abdomen as I took over holding the wad of soiled satin to Rebecca's chest while he focused on getting air to her brain.

"Hold on," I told Rebecca, as if by commanding her alone, I could will her not to die. Not to leave the friend who still needed her. "You don't get to die. Not today."

I dialed, lifting the receiver to my ear, ready to threaten the worst kinds of violence if the ambulance didn't arrive in the next two fucking minutes.

CHAPTER

Eleven

ROOK

“WE’LL MEET you at the hospital,” Corvus told the paramedic as they loaded Rebecca into the back of the ambulance, like it was a threat instead of a promise.

“If she dies, so do you.”

The paramedic paled, giving us one terse nod as he climbed into the back with Rebecca, closing the doors behind him. Lights flashing and sirens blaring, they sped down the road into Thorn Valley, leaving a plume of sand in their wake.

I turned and decked Corvus in the jaw, catching him off guard. He stumbled back a step, hand going to his chin with murder in his eyes.

“Rook, what the fuck?”

“That’s for being a fucking idiot,” I spat at him, practically preening at the sting in my knuckles, salivating with the urge to hit him again.

“What—”

“*She was alive,*” I shouted in his face. “And you just stood there like a lump of dead flesh.”

“I—”

“Save it, man. What is going on with you? I’ve never seen you so fucking out of it. Where’s my brother? Hmm? Because we need his ass here right now, not this motherfucker who stands there like a mute statue instead of doing literally *anyfucking* thing useful.”

His mouth pressed into a thin line, a knot forming between his brows. I could see it. That thing inside of him that he liked to keep locked up. There it was, right fucking there, tormenting him, begging him to be let free. But he clenched his fists against it. Swallowed it down. Snuffed it out.

I shoved him in the chest. “Come on,” I egged him on. “Let it out, Bro. If you don’t, your brain’s going to be drowning in it, and we need you right now. We need this.”

I jabbed the side of his temple twice with my fingertips, making him recoil, his upper lip curl.

“We need to call this in,” he said through gritted teeth. “Don’t push me, Rook.”

I laughed, but the sound of it was violent even to my own ears. I’d never been so fucking tired and so wholly unable to sleep in my entire miserable life. *Wired* didn’t even begin to cover this feeling and the fact that the *thing* squatting in my chest was hungry again wasn’t fucking helping.

My hands ached for violence. To do *something*. Anything that might bring me closer to my Ghost. Bring my Ghost back to me.

I was ready to go door to door with an AK and blow the heads off anyone who didn’t have her face. I’d find her eventually. And when I did, we’d sharpen our blades together and gut the filth that hurt Becca.

A shuddering breath escaped my lips at the beautiful, bloodstained imagery playing like poetry across the backs of my eyelids.

“Fine,” I said, the reel of promised revenge with my Ghost like ASMR to my fractured soul. I shakily brought a cigarette to my lips and lit it up, inhaling deeply. “Call it in. While you do that, I’m going to go back in and make sure we didn’t miss anything.”

I blew the smoke in his direction, watching the flashing lights in the distance vanish.

He should’ve been the one to do the looking, but he wouldn’t find a damned thing, not with his brain soaking in

unspent testosterone-fueled rage.

“You call,” he argued. “You’re already bleeding through your fucking bandages again. Stay here.”

The laugh I was planning to have at his attempt to subdue me died before it could reach my lips.

“What time is it?”

His brows drew down. “Why?”

“Who do you think that is?”

I pointed the red cherry at the tip of my cigarette to the headlights flashing like strobe lights through the trees as the sun finally broke over the horizon.

I glanced back up at Briar Hall behind me, finding more than a few curious faces in the windows, watching from the semi-security of their bedrooms.

The last fucking thing I wanted to deal with right now was the principal. Though the mouse of a man would probably take one look at our blood-coated hands and turn his fat ass right around and go back home where he was safe.

“That’s not the principal’s car,” Corv said, echoing my thoughts as the older model Volvo rounded the bend onto the front drive of the academy, pulling up in front of the entrance.

“Not the cops, either.”

Corv made it clear to the operator that we only required an ambulance and not to send anyone else. Name dropping Diesel made arguing a moot point.

We watched as a man stepped out of the driver’s side, unfurling to his full height, closing the door behind him.

I reached around my back and slid my tacky fingers around the smooth grip of my Browning Hi Power, flicking my cigarette away after one final drag.

The other door opened and a girl stepped out. Her height and the shape of her frame made all the weight fall from my shoulders, before the shadow over her head fell away. It wasn’t my Ghost.

This girl had short dark hair and a small oval shaped face.

The two of them argued in hushed tones in front of the Academy before the girl finally shut her door too and they ascended the stairs to the front door.

“Who are they?”

Corvus shook his head. He wasn't sure either. “We're about to find out.”

I followed him across the lot, listening intently to the electronic voice coming through the speaker at the entrance.

“I'm sorry, but we don't allow visitors outside of regular school hours, you'll have to come back another time.”

“Well, when's that?” the girl asked in a whiny voice.

“Eight forty-five,” the new security guard replied.

“Look, we just want to check on a friend. Her name is Ava Jade Mason.”

The girl leaned down to shout into the mic while the other guy hovered behind her, hands shoved deep into the pockets of his jeans.

“She hasn't been answering any of our calls or texts and we're really worried that something might've happened to—”

“Who the fuck are you?” Corvus asked, and the girl gasped, pivoting to face us with surprise in her eyes.

“And how do you know Ava Jade?” I added, analyzing the pair of them.

The new security guard's voice came back over the speaker with a sigh. “Look, I've told you already...”

I stalked through the newcomers, forcing them to separate, and jammed the intercom button. “Stop talking,” I spoke into the mic. “Go back to your Diet Pepsi and Takis like a good mall cop. Oh, and be a peach and turn the fucking cameras off, yeah?”

“Right away, Mr. Clayton.”

I waited until the red light blinking on the overhead camera went dark before turning my attention back to the girl.

“I believe we asked you some questions.”

Her throat bobbed.

The fear hitching her shoulders high, leaking into the azure blue of her eyes, made a smile pull at my lips.

“Look, I don’t know who you are but this isn’t your business,” the guy said, glancing between Corvus and me with something in his stare that whispered to me not to trust him.

I didn’t like the way he was looking at us. Like he was gauging our height. Our builds. The distance between us and him.

He widened his stance.

A fighter, then.

“Wait. I know you,” Corvus said suddenly, ignoring the guy’s misinformed statement. “You’re Kit. Kitrick Dagwood. From Lennox.”

He fixed his cold blue’s on the girl next. “Which would make you Dominique.”

Kit.

Kit?

I racked my brain, dredging up information from the bits and pieces I picked up on my own from my brother’s more intensive PI work. The exhaustion clinging to my skull like lead weights made it difficult, but not impossible.

This was the self-defense instructor she’d been fucking. And the friend who all but abandoned her when she moved here.

I analyzed them in a new light.

Kit stood a little shy of six feet from the ground. With reddish brown scruff on his jaw that grew up into darker hair cropped short. Shit brown eyes. A decent jaw. If you liked the ass chin thing.

Not her type.

And fucking old.

Not that I was one to judge, but this guy had to be thirty five. And not a threat. It was clear Corv was thinking this pissant might be Ava Jade's stalker, but no. This guy couldn't be him.

"And you are?" Kit replied to Corvus, his Adam's apple bobbing.

"Your worst fucking nightmare."

"Look, man, I didn't come here for trouble. I came here to check on a friend."

"A friend?" I echoed. "Don't you mean fuckbuddy?"

Even saying the words made a twist of jealousy twinge in my stomach. Not my thing. Never was. But Ghost was *mine*. Ours. The fact that this pansy ass motherfucker came here meant on some delusional level he thought he still had a claim on her. He needed to understand that he didn't. And never would again.

"That's not your business."

Dead wrong.

"You should leave," I said, the one and only warning I would give. Only spoken at all out of respect for my Ghost and the fact that she may not like to return home to find her old friends dead.

Corvus squared off against Kit, who raised his hands in a placating gesture my end-of-his-rope brother wouldn't be placated by.

A shiver of anticipation rolled down my spine at the look in his ice cold eyes. The dead look. The one that spoke of murder. A smile pulled at my lips.

"Look, I get it. You're the new flavor of the week, right?"

Corvus didn't give him a reply, his eyes tracking Kit's every movement.

“You don’t want to do this, man,” he told Corvus, letting out an exasperated sigh, like he was dealing with a fired up toddler rather than one of the most deadly men in the state. “How old are you? Eighteen? Twenty? You’ve got too much to live for. Let it go, man. I’ll crush you.”

A hysterical laugh rose from my throat unbidden, and I hunched over at the force of it, sides aching as tears welled in my eyes.

“What’s so fucking funny?” Kit asked, looking offended.

Dom grabbed Kit’s shoulder, trying to pull him back toward the car. “Come on, Kit. Let’s just go.”

“No,” he said, rolling his shoulders back, shucking Dom off. “I want to know what’s so fucking funny?”

I swiped a tear away from my eye with my knuckle and leaned back against the wall, tugging out a cigarette to put it to my lips. “You should listen to your friend,” I said through the last of the dark laughter still shuddering in my lungs. “Get the fuck out of here.”

Kit looked between Corvus and me. “You know what, fine. I don’t have time for this shit.”

He shook his head, jabbing two fingers in Corvus’ direction. “When you see Ava Jade, tell her I’ll be waiting when she’s ready to come back to a real man.”

Ope.

Corvus rushed him. The self-defense instructor managed to dodge the first swing of his fist, but wasn’t fast enough to evade everything else.

My brother kicked his legs out from under him and he went down hard, eyes wide and empty from the knock to the back of his head.

Corvus crouched over him, not wasting a second before snatching up a fistful of t-shirt to drag him up only to knock him back down with a beautiful throw of his fist.

Kit’s head jerked back, blood spurting from his mouth.

I took a drag of my cigarette.

Corvus hit him again.

Dominique screamed.

Again.

My cock hardened.

Again.

Kit's eyes rolled back.

“Stop it!” Dominique screamed. “*You're killing him!*”

Blood sprayed over my brother's blackout face. The beast inside on full display.

I shook my head, in awe of him. Aching to join him. But he needed this. This one was his and only his.

Dominique raced in, throwing a roundhouse kick to Corvus' head. He was knocked to the side for an instant, but it didn't stop him from getting right back on that motherfucking horse, pummeling him into the flagstone. Painting the entryway red.

Dominique tried again, jumping on his back only to be thrown off, her eyes wet with tears as she coughed, inhaling dirt.

“Please!” she shrieked, and I realized the plea was for me. “Make him stop.”

I took another drag and butted out the cigarette beneath my boot. “Sorry, love. This one's between my brother and that sorry bastard there.”

Corvus hit Kit once more before dropping his limp body to the ground to lift his chest to the sky, tipping his head back in a feral roar. Breath so hot I could see the faint cloud of it in the night air.

He looked down at his handiwork, upper lip curling, hard breaths expanding his entire torso as he rose back to his full height, fist still clenched like he wasn't sure if he was done.

I put my hands together in a slow clap, drawing his attention. “Damn, Bro. Didn’t know you had it in you.”

A muscle in his jaw ticked, and he stepped out of the way as Dom rushed in, falling to her knees at Kit’s side, trying feverishly to wake him.

Kit groaned and I frowned, a little disappointed to find he wasn’t dead after all.

“Want me to...” I indicated Kit.

“Do what you want,” he said in a distant growl, turning on his heel to leave without so much as another word. I watched his back retreat, not to the Rover in the parking lot, but around to the back of Briar Hall, no doubt to the trailhead that would take him back to the nest.

“Come on,” Dominique was saying, still crying, and it was hard to believe Ava Jade took self-defense lessons with this girl. This girl whose clothes oozed money and whose demeanor couldn’t be any more divergent from hers. Not to mention the divide in their skill level and ability.

Some people had a natural talent, a predilection for violence. Neither of these sad motherfuckers did.

“Get up!” she was shouting. “*Come on.*”

I considered the knife in my boot for a minute before deciding they weren’t worth my trouble. Or the time. Time that we didn’t have.

The door creaked open as I stepped into the academy, the sound of fleeing footsteps all around as I strode toward the elevator, cursing the limp I couldn’t seem to contain.

By the time I got to the second floor, all the students who’d been lingering in the atrium, watching in the stairwells, from their windows, had fallen silent. Aware of the monster stalking the halls.

The drag of dissipating adrenaline from watching my brother finally come undone was almost too fucking much for my exhausted system to take.

But I knew how to fix it.

How to stay awake.

To keep looking.

My Ghost wasn't safe. I knew that for certain now. We thought Becca was and look what fucking happened to her.

She'd be back by now.

If she were able.

Cold dread and white hot rage simmered and spiked in my blood, sputtering before either could be the fuel I needed to keep going.

I lost count of how many hours it'd been since I slept. But if this was how Corvus felt most days, I didn't know how he handled it without a little something to pick his dead ass up off the floor.

The bathroom door banged loudly against the opposite wall as I shoved my way inside, flicking on the light switch.

My phone pinged, and I plucked it out only to shove it back in my pocket, fingering past the cool metal to the bit of plastic tucked away beside it.

Grey could wait for an update. Just a few minutes.

I set the small bag filled with white powder on the stainless steel counter, my mouth going dry.

How could I know it hadn't been tainted?

Nah.

This fucker wanted us to destroy ourselves.

No carrion for the Crows.

He took away our outlet.

Outing Corvus took away his mask. Put him under more scrutiny.

And this...

This was the fucker trying to get me to sabotage myself. I didn't know what he knew exactly, but blow wouldn't render me useless. And it wouldn't turn me against my brothers.

What it *would* do was keep me awake for as long as I needed to be awake to find her.

It would make me a fucking wrecking ball of a human being, bulldozing everything and anything that stood in my way of getting to her.

I needed it.

Just for now.

I could stop.

I'd stopped before.

Before I could change my mind, I tore the baggy open, spilling the contents over the counter. I dipped my pinkie in the mound of powder and rubbed it onto my gums, tasting the familiar flavor.

Woody. It was pure. Had to be.

I waited a minute to be sure, feeling the small hairs on the back of my neck lift with the slow tickle of a high.

I fingered a card from my wallet, dividing the rest into two thick lines. Rolled up a bill.

My phone rang, and I set it on the counter, watching Grey's number flash insistently on the screen.

“Sorry, Bro.”

I tapped *ignore* and put the rolled bill to my nose.

CHAPTER Twelve

AVA JADE

IF I COULD, I would've chewed my own fucking arm off by now. But with the thick leather strap tight as a noose around my neck, that proved impossible.

The equally tight straps around my wrists afforded just enough wiggle room for me to annihilate the skin there trying to get them free.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

“Fuck!” I screamed into the room, the frustration and anger so intense it might take on a life form all its own and burst out of my skin.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

“I swear to fucking god...” I growled into the pitch darkness, promising a thousand things worse than murder to the nothingness.

My wrists were coated in wetness I knew was my blood, and a thin material hung off my slowly withering frame. An oversized t-shirt? I couldn't be sure. But I knew who it belonged to. The smell of his stench, piney with that sour tang of lime was embedded deeply into the fabric, unable to be washed out.

I'd have questioned why he put a fucking shirt on me and no pants but that became obvious upon waking, when hot urine burned its way out despite my trying to hold it in.

This fucking chair or whatever it was had a hole in the seat, big enough to let my mess pass through, drained away to

a metallic sounding bucket beneath.

The worst part wasn't that I couldn't see. And it wasn't that I was strapped down. The worst part was that I felt... clean.

Smelled clean.

Like cheap strawberry shampoo and Ivory soap. I tried not to let my mind run away with all the possibilities of what else he could have done to me while I was out. The space between my legs didn't feel any different. It didn't feel sore or violated. So unless this guy had a micro dick, there was a pretty good chance he hadn't touched me. At least not yet.

I squinted into the dark, not for the first time since I woke up, but still I couldn't see anything. I had no idea if this was even the same room or a different room entirely. All I knew was that dick face had clearly grown tired of my antics and decided to strap me down. Honestly? It was probably the smartest move on his part.

But it didn't bode fucking well for me. I growled through a pained moan trying to claw its way up my throat when I tugged at my restraints again. It was no use. Even if I broke both my thumbs, I wouldn't be able to slide my hands free. No, if I could do literally anything to break them, I would've already tried that.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

If I had to listen to that *fucking* dripping for another second I was going to go mad.

Scratch that. I was already going mad. Unless there were other people in this room, hidden under the cover of darkness, whispering faintly.

I highly doubted that.

Which left one of two possibilities, either I was finally going insane—something I always thought was likely to happen someday—*or* the drugs asshat kept pumping me with had fully fucked up all brain function.

Insane people don't know they're insane, I told myself. Right? Wasn't that what people said?

I mean, just because people said it didn't really mean it was true.

But it was something to...

My rambling line of thought cut off at the sound of someone coming. Of *him* coming.

I wished I could spit fucking acid. That would be a handy talent to have right now.

A handle turned, and I braced myself against the wooden chair. Light burst into the room and with the flick of a switch, another light, brighter than the fucking sun blazed down on me, making me recoil, bending my head to protect my burning eyes from the sting.

I blinked, trying to see through the white, my eyes screaming as they adjusted.

The out of focus shape of Drake moved toward me. His fingertips brushed the broken skin on my right wrist, and I jerked, tearing more skin to try to get away from him. He tsked me, snatching my forearm above where the strap wrapped my wrist to hold my arm steady.

He bent to get a closer look at the wound.

My stomach turned at the sight, and I swallowed back bile.

It was way worse than I thought it was. Way fucking worse. I was no stranger to the sight of gore, but something about *my own* gore always sort of grossed me out.

A little blood was nothing. A gunshot wound? Sure. A nice clean slice? Fuck, I enjoyed those.

But this? This mangled mess of bloodied, raw flesh, torn down to white bone on the ball of my wrist?

"I can fix this," Drake said, finally releasing me. "Tighten the straps. Make sure you can't move at all."

So this would be how it continued between us. Moves and countermoves. I used my clothing against him so he took it

away. I proved to him that even half numb and semi-conscious, I would fight him, so he strapped me down.

Now, he would make it so I couldn't even move.

What next?

"Just kill me."

He frowned, lifting to his full height.

"I'm not going to be the *thing* you want me to be. I'd rather die. So go ahead. Get it over with. I'll come back and haunt your ass."

...and watch my men get sweet, sweet retribution for my death.

"No, Angel. Everyone can be broken. *Everyone*. You just have to know which buttons to push."

He leaned in close.

"And I think I might have found some of yours."

I spat in his face and his jaw ticked, but he didn't move, remaining hunched, staring into my eyes. Would've been so much fucking better if it was acid.

Maybe that was how I'd kill him. Slowly disintegrate him in a giant vat of acid. The mental image made a bubble of manic joy rise in my chest and my lips twitched.

"For instance," Drake continued. "I've just taken care of the first problem standing in my way."

My smirk faded, and I threw myself against the straps holding me down. "What the fuck did you do?"

It was his turn to grin.

My guys. *My guys*.

No. He couldn't. They'd eat him alive.

He shook his head as though reading my mind. "Those vultures you call Crows are still alive. For now. But Becca met the reaper just a few hours ago."

But... Becca...

Met the...

"You're lying."

"Thought you might say that."

Drake pulled two cell phones out of his back pocket, replacing the black one in favor of the sleek silver iPhone. He thumbed the screen for a second and flipped it to face me.

"See?" he said, and I couldn't tear my gaze away.

I'd never get the image out of my mind.

Of Becca lying on her bedroom floor, her body at an odd, uncomfortable angle. Blood coating her torso. Her eyes shut.

"Oh, shit, wait a sec," Drake said, pushing his light hair away from his forehead. "I didn't press play."

I couldn't help the immediate burn of tears in my throat, or the way my chin began to quiver as Drake turned the phone back to me and I watched Becca's bedroom door open.

Saw her face turn ashen with fear as she realized who'd just come in, frozen in her pajamas.

"Hey darlin'. Miss me?"

"Wait, Jericho, please... don't..."

Bang!

"See," Drake said, giving the phone a little shake. "I made it nice and quick. I did that for you. Now, I can't say I'll do the same for the Crows, but they have it coming."

I couldn't feel my face.

Couldn't feel a damn thing.

I was looking at him through red-tinted vision, with a bottomless well of guilt in my stomach threatening to swallow me whole.

"Don't give him the satisfaction."

I gasped at the very real sound of Grey's soft voice in my ear.

“Stay calm.” Corvus’ voice joined Grey’s, and I closed my eyes, forcing tears to roll down my cheeks, no longer caring if I was crazy. If it meant I got to hear their voices, even for a second, it was well worth it.

Becca.

Dead. Because of me.

I should’ve stayed away from her.

Idiot. Such a fucking idiot.

I choked back another sob and then thrashed against the restraints when Drake ran a knuckle up the trail of moisture on my cheek. Pressed the knuckle into his mouth to suck off my grief at the loss of possibly the only real friend I’d ever had.

“The whole thing gave me an idea,” Drake was saying, and I had no idea when he started talking again, but I only heard him distantly as he backed away. The sound of the gunshot that took out my best friend replayed in a morbid beat through my skull in time with my pulse.

“See?”

I dragged my burning gaze up and saw what was behind him. A standing desk with two monitors on it, side by side. He clicked a button on the mouse and the screens came to life. Showing several different surveillance camera feeds from some locations I didn’t recognize... and some I did and wished I didn’t.

My bedroom at Briar Hall.

Becca’s.

The Nest.

Sanctum.

How long had he been watching us? What had he seen? And where the fuck were these cameras?

This was not the same room I was in before, I realized numbly.

It had cement walls and a cement floor like the other one did, but this one also had this desk. Outlets on the wall. A heavy but not impenetrable door in place of the solid slab of stainless steel that'd been in the other room. How big was this place?

“Pretty cool, right?” Drake was saying, continuing to speak like I actually fucking cared what he had to say. Like I wasn't imagining a thousand ways to kill him to try to keep the tears at bay.

“This way you can watch.”

“Watch?” I found myself asking, my voice sounding unfamiliar to my own ears. Deadened. Exactly the sort of voice he wanted to hear.

I cleared my throat, lifting my chin. Refusing to give him anything.

Drake nodded, white teeth flashing. “So you can watch them all die.”

CHAPTER

Thirteen

GREY

“WE’RE FALLING APART,” I sighed into the sterile hospital room, scrubbing my palms over my face as I watched Becca’s for any signs of life.

She looked so fragile lying there, with the tube down her throat and the IV in her arm and the monitoring devices stickered all over her body. She wasn’t out of the woods yet. They put her in the coma to give her body a better chance at healing, but they still weren’t sure if they’d be able to wake her up after. That would be up to her.

“Corvus lost it,” I continued as though she could hear me. “He *never* loses it.”

I lifted the Styrofoam cup of cold coffee to my lips and took a long swallow, not knowing how much longer I could stay awake.

“And Rook...”

A dark chuckle.

I set the coffee down on the linoleum tile and steepled my fingers, putting them to my lips. “I don’t know, but there’s something wrong there too. He didn’t sound himself on the phone... we’re breaking without her.”

The back of her hand felt like ice under my fingertips.

“We need you to wake up, Becca. you might be the only one who can tell us who this motherfucker is.”

I grit my teeth against the selfish request. Here I was urging her to wake up so that she could help me save her friend; meanwhile, somewhere inside of that beautiful broken body she was fighting to survive herself.

If only she'd finished the drawing we might've been able to avenge her, and maybe AJ, too.

"I'm so sorry this happened to you."

The sound of a man shouting down the hall touched my ears and I sat up straighter, craning my neck to see if I could get a look at him through the window by the door.

I leaned down, feeling the outline of the gun holstered at my ankle, waiting to see if the heavy thudding footfalls of the man were headed in our direction.

I saw his face in the window only a second before the door was wrenched open, and Mr. Hart entered the room with a nurse close on his heels.

"What is this?" he roared at the nurse, not even noticing me sitting silently in the darkened corner beside Becca's bed.

"You call this a private room?" he spat. "Do you have any idea who I am?"

"Yes, sir, of course. I'm going to put her on the waitlist for one of the larger rooms right now."

"And get the goddamn doctor in here right now, I want to know exactly what happened to my daughter."

The nurse raced back down the hall, and Mr. Hart inhaled shakily, putting his hand to his mouth as he took in Rebecca lying prone on the hospital bed. He noticed me a moment later and removed the hand that was covering his mouth, his big money mask back in place.

"Who the hell are you and what are you doing in my daughter's room?"

I met his hard stare with an even harder one of my own, remembering what Becca told me about her father forcing her to go to MIT instead of the school she really wanted to go to. I didn't think that was the only thing he'd ever forced her into.

“A friend.”

Mr. Hart’s cold brown eyes tracked from my head down to my feet and back up again, clearly deciding I was not friend material for his precious daughter only a second before recognition sparked.

“I know you. You’re one of Diesel St. Crow’s sons, aren’t you?”

“Grey,” I supplied.

His eyes widened.

“*You*,” he sneered. “This is all your fault, isn’t it?”

He cleared the space between us, his chest puffing up beneath his tailored suit. I stood, but made no move to attack or defend. This dog was all bark and no bite.

I wouldn’t lie to him, but I also wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction of a reply.

“What?” he hissed. “It wasn’t enough to take my wife from me? *Hmm?* You had to take my...*my daughter* too.” his voice cracked.

“I’m sorry for the loss of your wife, sir,” I said, monotone. “But it wasn’t the Saints who took her life, and I think you know that.”

“No?” he pressed, the cracks in his voice filled with acid now. “I’m not talking about her death, boy. Your kind took her from me *long* before she died, and I’ll be damned if I allow you to drag my daughter down with her.”

It was time for me to leave. I turned to Becca and bent, taking her delicate hand in mine despite her father’s protests behind me. I gave it a small squeeze. “You can do this,” I whispered. “We need you.”

“Get away from my daughter this instant.”

I felt something on her palm and pulled back, flipping it carefully to see the smears of dirtied paint drying in the cracks there. I peeled her fingers back and found paint under her nails, too.

Smiling, I brought her hand to my lips before laying it back down on the bed.

I shouldered past her father and out into the hall, already typing out a message to the group chat, ignoring her father's shouts to not bother coming back.

I jabbed the elevator button.

Grey: Meet me at Briar Hall. Becca might've left us a gift.

The doors dinged open.

"Greyson?"

"Uncle Damien?"

I stared at the man who was unmistakably Damien St. Vincent standing alone in the elevator with a knot in his brows. I hadn't seen him in a few years but he looked the exact same. With a salt and pepper shadow of scruff along his jaw and jet black hair that only deepened the contrast of his slate gray eyes.

Anyone else would've taken one look at him and run, seeing him for the predator he is. Much like Diesel, Damien commanded an air of respect and violence. But for me, he offered a small smile. And even though his attention clearly tracked to the bandage over my eye, he didn't stare.

"How you been, kid? I have to say, you've looked better."

He stepped out of the elevator and drew me into a quick embrace, slapping a palm on my back. "Hope you got the fucker that did that to your face."

"We did. What are you doing here?"

"Happy to see you, too."

Damien peered down the corridor, toward the room I'd only just left and it was all the answer I needed, but he gave me his own version anyway.

"The hospital informed me when she was brought in."

I frowned. "Rebecca?"

“She’s Eden Matthews’ daughter.”

The woman he loved more than anything in this world before this world took her from him.

Damien nodded, something souring in his expression as he settled a cold stare on me, maybe reading the guilt I was sure was on full display there. “Did you have something to do with this, son?”

“Not exactly.”

“Care to elaborate?”

“There’s someplace I have to be,” I said, knowing I’d be here all fucking night if Damien wanted the full explanation of why Rebecca Hart wound up in the ER at four in the morning and was now fighting for her life in a coma. “Are you staying in town?”

He didn’t seem at all placated by my response, but nodded. “For the night at least.”

“Good. Go talk to Dies. He’ll fill you in.”

“This have to do with the Aces?”

I remembered Diesel had Uncle Damien on standby in case we needed him when things were getting bad, but mostly, our gangs ran independent of one another. And Uncle Damien had his own territory to look after. A much larger area than we had.

“They’ve been taken care of,” I said, jabbing the elevator button again. The doors opened, and I stepped past my uncle and into the box. “Talk to Dies. We’ll come by and help explain if there’s time.”

Damien’s eyes flashed a warning in the fluorescent lighting overhead.

“Oh and you might not want to visit just yet,” I said as the doors began to shut. “Her father’s in there with her.”

His jaw ticked, and the doors sealed, carrying me down to what I hoped was the key we’d been looking for. The one that might open the door to take us back to our girl.



ROOK SHIFTED foot to foot at the front entryway, seemingly uncaring that one boot was tapping away at a dried pile of blood. Apparently *Kit* had come to ‘check on’ AJ, and he must’ve said or done something to make Corvus snap.

Not an easy feat, but with the way he’d been at the edge of his rope lately I wasn’t as surprised as I should’ve been. We knew only from stories how he’d been when Diesel first took him in, it seemed now we’d get to see the monster for ourselves.

Speaking of the devil, the engine of Corvus’ Ducati snarled as he revved around the corner and pulled into the lot.

“What’s this shit about?” Corvus growled, stepping off his bike helmetless, with heat still lingering in his gaze.

He turned his attention to Rook. “Have you been here this whole time?”

Rook lifted a hand to shield his eyes from the morning sun as he squinted at Corvus. “Would you have rather I took the Rover, Bro?”

Corvus bristled at the reply, but I ignored them both, stalking past Rook to the front doors of the academy. “Let’s go. You two can bicker later.”

Corvus lengthened his strides to keep up, the three of us walking through the atrium, scattering students milling around between classes in our wake.

“Mind explaining why we’re back here. I was on my way to Lennox when I got your text.”

Rook punched the elevator button and then leaned against the wall, waiting, rolling a coin over his knuckles. “What do you mean she might’ve left a gift?”

I sighed. “I think Jericho is AJ’s stalker.”

No point in dragging it out.

“Jericho’s dead.”

“Is he? Becca said she made herself look at every face on her way out of the Docks. He wasn’t there.”

Rook shrugged, but I could already see his mind working behind the blasé gesture. “Then he died in the attack on Sanctum.”

“I don’t think so.”

Corvus pinched the bridge of his nose, upper lip curling. “I’ll ask you again, Brother, what the fuck is this about?”

“It was something he said in the recordings,” I explained, ignoring my brother’s misplaced hostility as we rode the elevator up to the third floor. “It made me think we weren’t his only target. Think about it. He was asking about AJ. Wanting Becca to find out where she was.”

“To get to us,” Corvus said, but the conviction in his voice was gone. Even he was starting to see it.

“Maybe. Maybe not. Becca didn’t have any pictures of Jericho, but she’s an artist. A fucking good one. I asked her if she could draw him for us.”

Rook glared after me when I walked out of the elevator. I could feel his wrathful gaze boring holes into my back. “You didn’t think you should mention this sooner? Give her a protection detail?”

“I did.”

“Axel was fucked,” Rook argued. “He wouldn’t have been able to stand up to a strong wind, never mind this sadistic motherfucker.”

“I didn’t know if I was right,” I admitted, keeping my eyes trained ahead. “I still might not be.”

Corvus dragged me back with a rough grip on my shoulder. “You should’ve fucking told us.”

This time, I did meet his stare. “I know.”

Rook knocked Corv’s hand from my shoulder, giving him a warning glance before turning his black eyes back to me.

“You fucking tell us if you think you know something. I don’t give a shit how stupid you think it is. Hear me?”

“Yeah, Bro. I hear you.”

“So.” Corvus sighed. “You think she managed to draw him before he got to her?”

I shook my head. “Not draw. Paint. But no, I didn’t think she had. Not until I went to check on her at the hospital and found dried paint on her palm.”

I could see the same hope I felt mirrored in their tired expressions.

Rook all but ran past me, clearing the distance to AJ and Becca’s room, not wasting another second.

We followed him into the apartment, through the living room and across to Becca’s room. He shoved the door in and set to work.

“Paint,” he called after tearing back the comforters on her bed. Smudges of varying colors stained her light duvet. Dirty paintbrushes scattered to the floor.

I lifted a pad of watercolor paper from the floor, fingering a torn bit at the top. “A sheet’s missing.”

“Fuck!” Corvus kicked the side of her espresso finished dresser, denting in the wood. “He took it.”

I shook my head. No.

My blood cooled in my veins, dread hollowing my gut. “No. No, we don’t know that. Keep looking.”

Rook snatched the pad of paper from my grasp, the hope in his eyes replaced by deep shadows.

I stole it back. “Keep. Looking.”

His dead eyes told me he’d already lost hope, but he gave me a terse nod anyway. Rook didn’t care about much, but the things he did, he cared about fiercely. With no reserve. Giving up was never an option when it came to us, and it wouldn’t be with our girl, either.

Rook began going through her nightstand drawers while I rifled through lacy panties and bras in her dresser. I didn't think Corvus would help at first, but as we worked, tearing through every inch of the bedroom, he became too uneasy to stand still and stomped into the bathroom to check there.

Rook paused when he pulled out the bottom drawer on the right hand side of Becca's bed and I rushed over, my heart jump started back to life. "What is it? Did you find—"

My words died on my lips at the absolute fucking *arsenal* of sex toys in the drawer. Every shape and size of vibrator and dildo. Anal beads. Butt plugs. Some weird device shaped like a rose. A whip. Fucking *rope*. And at least five different kinds of lube. All organized and lined up in categories and size order.

"*Damn,*" Rook said on a breath. "That's quite the collection. He fingered a ball gag from the pile, and I swatted it out of his hand.

"*Dude,*" I chastised, slamming the drawer shut. "Keep looking."

He shook his head, brows lifting as he set back to work, moving on to the desk against the wall.

I turned from where I stood, surveying the room. The dresser, bed, and nightstands we'd already checked. Where else could she have hidden it?

Please. *Please tell me you hid it.*

I'd tear the entire fucking room apart before I gave up on this.

I texted Diesel again, just in case she's shown up at Sanctum, even knowing damn well he'd have called one of us on the spot.

My gaze tracked over the floor, the window hung with heavy draping curtains next to her bed. The large self-portrait on the wall. The bookshelf.

The portrait...

It wasn't hung perfectly straight. Even though most other things in the room were lined up in neat rows. Precisely placed.

A smudge of brownish paint marred the otherwise flawless deep purple wall just next to it.

Emotion, raw and hot rose in my chest, and I covered a shaky exhale with my palm. "Holy fucking shit."

I was right.

I was right.

A tremor of harrowing worry ricocheted up my spine at what that meant. At the realization that Ava Jade was definitely *not* safe.

"What is it, man?" Rook asked, coming to stand next to me, his black eyes tracing the painting.

"The fuck are you two looking at?" Corvus demanded, standing in the doorframe of the bathroom.

Without a word, I walked forward and lifted the painting off the wall, flipping it around. There, jammed haphazardly into the back of the canvas framing was a lone piece of watercolor paper.

I slipped it from the frame, my stomach in my throat. Corvus and Rook crowded beside me as I flipped it over.

"Is that..." Corvus trailed off, his voice dripping malice.

"It is."

Rook tore the page from my hand to bring it closer to his twisted face, his dead-eyed composure slipping before it fled entirely. He threw the page away and stormed for the door. "He's *mine*."

CHAPTER

Fourteen

CORVUS

“*ROOK, WAIT,*” I shouted, chasing him through the hall to the stairs. I only managed to catch up at all because his leg was slowing his ass down.

“*I said wait,*” I tried again, my growl echoing in the stairwell, making him whip around to face me, white knuckle grip on the railing, face a mosaic of unleashed fury. The mirror image of what I felt inside but was fighting past because we couldn’t waste this. We had the advantage here. The upper hand.

And we couldn’t let it all go to shit because we wanted this fucker’s head on a platter.

“What?” he barked. “What the fuck are we *waiting* for?”

Grey caught up, letting the door bang closed behind him, sealing us into the stairwell alone.

“Stop and think for a fucking second,” I implored him, noticing his rapid breathing. The way his whole body moved with the simple act of taking in air. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d seen him like this. So wound up he could explode at any second. It was shocking he’d stopped at all. That he was listening.

His black eyes searched the dead air in front of his face as he tried to figure out what I was getting at, clearly getting more and more frustrated by the second.

Grey padded down the few steps from the landing to us, stopping in front of Rook. “AJ still isn’t back. If my theory is

right and I think it is then...”

“He might have her,” Rook finished for him, his eyes wild now, but focused.

“And if we rush in guns blazing...”

“So, what then?”

I licked my lips, my body alive with a savage flutter behind my rib cage. The crush of anxiety I hadn’t felt since I was a fucking teenager rearing its ugly head. Everything depended on us doing this *right*.

“We don’t let on we know anything,” I started. “First, we need to find out where he is.”

Rook lifted his phone to his ear and I grabbed his jacket sleeve, jerking him toward me. “Who the fuck you calling?”

“Diesel.”

I released him. “Tell him not to let on a goddamned thing.”

He nodded, and Diesel picked up on the other end. “Dies, you alone?”

Rook shuffled down a few steps, turning around to speak to Diesel in hushed tones.

Grey ran a shaky hand through his hair. “What are you thinking? Tail him?”

“If Drake is who we think he is, it won’t be easy. He’s a smart motherfucker but that means we’ll just have to be smarter. He probably has all his bases covered. He’ll notice a tail straight off. We’ll have to be more creative.”

“So, we’re just supposed to pretend we don’t know? Be in the same room as this fucker? Breathe the same air?”

“Unless there’s some way we can get our hands on him without setting a war in motion with the Kings.”

“Fuck the Kings,” Rook injected, coming back up to where we stood near the window, looking out over the rapidly darkening parking lot. “How do we know they aren’t in on this shit? He’s one of theirs.”

“And if going to war is what it takes to get her back, then so fucking be it,” Grey added.

The uncomfortable flutter behind my rib cage died, swallowed by the familiar heat of the animal within coming back to life. They were right. It didn't matter what it took.

“Where is he?”

Rook's lips twisted into a wicked grin. “At Sanctum. Diesel's going to try to keep him there.”

Fuck. I gritted my teeth, shaking my head. “If Drake gets the feeling something's off, he'll bolt.”

“Diesel won't let him.”

A new worry took root. “Why's Drake there?”

“It was another meet with Mav and his main crew. About what happened with Becca. He's putting the pressure on Mav to bring Aries in.”

But we knew now it wasn't Aries. Never was. He was always a distraction. Something to keep us busy while the real threat worked alongside us. Right under our noses. This whole fucking time.

“Who's with him?”

Rook lifted a shoulder in a half shrug, his expression filled with questioning annoyance, bouncing on the balls of his feet. Overeager for action. “I don't know, man. I heard Pinkie in the background. The others are still on patrol for Ghost.”

The lines of exasperation in his forehead softened as he realized what I'd already figured out. Diesel was in a closed space with the enemy. Diesel and Pinkie and maybe one more Saint if he was lucky. Meanwhile Mav was there with Drake and the rest of their inner circle.

“We don't know for sure if the Kings even know about Drake. The alliance could still be legit. There's no reason to think...” Grey trailed off. The placation was more for himself than for us. He could be right, but I doubted it.

“We need to move.”

GREY PUSHED the Rover to its limits as we sped across town to Sanctum, still better with one eye than any driver I knew with two.

“Slow down a bit,” I warned as we turned onto High Street, nearing Sanctum. We didn’t need to come peeling into the lot and set anyone on edge. We were going to walk in there, take Drake, and tell Mav that if he didn’t cooperate, it would be his head.

The Kings might’ve outnumbered us now, but not by much. Not by enough.

Was I thinking straight?

I shook my head, blinking away the exhaustion clinging to my eyelids, trying to drag them down like lead weights. Sleep wasn’t a luxury any of us could afford these days. If I didn’t get my Sparrow back, I doubted I’d ever sleep again.

But if I did get her back...

I’d do whatever she wanted. *Be* whatever she wanted. I’d share her with my brothers. Let go of my control.

Falling for someone was never in the cards for me, but I didn’t just fall for Ava Jade. I’d crashed and burned, and I’d keep burning for as long as she wanted to hold me in her fire. Love was something meant for story books and fairy tales. A lie people whispered to each other in the dark to justify and rationalize their most carnal desires. To control. To protect. To dominate. To fuck. To *own*.

I didn’t love Ava Jade. What I felt for her went far beyond such a simple emotion. It was a nameless thing that kept me going, breathing life into my battered bones and weary mind. She was the spark.

Grey ground his jaw as he forced the Rover to a crawl and Sanctum came into view.

Rook’s fingers dug into the front seats from where he sat in the middle behind us, ready to launch at a second’s notice.

“Remember,” I said, working to keep my voice at an even timbre so as not to set him off. “We can’t kill him. Not yet. We need him alive.”

“Fine.”

“Rook.”

“I said *fine*.”

Grey cranked the wheel to pull in next to one of Dies’ cars out the front of Sanctum at the same time as a loud *bang!* rang through the evening air, forcing him to hit the brakes.

The front door of Sanctum crashed open and a storm of gray smoke chased Drake from the building.

Diesel.

Rook darted from the backseat, leaving the door open behind him.

I opened my door, the instinct to *chase* searing through my blood, but Grey shoved the Rover into reverse, jostling me back into the cab.

“He’s going to get away,” Grey shouted, throwing the Rover back into drive.

Drake straddled a motorcycle parked down the street from Sanctum, but Rook was almost there, his wraith-like shadow on top of him.

Diesel poured out of Sanctum with Pinkie and Mav right behind him, coughing.

My relief at finding him alive fled as the roar of the motorcycle’s engine filled the night, droning out the sound of their coughing. Even the sound of our own engine, revving to give chase.

“How did he know we were coming?”

I barely registered what Grey had asked as he cranked the wheel, jarring to a stop only long enough for a cursing, out of breath Rook to clamber back into the back seat as we sped off after the single tail light curving up the blacktop ahead.

“Keep them here,” I hollered out the window to Diesel, gaze cutting to a genuinely stunned-looking Maverick. “And call back the others.”

Diesel nodded through another hard cough from the smoke bomb and whipped my head around, taking out my gun and checking the clip before pushing myself half out the passenger side window, into the whipping wind.

“We’re going to lose him!” Rook roared and Grey punched it, propelling us like a speeding bullet down the road after Drake.

“Watch out!” I called and Grey barely managed to skate around a merging SUV, nearly jostling me out the fucking window.

Ahead, Drake’s taillight grew smaller. Further.

No.

“Grey!”

I fought the wind, firing, but the shot went wide and still his fucking taillight grew smaller until it vanished around a corner.

“Hold on!”

I threw myself back into the seat before he pulled the e-brake, skidding us to the side before speeding off again, down the narrow alley between two buildings.

The side mirrors sparked, scraping against weathered brick as the Rover ran over empty bottles and cardboard boxes, smashing trash cans out of the way.

The instant we were clear of the alley, both Rook and I leaned out our windows, searching.

“There!”

The motorcycle dipped to the left off the end of Main Street, merging onto the southbound highway. Grey followed, swerving around two cars in the slow lane to slide all the way to the fast lane, pushing the Rover to its limits. Honking sounded all around, but he ignored everything except the

Rover and the road and the bob and weave of Drake's tail lights ahead.

The unparalleled focus in his eye told me he wouldn't be letting Drake go. Not while this car was still moving and he was still behind the wheel.

"Get around this van," I shouted over the roar of the wind rushing into the cabin, pushing back out the window, taking aim.

The business end of my Colt traced the erratic driving pattern of Drake ahead between two other cars.

Fuck. If I fired I'd risk hitting one of them instead of my intended target.

Rook's gun discharged two shots, ringing in my ears. One hit the rear tire of the hatchback to the right, sending it swerving off the highway, spinning into the ditch, toppling onto its side. The other missed Drake, but the gunfire was enough to scare the other car off the road, leaving him with no cover for at least another couple of miles.

I clenched my teeth, ignoring the smoking wreckage behind us to focus my attention ahead.

I fired. Once. Twice. Drake jerked, the motorcycle swerving madly before he managed to right it.

Rook fired, but his shot went wide, pinging off the metal center meridian in a shower of sparks.

"Keep it fucking steady," Rook bellowed, and Grey, heedless of the lines on the highway, drove straight up the middle, laying on the horn to keep the cars attempting to merge onto the highway from getting in our way.

"Now," he shouted. "Do it."

Rook fired again and this time he would've had the fucker had he not swerved out of the way at the last second, using a break in the meridian to put himself on the other side of the highway, driving against oncoming traffic.

He bent low over the bike, flattening himself with his elbows wide as he steered through the speeding, honking

vehicles.

“He’s going to get away,” Rook hissed, watching like a fucking bobblehead, trying to keep his sights set on Drake as Grey continued driving.

“No he’s not.”

“Shit!”

Two cars on the northbound highway crashed trying to avoid hitting Drake, a third flipped over the median into our path.

My head knocked against the window frame, neck screaming with whiplash as Grey avoided the collision, the smell of metal and gasoline heavy in my nose. The glow of fire in the rearview.

Cars piled up on the opposite highway, busting through the meridian, clogging the air with a thick, dense smoke.

“Do you see him?” I asked Rook, trying and failing to locate him in the wreckage or the now tens or maybe hundreds of cars slowing to a red-brake-light stop.

We did *not* just fucking lose him.

No.

I slammed my palm on the dash, my breath hot and heavy, coming out through bared teeth.

Rook grabbed my shoulder. “There!”

I followed his line of sight and found a single tail light as it curved, getting off the highway.

“Grey—”

“I saw.”

He took the next exit, jamming the Rover into a lower gear as we whipped around the curve and took the first left.

With bated breath, we drove in tense silence, the whistle of the wind the only sound above the distant roar of fire and sirens as we took the exit road toward Edgewood.

We barreled down the road, passing every vehicle in our way, scouring the shoulder, the trees, the roads forking off in both directions.

The Rover rolled to a stop when the road finally reached a two way split, holding up traffic as it caught up behind us. Left would take us back to Thorn Valley. Right to Lennox.

There were no red tail lights in either direction.

Grey punched the steering wheel hard before grabbing it to anchor him through a feral war cry. “Fuck, fuck, *fuck.*”

The car behind him honked, long and loud and his eyes glittered with rage before he threw it into reverse, demolishing the front end of the car behind us before throwing it into park. His hands gripped the wheel as he fought to tame his breathing, leaning his forehead against the worn leather.

There was nothing Rook or I could say now that wouldn't make him feel even more like a failure than he clearly already did.

“You did what you could,” I said, my voice terse and emotionally detached even to my own ears.

We fucking lost him.

And now he knew that we knew who he was.

I dragged a sweaty palm over the scruff growing on my jaw.

“Just fucking say it,” Grey demanded, his voice hollow. “I never would've lost him before. The one fucking thing I'm good at and I—”

“*Don't,*” Rook sat back in his seat, laying his Browning in his lap to press his palms into his eye sockets. “How the fuck would you've caught a motorcycle driving on the other side of a fucking meridian in opposing traffic. Who the fuck are you, Houdini?”

Grey didn't reply, and the man in the car behind us opened his door, phone to his ear. Blood running in a straight line down the middle of his forehead.

Rook opened his door, flashing his gun at the guy. “Back in your car, asshole.”

“We need to get back,” I found myself saying. “Maverick needs to answer for this motherfucker. He knows something. He has to.”

Yes. A new idea. A new angle. Something. I needed something to go on. Anything that could lead us to *her*.

Grey turned left, taking us back to Thorn Valley.

My phone vibrated and I took it out, knowing better than to hope it would be anything good.

And as usual, I was right. My stomach soured at the message lighting up the screen.

Sensing my tension, Rook leaned forward, trying to peer over my shoulder to read the text, but I thumbed the side button and the screen went black, reflecting my own carefully constructed mask back to me. “Who was it?”

“Diesel,” I lied.

CHAPTER

Fifteen

ROOK

“WHAT ARE WE DOING HERE, DIESEL?” Maverick’s misplaced sense of superiority tainted his voice as it floated up to us from the underbelly of Sanctum.

“We’re waiting for my sons.”

“There are places we need to—”

“You’ll wait.”

Diesel’s attention turned toward us as we came down the stairs and I shoved past Corvus to make a beeline for Maverick.

“You didn’t catch him?” Diesel asked Grey and Corvus, stepping out of my way as I squared up in front of King’s so-called ‘leader,’ seeing him in a new light.

Watching him cower.

“Tell me about Drake.”

His lips flexed into a tight line, but his stare couldn’t hold mine for more than a second before he turned his attention to Diesel. “What is this, St. Crow? I already told you I don’t know why the boy ran.”

“Like how you know nothing about where Aries went?” I pressed, thumbing my blade from my hip to flip it between my fingers, rolling it over my rings.

“Diesel?” he urged.

“You will answer my son’s question, Maverick.”

“Sit.” I pushed the tip of my blade into Maverick’s chest, guiding him to the seat behind his ass until he fell into it.

I perched on the edge of the meeting table, lifting my foot to rest on the chair next to him, never looking away. Watching the sweat bead at his hairline.

“I’ve already told your father, boy. I have no idea what Drake was playing at. One second he was sitting here at the table with us for the meet. The next thing I know he jumps out of his seat and throws a damned smoke grenade and a flash bang under the table and he’s gone.”

I looked to Diesel for confirmation. He nodded gravely.

“What was he doing before that?”

Maverick’s thick brows bunched together.

“He was on his phone,” Diesel answered for him. “Must’ve seen something that spooked him off.”

Corvus and I shared a look.

We already knew Drake had eyes on us at Briar Hall. In the halls. The cafeteria. The fucking kitchens. Why not in Ava Jade’s and Becca’s room? We could’ve missed it. We weren’t watching close enough. We should’ve been checking.

Should’ve.

Should’ve.

I would never *should’ve* again.

On that note.

I licked my lips, eyeing Maverick’s men behind him. As per Diesel’s rules, none of them were allowed in Sanctum armed, but judging by their shifty looks and hand placements, they weren’t following the rules. And Diesel, dear daddy Diesel wasn’t as on top of it as he should’ve been.

“That motherfucker nearly *killed* our friend,” I seethed, remembering the feel of Becca’s near dead body under mine as I fought to save her. She didn’t deserve that. “And he might have my fucking reason for living in his filthy hands. *You know something*. Tell me.”

The truth of it hit me like a Mack truck to the chest. *She* was my reason to keep going. For years I'd been just getting by. Keeping the ugliest parts of myself choked off, sated. I'd stopped giving a fuck whether I survived our next job. Our next run in with a rival gang.

Ghost was my reason to want to be more cautious. If only to keep from missing a single moment with her. My brothers filled the void. They were close to being enough, but she was *more*.

She was everything.

Maverick's upper lip curled. "I don't know a damned thing."

I punched him in the face, sucking in a breath at the sting.

His men rushed forward but Grey, Corvus, Diesel, and Pinkie raised their weapons in warning.

I watched the light come back into Maverick's eyes as they focused on me.

On me licking his blood off my rings and spitting it onto the floor.

"Try again."

"Rook," Diesel said, calm. The eye of the storm raging all around him.

Maverick's chair scraped back as he stood, twisting out from under my shadow. "I'm warning you, St. Crow," he said, unsteady as he swiped the back of his hand over the blood dripping from the fresh cut on his lower lip. "This is not how we handle business."

Diesel nodded, and I snarled at him. "He's *lying*."

"And if he is, then he knows what will happen."

"This is bullshit."

I lifted my blade to Mav's throat and within half a second there was a barrel pressed to my temple by one of his men.

"I think you should go, Maverick," Diesel said.

He swallowed against my blade. “And our alliance?”

“Give me Drake and I’ll reconsider severing ties.”

Mav’s lips parted in surprise. He hadn’t been expecting this. Hadn’t been expecting Diesel to support his sons over this absolute forgery of a fucking alliance.

“I told you, I don’t know what he’s up to.”

“Then you have nothing to worry about.”

“Dies?” I pressed, drawing a drop of blood from Mav’s neck.

My father turned his attention to the man with the gun pressed to my temple. “You have exactly one second to remove that gun from my son’s head or I’ll blow yours off.”

“One—”

The barrel dropped, and I pushed off of Maverick, away from the Kings reduced to fucking jokers in a court of bloody nightmares.

“Leave.”

“Think about this, St. Crow—”

Diesel fired a round into the ceiling, sending them scattering like roaches. “*Leave.*”

Diesel remained like that, with his arm raised, the tail of smoke from the shot he fired still rising from the weapon gripped tight in his hand, until they were all gone.

“Now,” he said, holstering the gun. “Someone want to tell me what the *fuck* is going on?”



“I STILL SAY you shouldn’t have let him go.”

I paced the short span of floor as Grey finished explaining about the painting of Drake and what it meant.

Diesel gave me an exasperated glance before responding to something Grey was saying. “So, you’re telling me the Hart

kid's gang boyfriend—”

“Becca,” Grey corrected him.

Diesel sighed. “*Becca's* gang boyfriend who was an Ace actually wasn't an Ace at all but a King?” A pause. “A King who is also Ava Jade's stalker?”

Grey pinched the bridge of his nose. “Basically, yes.”

“Well, that shit doesn't make sense.”

As little sense as it made when we came to similar conclusions about Aries. But with Aries, it didn't fit. His little pansy ass couldn't have been Ava Jade's stalker. This guy, though? He could be.

I saw his darkness. A different flavor from mine but it was there all along. I thought it meant he could run with us, a new wolf to join our murder of crows. My Ghost saw it too. It beckoned her. Reeled her in only to trap her.

Bristling on the inside, I shivered on the outside, feeling the drag of coming down from my high like fingernails pulling at the back of my skull.

Corvus stopped stewing, giving the inside of his cheek a break from his incessant chewing. “It only doesn't because we don't have all the information. But it fits. It's him. It has to be.”

About time he fucking said something. My older brother had been a goddamned mute since we left the crossroads in Edgewood. I read between his lines now though, catching onto what he wasn't saying.

If it wasn't Drake, then that would mean we had exactly zilch to go on in helping us find my Ghost. But I was with him on this. It did fit.

And without Grey putting the pieces together we wouldn't have this lead at all.

I flipped open my phone, scrolling to my old Lennox contact to fire him off another text.

Rook: What the fuck is taking so long? I need my shit.

“I don’t like this,” Diesel was saying. “Rook’s right.”

I scoffed.

“Maverick was lying. That much was obvious, but we don’t know what he was lying about. He might not have a clue what Drake is up to, if that’s even his name.”

“Doubtful,” Corvus muttered, gazing distantly toward the exit before checking something on his phone.

Diesel rubbed a knuckle over his chin, thinking. “Either way, it might come to a fight with the Kings and we’re weak. We lost a lot of men at the Docks and nearly half our fucking force are either down or at least badly injured.”

“Bring in the newer recruits,” Grey suggested.

“They aren’t ready. Haven’t even taken the trials.”

“Make *this* their trial. It’s better than being outmanned practically two to one.”

Diesel didn’t like that idea, but it was clear he was considering it.

“All right, we bring them into the fold, separate out the wheat from the chaff when this is through and run them through the trials. But we’re outgunned, too, and low on munitions. We’d need more weapons and can’t risk traveling through King territory to get what we need right now. And if we go the other route, to the dealers south of the border, it’ll cost twice as much and we can’t afford it.”

“I might be able to fix that problem,” I offered, remembering a certain someone’s very expensive *very fancy* Easter eggs. Someone who deserved to have her mansion broken into, her precious gifts stolen. “You still have those art dealing contacts in the black market?”

Diesel crooked a brow. “Yeah, why?”

“I’ll get us the cash. Set up a meet with the Mexicans for a few days from now. We’ll get the weapons and munitions just in case.”

Diesel looked like he might argue or ask questions, but instead he just set his jaw, and sighed, deciding he didn't really want to know.

"Boss?" Pinkie's voice drifted into the chilly room from the office by the exit where he was diligently watching the cameras. "St. Vincent's here. And the boys are back from their patrol."

Diesel gave Pinkie a nod and the big guy went back to watching the screens.

"I'll brief the others on what went down here. We'll have to drop it down to a single patrol on the streets for your girl. I can't risk spreading us thin right now."

"She isn't on the streets." I wished it wasn't true, but I knew in my gut it was. He had her.

He'd had her this whole time. The things he could've done to her in the days, nearly a week now, that she'd been gone.

The darkness within stirred, both fed by the remnants of the white powder still keeping me going and dulled by the aftereffects of it slowly leaving my system.

I needed more.

Now.

I lit a fresh cigarette with shaky fingers I willed to still themselves, checking my phone again for a reply. Ready to get moving again. We'd done enough standing around.

"We need to keep looking for her—for *him*," Grey told Diesel, mirroring my thoughts. Our father closed the short gap to where Grey was seated and placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

"I know, Son."

Grey stood.

"Check in every few hours."

"We will," Grey promised as our uncle hollered a hello from the stairs, trotting down to meet us. His nose turned up at what he found, brows furrowing.

“Hey, little brother,” he said in greeting to Diesel. “Why do I feel like I just missed the show?”

Diesel shook his head, making for the bar. “Drink, Damien?”

“You know what I like.”

Diesel lifted his chin in a silent goodbye as we left, finding a new day staining the sky purple, a slice of glowing orange blooming on the horizon.

“I’m going to see what I can dig up on Drake,” Grey announced. “And try to access any cctv footage on the road where we lost him.”

“Good call,” Corvus said, making for Diesel’s car.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m going back to where we lost him, try the road to Lennox,” my brother announced. “You go back to the nest with Grey. I’ll meet you there in a bit.”

“We shouldn’t split up,” Grey argued.

Corvus paused with his hand on the handle of Diesel’s car, his back stiffening. “What good am I sitting my ass at home?”

“Corv—”

“Let him go,” I interrupted. “We’ll meet you at home, Bro.”

Grey shrugged off my grip on his arm, twisting away from Corvus as he slid into the driver’s seat of Dies’ Camaro. He always left the keys in it. No one was stupid enough to touch Diesel St. Crow’s car in this city. No one except his son.

Grey stalked around the building to the Rover, a black cloud following him.

“Hey,” I called after him, not even bothering to try to keep up as I lit another cigarette, coughing on the acrid taste of cocaine dripping down the back of my throat. “You still have that shit on all our phones, right? The tracking shit?”

He stopped, spinning on his heel, his brows drawn in question. “Yeah, why?”

“Corvus isn’t going to the crossroads. He’s lying.”

“What?”

“Something’s up and we’re going to find out what.”

CHAPTER

Sixteen

GREY

“THIS IS A WASTE OF TIME,” I grunted, shoving my phone into Rook’s hands as I settled into the driver’s seat. “We need to be trying to track this motherfucker.”

“We might not have to,” Rook answered, closing the passenger side door, his hand shaky as he swiped his way into my phone and I started the engine.

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Think about it. We know Ghost’s stalker wants us out of the picture. If I was him, I’d want to get each of us alone. And he has the perfect bait to make that happen.”

“Corvus wouldn’t be so stupid.”

Rook lifted a brow at me, challenging me to reconsider my response. “If this bastard threatened Ava Jade, you’re telling me you wouldn’t do whatever the fuck he said, *including* lying to us or going off on your own?”

My chest burned. I’d already done exactly that.

“Exactly,” Rook sighed. “Now how the hell do I work this tracking app?”

I snatched the phone back, flicking to the app and keying in all the credentials to activate it before passing it back.

Rook zoomed into the map, finding the little blue dot that showed Corvus’ location. He grinned.

“He’s not going to the crossroads. He took a left on Compton.”

What? “What’s out that way?”

Rook shrugged, letting out a shuddering sigh. “Not much. A couple hotels. Restaurants.”

He looked rough, I realized. Way rougher than I’d seen him look in a long time. Losing AJ, not sleeping, and all this shit with the Kings seemed to be getting to him. It was about time something did, but I hated seeing him like this. I selfishly wished he’d go back to being his aloof self, without a care, with all of the confidence that no one stood a chance against us. That we would get her back. Easy as fucking cake.

This Rook was a harder pill to swallow, and his anxiety only fed my own.

“Hey, you good, Brother?”

Rook narrowed his black eyes on me quickly before flitting them away, letting them go dead. “Just drive, Grey. We need to catch up with Corv.”

Rook directed me through the streets of Thorn Valley as we slowly tailed Corvus across the city.

If this was a waste of time...

I inhaled deeply through my nose to settle the quake in my stomach. Unwound the taut muscle wrapping my arms like cords about to snap.

I had him. *I had him*, and I fucking lost him.

Anything that happened to AJ from here on out happened purely because of my inability to do the one fucking thing I did best.

“You’re going to break it off if you don’t let up,” Rook said, smoking a cigarette out the window, gesturing with the burning red tip toward my grip on the steering wheel.

I didn’t even bother trying to relax, gritting my teeth behind the wall of my lips, willing him to shut up so I could try to calm down.

This wasn’t me. I was the group mediator. The make-everyone-happy brother. The calm one. The *nice* one.

The things I wanted to do to Drake were as far from nice as you could get.

“I want to rip his arms off,” I gritted out.

“Mmm,” Rook agreed, puffing out a cloud of noxious smoke, heavy-lidded gaze still focused on the phone, completely unfazed by what I’d just said. And why would he be? I was letting myself feel everything now and only now. With one of the only people on this planet who would understand.

Something beneath my breastbone trembled and heat scattered down my arms like sheet lightning.

“I want to castrate him and scalp him and roast his ass over a bonfire, and when I’m fucking finished, I want to serve his smoking head to her on a platter.”

The volume of my voice increased of its own accord until I was shouting. The pressure behind my eye and the space where my other eye used to be making them feel on the verge of popping.

This finally got Rook’s attention. He ashed his cigarette before snubbing out the still-burning cherry between his fingers.

“Welcome to the next level, Bro. Now use that shit. We’re going to need that fire to find her and finish this motherfucker.”

My pulse slowed back to a manageable tempo, warm cheeks cooling as my breaths evened out. “Is this what it’s like for you all the time?”

All the rage? The vicious desire to smash everything within reaching distance just to let out enough of the fury to properly function. It’d been building since I woke up and AJ wasn’t there. It’d gotten worse after finding out about Becca. But now?

Now it was almost unbearable in its intensity.

Rook’s deep timbre filled the cabin with his reply. “Worse.”

I sagged, trying to pull my focus back to the task. We were pulling onto the strip of hotels near the northern edge of the city. “Where is he?”

Rook pointed a ringed finger up the street. “Up ahead. Another few blocks, I think. I don’t see the Camaro. He must’ve parked it in one of the underground lots.”

“He’s stopped?”

“Yeah. Looks like it.”

I pulled into a parking spot on the side of the road, not wanting to get too close in case Corvus spotted us, but also sort of wishing he would just so I could throttle him for going off on his own, in the *complete opposite* direction from where he said he was going.

If either of us pulled this, he’d shit a brick and then use said brick to bash our heads in.

We stepped out into the growing dawn, the smell of the city in the early morning filling my nose.

Rook stepped up onto the sidewalk on his toes to get a look down the street before checking his phone again. “I don’t see him, but if this is right, he’s at the Vandermark.”

The Vandermark?

I tipped my head up to see the length of the narrow gothic revival building currently dressed up in gaudy Christmas decor to match the banners strung on the lampposts lining the street leading up to it.

“Shit, there it is, right out front,” Rook said, and I followed his eye to the Camaro sandwiched between two larger vehicles in a parking space close to the entrance. Corvus not inside it.

Why would he be going there? It didn’t make sense as a meeting spot. Not if Drake’s intent was to take Corvus out. There weren’t enough fast ways to escape the tall building. Unless...

“The underground parking garage.”

Rook nodded. “Let’s move.”

CHAPTER

Seventeen

AVA JADE

DRAKE MADE it impossible for me to move and absolutely *everyfucking* thing itched. That alone would've been enough to drive a woman insane, but with the drugs still lingering in my system, and that *incessant* dripping... safe to say I was absolutely mad. Delirious. Starting to question reality.

So when he came barging in, sweeping right into the room to head straight for the desk of monitors, I thought maybe he wasn't really there at all.

I mean, fuck, I thought I'd seen my dad chilling over there in the corner, humming his favorite tune to the sound of a guitar strumming in my brain just an hour ago. Or maybe it was a day ago. Who fucking knew.

Either way, my dad was definitely dead, and I was definitely crazy.

Which was why I started to laugh when Drake manically smashed the spacebar on the keyboard, muttering to himself as the computers woke from their slumber.

He whirled, sneering at me, a smear of blood on his jaw.

I immediately stopped laughing.

Whose blood was that?

Whose *fucking* blood was that?

He realized where my eyes had strayed and looked down with a grimace, peeling off his leather jacket with a hiss.

He smelled like smoke and gasoline.

My heart thundered in my chest and I spoke through my teeth, trying to find the darkness inside that seemed to have abandoned me to my crazy sometime between being stripped of my clothes and dignity and being strapped into this godforsaken chair. “What did you do?”

He bared his teeth as he tore the sleeve from his black t-shirt, revealing a bullet wound in his shoulder, bloody and gruesome and enough to tickle my insides with fucking joy.

They got him. If only they’d hit a little lower. More to the right.

Drake grabbed the first aid kit he’d used to wrap up my wrists and tore a pair of long metal tweezers out of a plastic sleeve with his teeth.

He let out a mean cry, gripping the underside of the desk with one hand while he dug the pointed tips of the tweezers deep into the wound, coming out with a bullet a few seconds later. He dropped it to the floor and it clattered as it rolled toward the door.

“*Fuck,*” he barked, closing his eyes tight for a second before continuing to sanitize and wrap the injury.

“What happened?” I pressed again, swallowing past the thick cloth Drake had used to bind my head and neck even tighter to the chair, squirming the tiniest bit that I was able. My lower abdomen ached with even the slightest contraction of my muscles and my face pinched.

“I’m fucking talking to you, dickface,” I shouted hoarsely, coughing against the restraint of the cloth. When he didn’t answer, the laughter came again, and with little control over what fell from my mouth, words tumbled out as though from a drunk Ava Jade. But these words I didn’t care to stuff back inside.

“They figured it out, didn’t they?”

I laughed some more.

“They kicked your ass! Look at you? Pathetic.”

He turned on me, his fist closing around my throat, making me bite my tongue, my mouth welling with the coppery tang of blood.

I stared straight into his eyes, daring him to finish what he started, shoving down the knee jerk reaction to panic when my vision began to darken around the edges. I wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

Kill me then, I dared him with my stare alone. I wouldn't give him my soul, become the hollow shell he wanted to fill with his own desires, so he might as well take my life. Get it over with.

“Fucking *bitch*.”

Red veins flared in his eyes, and he squeezed harder, shaking with the effort. My lungs burned. If he squeezed any harder, I was sure my neck would snap.

Just before the lights went out, his hands moved and a gush of cool, sharp air filled my lungs, making me choke and splutter. Reality came back in patchy images spotted with dark circles as I breathed through the razor blades in my throat.

“You think so highly of them...” he said, his voice distant as I ebbed somewhere just outside of full consciousness. “You think they're invincible, *hmm?*”

I tried to spit out the blood in my mouth between coughing fits, but only managed to get it all over the oversized t-shirt still covering my body.

“I'm going to show you just how mortal they are, Angel. And once they're gone, you'll see it was always *me*. I'll make you see.”

“Come on AJ,” Grey's voice soothed me and a morbid grin graced my blood-coated lips. “Snap out of it, baby. I need you to focus. Watch what he's doing on those screens.”

I opened my eyes wide to correct the lingering double-vision while also trying to swallow.

“That's it,” Corvus crooned. “Good girl.”

The phantom touch of rough fingers brushed over the no doubt purpling skin on my neck, making me shudder. “Just picture him flayed and cockless,” Rook whispered in my ear, and I leaned into his touch, but it wasn’t there anymore.

And neither was he.

They were gone.

They were never here.

“...think they ruined my plans...” Drake was saying to himself, and I turned my attention back to him, squinting to try to see what he was doing on the monitors like Grey told me.

Like *I* told me, I corrected myself.

Not real.

Not real. Get it together Ava Jade.

“*Ha!* They might’ve made it more difficult but this changes nothing.”

A phone rang somewhere, the echo of the factory setting ringtone bouncing all around the small room. Drake opened a drawer and pulled out an ancient flip phone, answering it.

“Go.”

A pause.

“*Fuck.*”

He brought the phone away from his ear and squeezed it between his hands, closing his eyes, a muscle flexing hard in his jaw as he contained himself before putting it back to his ear. “Shut the fuck up, Maverick. No. Don’t do anything. You fucking sit there and you wait for my instructions. Head for the warehouse. There’s something I need to take care of, and then I’ll meet you there.”

Drake hung up before Maverick could’ve possibly given him a response, muttering to himself some more. And I thought *I* was crazy.

“What was that you were saying about them not ruining your plans?”

He stiffened but didn't come at me this time.

Honestly? A little disappointing.

I watched Drake open up a program with what looked like about a hundred different tiny video cameras on it. He clicked on several of them and they flew over to the next monitor, opening live camera feeds in small boxes. A door. A cityscape I recognized to be Thorn Valley. Where was this?

What was this?

“In about ten minutes, there'll be one less of them for me to worry about. One less of them in the way of me claiming what rightfully belongs to me. Thorn Valley should be *mine* by right.”

Drake moved away from the monitors, giving me a clear and unobstructed view of the almost motionless footage. The only reason I knew it was live was because there were clouds moving in the sky.

He came around the chair, putting himself behind me. He bent his head to my eye level, pressing his cheek to mine, making my stomach turn as he pointed directly toward the image of the city skyline. “You see that, Angel? We're about to find out if Crows can fly.”

CHAPTER

Eighteen

CORVUS

BARELY THREE SECONDS after I entered the lobby of the Vandermark, my phone rang with an unknown caller.

“Where are you?” I growled down the line, making the early morning hotel guests give me a wider berth as I turned in a slow circle, searching for his rat face among the ridiculously opulent Christmas decor. A rendition of Jingle Bells played over the sound system, a stark contrast to the black aura surrounding me.

“Go to the elevator.”

“Fuck that. Where. Are. You?”

“Excuse me, sir, can I help—”

I spun on my heel, glaring down at the bellhop twiddling his thumbs nervously until he fell silent and stepped away. “Apologies, Mr. James. I didn’t recognize you.”

Eye twitching, I went to the bank of elevators. “Up or down?”

“Up,” Drake replied. “All the way up.”

“*Corvus*—”

The sharp strike of flesh on flesh contact followed by a hiss cut off the sound of her voice.

“*Sparrow*,” I roared into the receiver; my pulse picked up. There was no mistaking her voice, even hoarse and pitched high as it was. This monster had my Sparrow. It wasn’t just a possibility anymore. It was a stark reality.

My phone screen cracked in my ear from my grip on it. “If you touch her—”

“You’ll what? Up, Corvus. All the way to the top.”

I stabbed the button, my chest tight. “Let me talk to her.”

“No.”

I stepped into the elevator, hitting the button for the top floor, a miasmal feeling tapping at my bones. Telling me to turn around.

“Don’t!” Came my Sparrow’s desperate plea in the background of the call, and I crouched to the floor, dizzy, every muscle screaming with useless adrenaline. I couldn’t breathe.

Could do nothing to help her.

“Quiet,” Drake hissed, and I heard her muffled shouts as he shoved something into her mouth.

The line buzzed faintly with dead air for a moment as the elevator carried me up and up, and I schooled my breathing, knowing I would never get the frantic sound of her voice out of my head. *Never*. No matter how hard I tried.

The gravity of it settled in my stomach like acid coated lead. The others didn’t say it, but I knew they were thinking it. It was *me*. I was the reason she took off that night at the Docks.

I sent Drake after her.

Me.

“I’m going to kill you,” I promised him, my voice unrecognizable.

The elevator doors opened at the top floor, outside of a single door to the penthouse suite. Drake didn’t reply.

A muscle under my eye twitched as I rose back to my full height. “I don’t have a key.”

“Oh, you aren’t going in there. Take a left. Go to the stairs, Corvus. All the way up.”

Down the hall, an exit sign pointed to the door. Next to it a roof access sign hung on the wall.

I didn't budge. "What is this? What do you want from me?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

I gritted my teeth.

Drake laughed hollowly down the line. "I want you to die."

I shook my head, pushing the button for the elevator again. I wasn't playing this game. No fucking way. "You can suck my left nut, asshole."

The frenzied strain in his voice was clear in his reply. "Go to the stairs... or I'll kill her."

Bile coated the back of my throat.

He was bluffing.

All this just so he could have her. He wouldn't kill her.

"You won't."

A grunt on the other end.

A pained cough.

I set my jaw.

"Go ahead, Angel," Drake prompted. "Scream for your Crow."

Another grunt.

"Stop."

The tiniest whimper that told me just how hard she was working to keep herself silent despite the pain clearly being inflicted upon her.

"I said *stop*."

He'd made his point. He may not kill her, but he wasn't above hurting her to get what he wanted.

"Left. Take the stairs like a good little vulture."

The door crashed against the wall behind me as I whipped it open and took the stairs one at a time. Each step a march in the black parade that could only lead to one possible ending.

My phone vibrated in my hand, and I chanced moving it a few inches from my ear to see Grey trying to call.

I shut my eyes tightly, jaw clicking as I ignored it and the door to the roof came into view.

It went off again. Twice.

I checked again, reading three text messages on the screen.

Rook: Where the fuck are you?

Grey: We're here. We found Dies' car in the parking garage. What the hell are you doing at the Vandermark?

My stomach twisted knowing they were somewhere in the building. Looking for me. The fucking tracking app. I forgot to disable it. Or maybe subconsciously I'd wanted them to find me. To stop me.

I pushed against the door, but it wouldn't budge. "It's locked."

The door clicked. The lock disengaging.

For one beautiful second I actually thought he was really on the other side. That *she* was too. And I could finish this.

I raised my weapon and kicked the door open, ready to fire, and was left staring into the blinding amber light of a new dawn. Seeing the heart of Thorn Valley a few miles to the west of where I was standing. And nothing else.

Gravel crunched underfoot as I swept the roof but found nothing. No one.

I put the phone back to my ear, not bothering to speak.

"You look terrible."

My brows drew, and I looked more closely at my surroundings, finding the small black eyes of cameras placed in several places around the roof.

“I’m sure you aren’t looking too hot yourself after taking that shot to the shoulder.”

“Just a graze, nothing to worry about, but thanks for your concern.”

“Enough. I’m done talking. Get to the fucking point.”

“You see that ledge in front of you, the one facing the front of the building? Walk to it.”

“And then what?”

“Jump.”

“*Don’t you fucking dare,*” my Sparrow growled, and I could hear the struggle in her voice. The strength shining through the hoarseness and the fear.

“How do I even know she’s really there?” I ground out. “That that isn’t someone else or a fucking recording?”

I knew in my gut it wasn’t, but I was stalling. And I needed to be absolutely certain. I needed to see her. I needed Grey and Rook to find me. To stop me...

“You don’t.”

“Then you won’t get what you want. I won’t jump.”

I hung up, my stomach plummeting.

He won’t kill her.

He won’t kill her.

It was less than a minute before my phone rang again. A different sort of ringing, and when I turned my phone to my face, I saw an incoming request for a video call.

My thumb shook over the answer button before I finally pressed it, my lungs refusing to take in air.

There she was.

My throat burned.

My Sparrow caged. Her wings clipped.

Tied to a massive wooden chair with thick leather straps, the chair bolted to the floor. Lengths of dirtied white cloth tied

around her neck, her wrists, her forearms, her shins. Binding her so completely that I doubted she could move more than half an inch.

Fury and fear danced in her eyes, the dark hollows beneath them making the sharp sea glass color of them cut me to the bone. A red knuckle pattern marred her pale cheek. Blood stained the oversized white t-shirt covering her otherwise naked body. Her legs trembled against their binds.

Her chin quivered around the mound of gauze gagging her and she shut her eyes, trying to hide herself from me. To hide the reality of where she'd been. What she'd been through.

She didn't want me to see.

"There," Drake said and the image shook as he settled his phone somewhere so he could enter the shot. He strode toward her in the small room.

Cement walls. A drain in the floor. I couldn't see the roof.

It looked like a cell.

I took a screenshot. Then another as he ran a finger over her collarbone and bile rose up the back of my throat.

Her eyes shot open at his touch, and heat flooded my veins.

"*Oh*," Drake said, a smile widening on his lips as he crooned in Ava Jade's ear. "He doesn't like that, does he? That's right. He's the jealous one. Can't stand to have anyone else look at or touch what he mistakenly thinks is his."

He snatched her chin, his tongue flicking out from between his lips like a snake to lick her from jaw to earlobe. Her muffled attempts to shout at him only made it ten times worse as her body convulsed in disgust.

"You know, you were right," he said, releasing her chin, his eyes on me while he reached lower, fingers dipping below the neckline of the t-shirt. "I won't kill her. And it seems hurting her isn't motivating enough, but..."

Her jaw clenched when he found her breast and the thin t-shirt material shifted as he squeezed it, hard.

My breaths came hot and ragged. The ground beneath my feet seemed to shake. But I couldn't look away, forcing myself to watch what I allowed to happen.

"But there are other things I can do," Drake continued, flicking his hair back from his face as he withdrew his hand only to snatch the collar of the shirt and tear it clean down the middle, exposing her naked body to the camera.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Her lower abdomen was a map of purple, black, yellow, and blue. Swollen.

I shut my eyes against a wave of vertigo.

"I was going to wait until she begged me for it, but maybe I'll sample her now."

"Don't touch her."

"Unless..." Drake looked at me expectantly.

My eyes tracked to the edge of the roof and back. No.

I needed to end this bastard, and I couldn't do that from six feet underground.

"Then just remember," Drake said, his smug expression souring with impatience. "This is on *you*. Not me."

He bit his lower lip, his dirty hands finding her breasts again, twisting her nipples until her eyes watered.

"Tell him how good it feels, Angel," Drake crooned, removing her gag as he twisted her left nipple again and she bit back a cry.

"*Fuck you,*" she hissed through gritted teeth, her eyes lifting to the phone. To me. "I don't care what he does to me. Hang up. Just hang up the phone. *Corvus.*"

Drake rounded the chair, kneeling in front of her, between her splayed legs, leaning to one side so I would have a better view while he pushed a hand up her thigh.

My knees hit hard gravel.

My Sparrow's gaze lifted to the ceiling, trying not to watch what he was doing between her legs, every tendon and vein in her neck taut and swollen. "Just don't look," she urged me, the fire in her voice almost enough to cover the edge of panic.

"Stop."

He did as I asked but didn't remove his filthy hands from my woman. "Jump now and I promise you I will not touch her again until she asks. And she *will* ask."

"How can I trust that?"

"You can't," Drake said with a smile. "But you can watch me fuck her if you prefer."

I met her eyes in the camera, lifting a trembling finger to the screen as if I could touch her through it.

The texts from my brothers were non-stop now, flashing over the top of the video, frantic.

They couldn't find me, I realized. If they did, Drake would only force them over the edge, too. And they'd go...

My mind was already made up.

Ava Jade gasped as Drake drove two fingers into her pussy, her jaw clenched so tight I could see every edge of the angled bone.

"*Stop*. I'll do it."

"No!"

He withdrew.

My Sparrow continued in an onslaught of threats and curses, all of them aimed at me. I deserved it. I deserved it all.

What better way to prove how sorry I was for everything? That I loved her?

I would rather die than watch him touch her for another second. I would rather spend eternity in the fiery pits of hell than see the strain in her eyes. Hear the fear she worked so hard to hide in her voice.

I should've died twelve years ago. In that bedroom with my fucked up family.

I should've died a hundred times since.

Numb, I lifted the phone to my face, hating that I'd never see hers again, but my brothers would.

"Rook and Grey will find you," I promised her, speaking over her broken, shouting voice.

I looked at Drake now, who pushed himself to his feet, the triumph in his eyes making my chest burn with rage. "I'll see you in hell."

"Looking forward to it."

My Sparrow sobbed, her curses and shouts weaker as she lobbied them through the dam blocking her voice. "I hate you!" she screamed at me. "Don't do this!"

But I was already walking to the edge, stepping up to the plate. Batting my last fucking round.

She'd be fine without me. They would all be.

Rook and Grey had a bond far stronger than I shared with either of them. *And who's fault is that?* My subconscious hissed.

My own.

I didn't let people get close. Wouldn't let them in. Let them see what hid beneath the layers I sealed myself inside.

And now I never would.

"I'm sorry, Sparrow. For everything."

I dropped my phone onto the gravel and turned away from the view of the city I'd come to call home, shutting my eyes. Spreading my wings wide. My heels shuffled beyond the ledge, hanging over empty air.

...and I fell.

CHAPTER *Nineteen*

ROOK

WE RUSHED off the elevator from the parking garage, shoes screeching on the freshly polished marble of the lobby, searching for him.

I cursed as I brought my phone back down from my ear. Voicemail. Again.

“Check the app again,” I snarled at Grey, making for the front desk, shoving a suit out of the way to get to the front of the line.

“It still says he’s here. He should be right fucking *here*.”

“Excuse me, sir, I believe that man there was ahead of you,” the maître-d chirped at my advance, backing away from the counter, his button up suddenly too tight around his fat neck.

“Tall fucker,” I said. “About yay high. Dirty blond hair. Scary looking face. Probably wearing a leather jacket. You seen him?”

His double chin bobbed as he tried and failed to utter a stuttering reply. “I-I-I’m not—”

“He took the elevator,” a bellhop replied from further down behind the long desk. “Maybe five minutes ago.”

“Which floor?”

The little pipsqueak’s lips closed.

I snapped my fingers at him. “Hey! Which fucking floor?”

“I-I don’t know.”

I twisted to find Grey jumping the desk despite the maître-d’s protests, shoving him out of the way of the computer. “Your security system. How do I get in?”

The fat oaf, flushed scarlet, waved frantically as he backed away from Grey. “Someone call security!”

I launched over the counter and took him by his too-tight collar, pulling him in until his face was inches from mine. “Your security footage. Now.”

He let out a shrill squeal, and I saw the exact moment he realized *what* had a hold of him. Not a Saint. Not a Crow. But a fucking psycho who wouldn’t hesitate to rip out his jugular if he didn’t give exactly what was asked.

“I-it’s there,” he pointed weakly toward a room near the back of the large lobby, where a security guard argued with a petite woman I guessed was the manager trying to get him to do his job. Which he was clearly refusing to do. Smart fucker.

“Grey,” I jerked my head to the security closet and released the cowering maître-d. “Call me when you find him.”

I headed for the elevators, taking out my gun to a cacophony of gasps and squeals from the few people still lingering around the edges of the lobby. I pushed the barrel against the button to go up and slung off my jacket, discarding it on the lobby floor, my muscles rippling with unspent energy, burning off the last traces of the blow still clinging to my nerve endings.

I cracked my neck, stepping into the elevator car as Grey rushed across the lobby, shouting at the security guard to bring up the footage from the last ten minutes. All of it.

The doors shut, and I pressed for the first floor, twitching at the cringy Christmas music filling the pine scented box.

“Corvus!” I bellowed down the corridor as soon as the doors opened, stopping to listen. A woman exited her room in a bathrobe but at the sight of me, hurried back in and closed the door, latching it.

“Corvus!” I tried again, jamming the button for the elevator doors to close, punching the button for the second floor.

I fired off another useless text on the way, pulling the emergency stop when the elevator opened again to keep it from being called by anyone else.

“Corvus!”

My neck pricked with dread at the silence that answered. A disquieting sense of anticipation coated my chest in an icy sweat that had nothing to do with coming down.

Where are you, Brother?

I checked almost every floor, that feeling of something coming getting bigger in my chest until I couldn’t take it anymore, clapping the hard side of my gun against my temple to get myself together before pressing the button for the top floor.

I checked the clip. The chamber. Sniffing as I wrapped my fist around the grip and the door opened.

My phone went off and I cursed, too on edge in the quiet.

“He got off at the top floor,” Grey said. “But the angle is shit from the elevator camera. I can’t see which way he went.”

“I got him,” I said before hanging up. There was only one door.

The penthouse suite.

I raised my gun just as the sound of shattering glass exploded through the door, pushing me to charge. My shoulder popped and bright stars filled the edges of my vision as I rammed straight through, leaving the thing hanging from its hinge as I caught myself.

And found...Gregory Hart standing in front of a broken flat screen TV, a half empty bottle of whiskey in his fist as he looked drunkenly down at his handiwork and then over to me.

“What are *you* doing here?” he slurred at me. “Come to take me down too? Go ahead. You’ve already taken everything

else!”

I scanned the room for Corvus, trying to figure out what I missed.

“Where’s my brother?”

His face scrunched, and he just managed to catch himself before he tripped over the broken flat screen on the floor.

“Who?”

I shook my head. He wasn’t here.

Then where...

The dawning light reflecting off the buildings in the distance out the panoramic windows gave me my answer.

When I turned away to rush out the door, the shadow of something blocking the sunrise darted down the wall.

No.

The unmistakable crunch of metal was followed by the blare of a car alarm and a woman screaming far below.

CHAPTER

Twenty

AVA JADE

THE IMAGE of him falling backward from the roof played over and over against my closed eyelids despite the tears trying desperately to wash it away.

He's gone.

He just... fell.

I screamed my pain, thrashing uselessly against all the bindings keeping me caged tight. I screamed until my throat was raw. Until the pit in my stomach turned into a chasm, draining away all the good things until there was nothing but this.

Nothing but bad, bad, *bad*.

There would never be anything good again.

Through the tears, I found him watching me, his head cocked to one side as he relished in the sight of me broken. This time, I couldn't bring myself to care if this was exactly what he wanted.

I didn't care about anything at all.

I wanted to expunge the last three minutes of existence. Go back to hallucinating peacefully in the dark room.

Hallucinating.

That was it. Wasn't it?

It didn't happen.

It didn't happen.

“Oh but it did, Angel,” Drake said, coming to sooth me with a palm against my cheek, and I realized I was chanting the words like a mantra aloud. I tried to bite him, but he pulled away too quickly, leaving my teeth to click against nothing.

“I’ll leave you to process this... loss. I have some *things* to take care of. More Crows to turn to roadkill.”

This made my breath catch, and my skin burned everywhere. I pushed and pulled against the chair, shouting obscenities at him as he backed out the door, letting it fall closed behind him.

As one door closed another door opened, and I jerked my gaze back up, blinking through tear-stained vision as Grey crashed out the door to the roof, rushing over uneven gravel to the edge of the building.

“Grey!” I shouted uselessly, knowing he couldn’t hear me. I could only see him through the live camera feeds Drake left open on the screen. “Don’t look!”

He tripped against the ledge, throwing his upper body over to look down, and froze.

I couldn’t breathe, but the pain in my chest was beyond measure as I watched him take in Corvus far below. Grey staggered back from the edge, his eyes blinking, face white.

His head shook. His palms went to his knees as he bent his head, unsteady, lips moving wordlessly.

“I’m sorry,” I croaked to the screen. “I’m so, so sorry.”

He rose up suddenly and kicked the gravel, arching his back, his mouth open in a scream I couldn’t hear but that still shattered my heart all the same.

Grey’s lower lip trembled as he fell to his knees, eyes shut, face tipped up to the cloudless sky. Hands limp in his lap.

His grief filled me, doubling my own, pushing me to the edge of what I could take. A heart couldn’t handle this kind of pain. Surely, *surely* any minute now it would just stop.

I hoped it would.

Grey's attention jerked to his left, back toward the edge of the roof, and I blinked through my tears as his hard gaze focused on something I couldn't see from the angle of the camera.

He scrambled to the edge, kicking up gravel in his wake. When he stood, it was with Corvus' cell phone in his hand. He tapped the screen furiously, dragging the back of his hand hard across his eyes as he searched for anything that he could use.

His fingers stopped moving and his upper lip curled at something he found before he lifted his head and spun in a slow circle. He stopped when he found what he was looking for, eyes locking with mine through the camera he was now stalking toward like a lion let loose from his cage.

Grey stopped just short of the lens, his rage and pain showing through in the tremble of every muscle in his sculpted face.

I couldn't hear him, but it was easy enough to read his lips when he roared into the camera.

I'm coming for you.

I won't stop until she's safe. I won't stop until you're a puddle of blood at my feet. You hear me, motherfucker?

You fucking hear me!

Grey lifted his head suddenly, his eyes searching all around as though he'd heard something.

My pulse spiked as a fresh wave of fear arced through my body, thudding in my ears.

He took off like a shot, darting for the door leading back into the hotel.

"No, wait, *Grey!*" My voice broke on his name. Whatever it was... wherever he was going... it was probably a trap.

Probably going to get him killed.

Get Rook killed.

Oh god, where was Rook?

This wasn't going to end, was it?

Unless...

Unless I put an end to this madness.

I stopped fighting against the agonizing images filling my skull like the strongest sort of poison, screaming as flashes of Corvus flicked past my closed eyelids. Him boxing me in against the cliff side at the Docks. Wanting him. Hating that I wanted him. The moment I realized he was the Bone Man. The moment I decided he was *mine*.

And the moment I saw the decision to jump flash in his cut glass eyes.

His body falling, arms spread in an attempt to take flight doomed only to fail.

Grey's grief at the loss of his brother. His body arching in pain as he roared his fury to a god who wasn't listening.

The darkness that'd been slowly sinking lower, beneath the crust at the floor of my being, started to break free. Something shifted, cracked, and it leaked out, twisting pain into white fire. Grief into the fuel I needed to keep that fire burning hot. Wild.

The smooth metal object in my hand almost slipped out, but I clenched my fist around it, setting my jaw.

The memory of Drake's fingers on my chest, between my legs, beaten back by the darkness whispering that we had something. If he hadn't come so close. Been so distracted. We wouldn't have been able to dip our two fingers into the outside pocket of his jacket. We wouldn't have been able to lift out the item there and stuff it between our palm and the wooden arm of the chair.

The lighter, well worn, with initials engraved in its reflective surface was the first spark of hope I'd had since I'd woken up in this horror show of a place. And I wasn't about to let it go to waste.

CHAPTER

Twenty-One

GREY

I DRAINED the last of the coffee in the paper cup and tossed it to the floor to join the others discarded there, tapping through different security feeds to find the one I wanted.

There was exactly one gas station near the area of the Docks. The road leading up from the lake forked in two directions. One leading toward Thorn Valley and one leading through Edgewood and further south, to Lennox. The gas station squatted in between the prongs of that fork. Anyone traveling by car *had* to take one of those roads to leave the area.

And since Corvus sent Drake after AJ, it was safe to assume he took her that night. Which was why she never came back. Not because she didn't want anything to do with us anymore. Not because what Corvus said had hurt her so deeply it was enough to keep her from us all.

Because he took her.

The image of her, tied to a wooden chair in what looked like a fucking dungeon on Corvus' phone was seared into my retinas and would probably live there for as long as it took to get her back. Maybe longer. Maybe forever.

I'd hoped his phone would be able to give me something my brother couldn't anymore, but I'd already tried to work with the calls and phone numbers Drake used to call Corvus as a means of tracking him, but like I already figured, it was a complete waste of time. He'd covered his tracks too well, but I had one ace in the hole. Well, Diesel's Ace, actually. Someone

in the bureau owed him a favor. He'd been saving that favor for years. Today, I asked him to use it, and he agreed.

There was no telling if the agent would do it, or if it would help, but it was worth trying. The last cell tower Drake's burner phone pinged off of to make a call would narrow down the area. And if it didn't, then I was fucking *praying* something in this footage would.

I lifted my gaze to Becca lying in her hospital bed, a machine assisting her to breathe with a tube jammed down her throat.

Or if you'd just do me a solid and wake up...

If she did, there might be something she could tell us. All I needed was a single thread to follow. To unravel it all. And I could find her. I could make this right before we lost anyone else.

I wouldn't lose anyone else.

I grimaced as a sharp pain stabbed into my chest and I hunched over the laptop propped on my lap, swallowing past the burn in my throat.

Everything hurt. My head throbbed in time with my pulse, each labored beating a hammer against my skull, but I wouldn't give in to the need to rest.

I'd rest when I was dead.

Or when *he* was.

My hand vibrated over the mousepad as I toggled over to another folder the owner of the gas station sent over at my 'request,' and I clenched my fist to stop it.

I wanted to be *out there*. Tearing down every building in search of her. Like Corvus would be. But I was better at this. *This* was where my talents were best put to use. Sitting here in this fucking chair, on this fucking laptop, batting my head against a proverbial wall.

"Just give me *something*," I growled at the screen, resisting the urge to throw the damned thing across the room.

A soft double rap at the door preceded my uncle's entry into the room. He took one look at me and all the paper cups littering the floor around me and set his jaw. "Nephew," he said, stepping in quietly, shutting the door behind him.

I nodded before going back to the video files filling my screen with small dark checkered images. I clicked on the first one, playing it with fast forward enabled to get through them quicker.

It would help if I knew what the bastard was driving.

Damien St. Vincent lifted the clipboard from the end of Becca's bed, flipping a page.

"No change," I said, saving him the trouble.

"But everything's stable," he argued. "She should've woken up by now."

He shoved the clipboard back into the slip and put his palm to his mouth, inhaling deeply.

He was right. She should've, and it wasn't a good sign that she hadn't. The longer she stayed in this coma, the less likely she was to wake up at all. But I wasn't about to tell him that. We'd suffered enough loss this week.

"How are you holding up?" my uncle asked, and I tensed, the knee-jerk reaction to tear a strip off him and shove him out the door making my eye twitch.

Or maybe that was just the abundance of terrible hospital coffee in my veins.

"How the fuck do you think?"

"It seems my brother wasn't entirely honest about the situation here. He said it was handled."

I laughed darkly. "Diesel doesn't ask for help."

I didn't need to tell him that. He knew it just as well or better than I did. Diesel handled his own shit. There were three chapters of this gang. His, Uncle Damien's and Uncle Ransom's, and they all operated fully independent of one another. None of them had ever asked him for aid, and he

wasn't going to be the first to break that unspoken rule of doing business.

“No. He doesn't. But I wish he would've.”

He paused, moving to perch on the edge of Becca's bed in front of me. His ringed fingers clasped in front of him but that was as far as I would look. I couldn't meet his stare. Not right now. I needed to fucking focus.

I clicked to the next video.

“This business with the Kings. Be honest with me. Are they a threat?”

“You need to talk to Dies.”

“I'm talking to you.”

I clenched my teeth. “We don't know,” I answered honestly, doing what my father wouldn't if only to keep anyone else from a senseless death.

My gut twisted. “We have reason to believe they may come after us.”

“How undermanned are you right now?”

“More than we should be.”

He pushed up from his knees and stood. “That's settled then. You did the right thing, son. This conversation will stay between us. You have my word.”

I tapped the spacebar, pausing a video just as a dark colored jeep came driving up to the fork in the road. I squinted, zooming into the still frame to see a shock of blond hair catching the moonlight. I checked the timestamp. It fit.

But the footage was grainy as fuck.

Whatever ancient system this gas station was using needed upgrading fifteen goddamned years ago.

Damien asked something, but I was beyond hearing him, clicking through the footage frame by frame as the topless jeep took the turn, not toward Thorn Valley, but toward Edgewood and Lennox.

It's him.

Holy fucking shit, it was him.

The frozen frame of his face in side profile was unmistakable. But then where was AJ?

I played the footage back a second time. A third.

On the fourth, as the Jeep bumped over a pothole in the road, I caught a glimpse of exposed skin.

I took a screengrab and moved it over to the software I'd purchased last year for cleaning up footage this shitty. I zoomed. Enhanced. Waited for the pixilation to even out.

And there she was.

Slumped over in his lap, her hair fanned over most of her face. That and the dark dress she wore concealed her almost entirely from the view of the camera.

"AJ..." I breathed, my heart pounding as my mind raced to work through what I could do with this.

This was the thread.

Now all I needed was to follow it and unravel everything. If this footage existed, there would be more. I just needed to follow the road. Every business nowadays had video surveillance for liability purposes. I just needed to go bang on every door from this point south. Follow his path south.

It would take time I didn't have, but it was something. Finally fucking *something*.

"Grey," Damien pressed, and I knew it wasn't the first time he'd tried to get my attention. "What did you find?"

I turned the screen to face him. "It's her."

His brows drew down as he analyzed the image. "Do you have a frame with the plate number?"

I'd already taken a screenshot of it. I brought it up and showed him. Damien nodded and pulled out his cell phone, typing something. "I'll see if my contacts can find the owner."

"It won't be the guy," I said. "He's too smart for that."

“Even the smartest of them make mistakes, son. That guy there,” he pointed to the still-open image of Drake in the driver’s seat. “He saw an opportunity, and he acted. I doubt there was a lot of time for being choosy about transportation.”

I nodded, still thinking it would be a dead end but grateful to my uncle nonetheless.

An alarm blared into the hospital room, jarring us into motion. My uncle and I shared a look, both of us twisting toward the door, where loud, thudding footfalls echoed in the hall.

I drew my gun.

My uncle followed my lead.

A voice on the sound system called for security to room 308.

The door smashed open and Rook’s pale face stuck into the room, breathing hard, his eyes wide black discs. “He’s out of surgery.”

CHAPTER

Twenty-Two

CORVUS

MY HEAD POUNDED like a fucking jackhammer, making my vision waver and double, smeared with a hazy blur, smudged with bright spots. The lights burned. My body ached like it'd been crushed by a fucking steamroller.

Sour bile coated the back of my throat and I coughed, choking on it as I heaved my battered body up, half rolling off the bed to land on my hands and knees. I vomited onto the tile, the sharp twinge of broken bones along my rib cage protesting the squeeze.

Voices shouted all around me.

Cold fingers wrapped around my biceps and I flung them away, getting unsteadily to my feet.

“Where is she?” I roared, my voice a slurred, raw sound I didn't recognize.

A sting in the back of my hand had me tearing an IV needle free from my skin, untethering me. I crashed into a large square object that chirped at my attack. The machine whirred as I used it to get my balance.

“Doctor!” someone shouted.

A siren alarm sounded all around me, making me cringe as it bored into my ear canals, making the pain in my head double.

“Sir,” someone was saying. “Mr. James, I need you to—”

I lashed out in the direction of the speaker, my arm connecting, sending the person to the floor.

“Where is she?”

I pressed my palm flat against my ears, hunching as a wave of intense vertigo made the floor beneath my feet shift. “*Where is she?*”

“*Move,*” a voice I recognized growled.

“Get away from him,” another added, and I blinked, trying to get my eyes to cooperate as I lifted my head, stumbling into the wall, the heat in my chest suffocating under the pressure of whatever was wrong with me. Making my heart race and blood vessels constrict until I my ass connected with the floor and an icy sweat slicked over my chest.

“*Where...*”

“Someone turn off that fucking alarm,” Grey hissed, and I struggled to lift my chin as the rough touch of my brother gripped me by the shoulders.

“*Corv. Corv.* You with us?”

“He can’t be moving right now,” a foreign voice joined theirs. “He needs to be lying down. He needs monitoring. We need to—”

“Shut the fuck up,” Rook seethed at whoever was speaking. “We’ll handle it, just give us some fucking space.”

There came no more argument as the cool tile beneath me slowly brought me back from the edge of darkness, and I was able to focus on their faces.

Rook and Grey came into focus, kneeling on the floor of a mostly-destroyed hospital room. My upper lip twitched as the pain in my head and side grew sharper, whatever they’d given me to dull it wearing off faster than it should’ve been with all the adrenaline pumping in my blood.

“Where is she?”

Rook’s jaw clenched.

I wanted to punch it.

They were supposed to find her. They were supposed to save her.

My mind chugged to catch up to the present moment, the rooftop coming back in broken pieces. They were supposed to find her because...

I remembered his hands on her body. Her struggle in that chair.

“Breathe, Bro,” Rook pushed. “You need to keep your BP level. You’re lucky to still be alive.”

The sharp edge to his tone gave away what he wasn’t saying. He wanted to shove me off that roof all over again for being so stupid. But he wouldn’t have done it any differently, would he?

Now, with my thoughts disjointed and loose in my skull, it all seemed so fucking pointless. Why *had* I jumped?

What good would it have done if I died?

Would it have even stopped him?

I dropped my gaze.

“We need to find her.”

I tried to get to my feet.

“Whoa,” Grey chided, pushing down on my shoulders until I grunted, dogged by his resistance. “No, you don’t.”

“We need to *find her*.”

“You aren’t doing shit,” Rook said in a dead monotone. “Look at yourself, man.”

This time when I looked up, I caught a glimpse of my reflection in the upturned metal tray leaning against the base of the hospital bed. Warped and blurry, I cringed at my own reflection, lifting an unsteady hand to my shaved head, finding a wide bandage at the top rear of my skull.

“You had a subdural hematoma,” Grey was saying, adding something around burr holes and acute fractures that I didn’t understand.

“English, Grey.”

“Your brain was bleeding,” Rook explained. “They needed to drill holes into that thick head to relieve the pressure. And you busted some ribs.”

“Is that all?”

Rook barked a laugh. “If the roof of Dies’ Camaro hadn’t broken the worst of your fall, it would’ve been a lot worse.”

Fuck.

“Don’t worry, we convinced him to kill you *after* you finished healing.”

“Where is he?”

“On his way,” Rook answered. “Now come on, we need to put you back in bed.”

I pulled against their attempt to help lift me. “No. We need to find her.”

...before he...

I closed my eyes against another wave of nausea.

Grey let go of my arm. “I have a lead.”

“What?” Rook and I said at the same time.

“I found footage of Drake taking AJ after the Docks. They went south. I’m going to follow their trail using every surveillance backup I can get my hands on.”

I tucked a knee, curling to stand on my own. “What are we waiting for?”

A curse slipped past my lips as the pain in my ribs intensified and wetness spread over my lower stomach, dripping red on the floor.

“Nurse,” Rook called, his voice back to the dead tone I knew meant nothing good. “Knock his ass out before he bleeds to death.”

I twisted to glare at him.

He glared right back.

The nurse came forward with a syringe and I gave her a withering stare that made her hesitate.

Rook stood, snatching the syringe from her.

“Don’t make me use it.”

“You wouldn’t.”

He flipped the syringe around in his fingers, a sly smirk twisting one corner of his lips.

“Want to find out?”

“We’re going to find her,” Grey interrupted, his arm hooking under mine to grip me around the back, pushing my lame ass up to my feet. “But if we let you die trying to be the hero, she’ll just kill the rest of us when we do.”



I WOKE from a forced sleep sometime later, and if it weren’t for Diesel sitting there beside the hospital bed with a shotgun across his lap and thunder in his eyes, I might’ve tried to escape.

“Don’t even think about it.”

“I wasn’t thinking of shit.”

“Sure, you weren’t.”

He sighed, resting a hand on the barrel of the gun, lifting his eyes to meet mine. A rare glimpse of his true emotion showed through the veil of iron he wore, and I recoiled from it, guilt curling its ugly fist in my chest.

“Where are the guys?”

A muscle in his jaw ticked. “Gone after your girl.”

I shot up in bed and nearly passed out from the sudden movement, falling back onto my elbows. “They found her?”

Diesel shook his head at me. “Not yet. But I got some info from that agent who owed me a favor, and Grey’s been gathering security footage from every gas station, convenience

store, and doorbell cam from the Docks, through Edgewood, all the way to Lennox since last night.

“And?”

“And they’ve traced his path from the Docks to a service road just outside Lennox before they lost him.”

My chest ached with hope. “They’re there now?”

Dies twisted his wrist to check the time. “Should be any time now. They’re going to drive the area where the footage Grey found ended while keeping within the radius of the last cell tower his burner phone pinged off of.”

He must’ve seen the desperation in my eyes because he lifted a hand to settle me. “It’s a wide area, Corvus. At least thirty-square miles.”

The hope cracked but didn’t shatter. This was what we’d been looking for. Rook and Grey—they could work with this. And I had no doubt that they’d comb every square inch of those thirty-square miles within the next twenty-four hours.

They’d find her.

They *had* to find her.

Because I could barely sit up straight.

“It’s your own idiotic fault, you know,” Diesel said. “That you’re stuck in here while they’re out there doing what actually matters.”

“Don’t.”

“Don’t *what*, Son?” Diesel snapped. “Don’t be upset that my son threw himself off the roof of a fucking building? Hmm?”

I pinched my eyes closed, remembering what it had felt like to give in. To fall.

The most terrifying thing about it was that it wasn’t scary at all. It felt like the sweetest sort of release.

It didn’t matter that I hadn’t slept more than a few minutes at a time in weeks and wasn’t thinking straight. It didn’t matter

that I'd almost killed a guy for making a backhanded comment about my girl in a blacked-out rage. That I'd been slowly, steadily losing this controlled version of myself since the first time I woke up to realize she wasn't there.

It didn't matter that now, in the light of day, lying useless in this fucking bed that I could see how completely pointless my death would've been. I *still* couldn't bring myself to fully regret it.

I'd do it again to save her.

And again.

And again.

If my death meant she suffered for even a minute less than she had to. I'd give her the knife and beg her to end me.

Diesel leaned forward over the shotgun in his lap, his expression hard. Lips in a taut line. "You've really got nothing to say?"

"You don't know what he was doing to her, Dad."

His lips parted at something he saw in my eyes.

"He had her tied. Practically naked. He was..."

A knot formed between his brows.

"...touching her. He threatened to..."

I couldn't even say it without the rage threatening to boil over inside. My head spun, the testosterone and adrenaline at war with the pain killers keeping me floating on a cloud where they couldn't quite reach.

"I couldn't watch him do it," I said after a moment of tense silence between us.

Diesel hesitated before responding, pressing the tips of his fingers together to steeple them in front of his mouth, thinking. "We're going to find this guy, and when we do, the things I did to the man who took my Jacqueline from me will pale in comparison to what he will suffer."

The promise of violence shining in his eyes made me shiver with relief.

“But you have to promise me, Son. No matter what this motherfucker does, you will *not* throw your life away. You have far too much to live for.”

I looked away. “I won’t.”

CHAPTER

Twenty-Three

AVA JADE

THINK, bitch.

Think.

I stared at the lighter through watery vision, as though it might whisper to me the secret to my escape. And my revenge.

Without the ability to move, it was useless.

I growled my frustration at it, pushing the darkness to new heights within. Little good it did me now. My skin prickled with it, my chest expanding wide with heavy breath. That nameless power I drew from in critical moments like this one was wasted on me.

What good was it if I *couldn't*. *Fucking. Move.*

I bared my teeth, carefully maneuvering the lighter between my fingers so I wouldn't drop it, flicking the flint wheel until spark and flame erupted from the metal. The heat of it singed my finger hairs, scorching my skin.

Shit.

I flicked the top closed and the flame snuffed out, the slight burn on my finger smarting with a dull pain.

“Yes,” Rook crooned. “That’s it.”

I tipped the top back on the lighter again and struck a new flame, watching it dance above the wick.

My gaze strayed to the wooden arm of the chair that I was still tied to. It was solid. Ancient. Probably fucking half

petrified. But it was *wood*.

The lighter stilled as the shake in my fingers steadied and whatever had been knotting in my chest unfurled. My lips parted, realizing there was one way I could still get out of here.

I couldn't twist my wrist enough to burn off the leather restraint. Or even catch the cloth gauze around the wounds there aflame. I could only touch this flame directly to the wood.

And if it caught, the fire would spread up the arm of the chair, burning everything in its path. The leather restraints. The tied cloth. *Me*.

All I needed was that one arm free and I could untie the rest of me.

...but it was going to hurt.

"Only for a second, AJ," Grey's smooth voice reassured me. "You got this."

"Whatever it takes," Corvus purred in my ear, the vibrations of his rich timbre shaking loose another tear from my eyes. I sniffed, clutching the lighter tighter.

"Burn it all," Rook urged, and when I opened my eyes, he was there.

His hand guided mine, pushing the flame ever closer to the wooden edge of the arm of the chair.

The tattoo over his knuckles...

The rings on his fingers...

He was so real.

So close.

I'd do anything he said if he'd just promise to stay.

I shut my eyes, trying to feel him, leaning into the madness. Willing this beautiful hallucination to carry me through as I pushed the flame to the wood and grit my teeth.

I BIT BACK feral screams as I peeled my burned flesh from the flame-licked wood, the burning leather strap around my wrist stretching like pulled taffy until it finally released its hold on me.

The heat made rational thought the hardest thing I'd ever had to do. So hot. Too hot. Sweat coated my face, my chest. Ran down my arms. Doing absolutely nothing to douse the flames getting steadily larger as they ate the wood from under my arm.

I shook, my eyes rolling back at the ceaseless *burn*. If there was a hell, this was what it would feel like.

Darkness threatened at the edges of my vision, but I breathed through it, unable to look at the pink, red, white, and black menagerie of pain that was my left hand and forearm.

I choked on stomach acid as the fire worked its brutal magic, scorching the sensitive underside of my forearm for another few seconds before the cloth tie burned enough for me to pull through that too. I lifted my wrist to my mouth with a sob, biting down on the still burning gauze wrapped around my wrist to tear it off, screaming through my teeth as the cinders also left little burns on my lips. I spat the gauze out and cursed when it landed on my thighs.

I shuffled enough to let it fall between them, down to the piss pot below.

My arm shook violently as I pulled as far away from the fire as I could, taking my first full breath in what felt like a century, my entire body convulsing as the burning sensation rang through my entire being. Shot bright spots against the backs of my eyelids.

The wood cracked and sizzled.

Bright orange light had me snapping my eyes wide. The fire roared in my ears as the flames spread, licking higher, catching on the back part of the chair.

“Fuck,” I managed through the dam in my throat, wincing as I shakily reached for the strap around my forehead. My

fingers sloppily tried to work the buckle, putting my elbow back into the fire.

I jerked away reflexively, my stomach dropping.

“We don’t give up,” Corvus reminded me, and I held onto his voice, willing it to be louder than the wind of the fire rushing past my ears. Singeing my hair. “We *never* give up.”

I thrust my elbow back into the fire, latching onto the buckle with renewed purpose, my fingers stinging and numb all at once.

The buckle came loose, and I let my head fall forward, choking on the cloth still tied around my neck. I worked on that next, coughing as the smoke wafted into my face, filling my lungs and already aching throat with its scratching claws.

As soon as my head fell free, I curled my body away from the flames, racing against the growing fire to untie the cloth and buckled straps on my right arm.

This wasn’t the clean, sharp, pain of a perfect cut. It wasn’t the press of fingers into flesh, caught up in a moment of bruising passion.

This pain didn’t call to the broken parts of me, giving me release. It fucking *burned*.

It doesn’t hurt, I growled in my mind. *It doesn’t hurt. It doesn’t hurt. It doesn’t hurt.*

Another arm freed and I threw myself forward, using both tingling hands now to untie the rest of my binds, the fire licking at my back. Any second now and the baggy t-shirt was going to catch.

“Come on. *Come on.*”

One leg out and the shirt caught, the breath of the fire blowing hot air up my back.

I shifted my hips away, crying out at the pain in my belly as I threw myself to the floor with one ankle still strapped in, rocking back and forth over the cold cement floor until the fire went out.

The acrid smell of burned hair assaulted my nose and I choked on it as I fumbled with the last strap, kicking the chair when I was finally, fucking blissfully free.

Palm pressed into cement, I willed my body to ignore the burns, the aches, the exhaustion and *get up*.

The chair was almost entirely engulfed in flame now and black smoke stained the ceiling, billowing out toward the close walls, rushing downward.

“Stay low, Sparrow.”

I made for the door, pausing when my hand wrapped around the handle.

The cameras.

“We need to know what he knows. What he’s seen,” my mind spoke with the voice of Grey, and I hunched, covering my nose and mouth in the crook of my elbow as I made for the screens, tapping the spacebar to open them up.

The monitors came to life, reflecting with flickering orange light from the fire burning behind me, warming my back through the remaining tatters of the t-shirt hanging from my frame.

My hands hovered over the keyboard.

“The folder with the video feeds,” Grey reminded me. “Go to it.”

I did, clicking through video feed after video feed, finding a feed of Sanctum and then another. One that looked to be positioned across the street. Another that rested behind the bar in the underground fight club.

There were three in and around the Crow’s nest.

Two in mine and Becca’s shared apartment at Briar Hall. One in the living room. The other in my fucking bedroom. The angle was awkward and I struggled to figure out where it could be coming from.

There seemed to be countless others. One in front of Diesel’s house. Another near the Docks.

These had to be top grade gear. Otherwise there was no way we wouldn't have noticed them. Was there?

I couldn't count the number of times I'd swept the apartment at Briar Hall, that the guys had swept the Nest, after my stalker had pushed his way into our lives.

Unless these were newer?

I tapped a saved video, my eyes burning from the smoke, throat burning, and watched Drake slither up to my bed at Briar Hall, hunching over my sleeping form in the dark.

My stomach turned, watching him reach down between his legs, his jerky movements giving away what he was doing under the cover of darkness. His body shuddered, and I watched, gagging, as he carefully touched his fingers to my lips, rubbing his seed there. Claiming me.

I exited the feeds, committing their locations to memory so we could take care of each and every single one of them when I got away from here, but a folder labeled simply 'Angels' on the desktop caught my attention.

I clicked it, knowing I was running out of time as the smoke thickened and the reflection of the fire on the monitor's surface brightened at my back.

Photos filled the screen, little snapshots of dead girls.

Each one more gruesome than the last.

All of them strangled to death.

The bruising on their necks clear in each overexposed frame.

They were his trophies, I realized, and the floor shifted beneath me when I realized something else. A similar quality between them all. Long, dark hair. Light colored eyes. Full lips. A familiar curve to their facial structure.

They all looked... like me.

I squinted through the burn in my eyes, coughing uncontrollably as I scanned the room quickly for something I could use, finding the long tweezers Drake had used to dig the

bullet out of his arm. I grabbed them and a swath of fresh gauze in my fist and ran to the door, heaving it open to stumble out into the hall. The fresh gust of air drawing the fire to new heights, filling the corridor with smoke.

My watery eyes searched the long hall, finding more than a few doors lining the walls in either direction. Many not unlike the one I just exited. But there were more still that were the other kind. The kind like the one in the first room I wound up in.

Solid steel, with small openable slots near the bottom to push through food.

I paused only long enough to wrap the gauze around my burned arm, but finally allowing myself to look at it, I found I couldn't.

The skin from my wrist up the underside of my forearm was just...gone. Open and raw, a mosaic of colors that didn't belong. Black and pink and red and seeping yellow.

Not a fucking chance I was touching that.

I dry heaved, but managed to choke down the urge to vomit, looking away.

A blinking red light down the hall drew my eye and I stared into the lens of a camera there, knowing somewhere, on the other end of it, Drake was alerted to my escape. That he was probably watching me right now.

How long would it take him to get back from wherever he went? Could he remotely engage some kind of lock? Shit.

It didn't matter, I wasn't going to be here when he got back. No fucking way. I'd let the whole place burn and walk through the ashes to get free if I had to, mortality be damned. I'd become something *else*, something *more* to make sure this bastard got what he deserved in the end.

The sound of glass shattering from the heat in the room I left spurred me into action, and I spared only one glance back at the tongues of flame licking from beneath the door before smiling wide for the camera and taking off down the hall. My

legs protested the sudden movement, but I pushed them to *work*.

We were built for this.

We were made *to run*.

And this time, he wouldn't catch me.

The door at the end of the hall was locked, but beyond it, through a small rectangular window, I could see a set of dirty stairs leading up. Out.

I leaned back and threw the force of my body into the door, but it didn't budge, and the aches in my body intensified to the point of nearly losing consciousness. The tweezers clattered to the floor, and I rushed to pick them back up, my panic-addled mind assessing the lock.

Old school. A key lock with a wide chamber.

I bent the tweezers back over my knee, prying them back and forth until they snapped into two pieces, each with a sharp, pointed end, and bent to my knees.

Picking locks was never my forte. It was Dad's specialty. Today, it was going to have to be mine.

The hallway began to fill with smoke as I worked. Great black clouds of it rolled over the ceiling, spreading fast in my direction. The fire spreading beyond the door to the cell he'd kept me in.

I hoped it consumed everything. Every nook and cranny of this accursed place needed to burn.

The lock clicked in protest at my advances, and I coughed raggedly, my lungs aching at the smoke working its way ever lower.

I closed my eyes, pressing my cheek against the still-cool metal of the door to steady myself, letting every sense other than touch fall away. Willing my trembling hands to still as they worked.

The lock made a loud *clack*, and I held the broken bits of metal tweezer in place, reaching for the handle, praying.

It opened, and if it weren't for the need for clean air battering at my rib cage I'd have paused to give Drake the finger through the camera.

I tripped up the steps, letting the heavy door fall closed behind me, one of the two long, sharp bits of metal still in my hand, wielded like a hunter's knife as I clutched the railing, hauling myself all the way up.

The darkness in the tight space was lined with a slice of light carving the stairs in two. Ahead, slanted wood doors lay nose to nose, and sun pushed through between them.

The sun.

I smiled to myself, burning tears from the smoke still tracking down my cheeks.

Unthinking I tried to lift the wood door with my left arm and screamed at the contact with the wounds there.

“Fuck!”

I pushed through with my right, bare feet leaving hard cement in favor of soft earth. Thick brush stood in my way on the other side, and I needed to claw through to get free, biting my lower lip to keep from screaming as it scratched along my wounds.

I fell to my knees in the dirt, twisting to look back at the hole in the ground I'd just crawled out of. You'd never know it was there unless you were looking for it. The worn wood of the cellar doors blended seamlessly with the rest of the overgrowth and the ruddy color of the forest floor all around.

Spinning in a small, slow circle, I took in my surroundings, finding nothing but trees as far as I could see in any direction. I could hear nothing but the chirp of birdsong. The hum of insects.

I found my footing, wincing as the burns along my arm protested the sudden temperature change. The warmth of the daytime sun clung to the forest, even here in the shade, and I sucked air in through my teeth as its humid heat washed over my chilled skin.

If this door was the only way in, then there had to be some sign of which way would lead me out. A road. A path. A tiny ass foot trail. There had to be something.

There!

But as I found my footing again, I realized the one weaving trail of hard packed earth leading away to the right would be the way Drake would likely use to come back, which he was surely already on his way to doing.

I couldn't go that way.

The sun pierced through the leafy canopy above, but I couldn't use it to place myself. I'd been underground too long. Had no sense of direction. No landmarks to orient myself. I had no fucking clue which way would carry back to them.

If I went the wrong way, I could wander for days and find nothing. There were more than a few places in northern Cali where even the most knowledgeable hikers could get lost. This could be a fucking nature reserve. Like in that true-crime horror movie *Becca* and I watched a few weeks ago. That monster had hidden his victims in a hole in the ground a lot like the one I just crawled out of too.

Maybe Drake was taking notes from Netflix hits.

I stepped in what I thought was a northern direction but hesitated, not wanting to be food for local wildlife, not after finally getting free.

I can wait here, my darkness reasoned. Let him think I'd escaped. Come rushing back. Right into a trap of my own.

I laughed at the absurdity of it, looking at the measly bit of semi-sharp metal in my hand and literally nothing else. I could hardly stand.

Revenge would have to wait.

Besides. Rook and Grey deserved their pound of flesh, too. I wouldn't take that from them.

"This way," I decided, pressing deeper into the trees when I heard the familiar blare of a train's horn, coming from somewhere far off through the denser wood to my left. I

stopped to listen more intently, needing to be sure I hadn't imagined the sound.

The horn sounded a second time. Then a third. Then stopped.

I smiled.

If there was a train, then there were tracks. And tracks always led to civilization. I just had to find them.

My feet stung after miles of heading in what I fucking prayed was the right direction. As much as I wanted to, I couldn't mark my progression through the forest to avoid going in circles. If I did, Drake would be able to follow my path. And I was working *hard* to keep that concealed. Doubling back to take a new route every mile or so. Walking through streams when I could. On top of logs.

I was painfully aware of how slow I was going. Entirely unable to run or even walk at a decent pace. Every step felt like wading through water. Or mud.

I stopped being hungry long before my escape and I knew that wasn't good. I could go at least three weeks without food and stay alive, but not without sacrificing energy and strength. The mushrooms and berries of the forest were tempting, but I wouldn't go down like the dude from *Into the Wild*. Nope.

That wasn't the way to go.

So I settled for sips of stream water, hoping I didn't get sick from it, shivering at the glacial temperature made colder by the rapidly declining temp as day twisted into night.

My eyes fought to close, legs twin pillars of pure *strain*.

Nearly falling, I caught myself on the trunk of a tree, the jarring blow of the rough bark enough to rattle my consciousness back to the present. Away from the jaws of exhaustion.

If only the damned train would go by again, I could orient myself. See if I was going the right way, still. It felt like the right way, but everything looked the same.

A dark shape crouched far ahead, quivering between two thick-trunked redwoods and I froze, half tucked behind the tree I'd run into. My breath fogged in the air, obstructing my view, and I clamped my lips shut.

Gooseflesh rose on my arms.

Oh shit.

I patted the tatters of the t-shirt hanging from my body, searching uselessly for the long bit of metal tweezer no longer in my hand. I scanned the dark forest floor, but no metal glinted in the moonlight.

When I looked up again, the large shape stared back at me with reflective eyes.

I turned to run, my foot catching hard on a tree root that sent me whipping to the ground. My temple connected with hard stone, and I blinked slow, a ringing in my ears as the moon darkened... darkened... until there was nothing.



I CAME to with a pounding in my head, itchy dried blood tight over my forehead and down my cheek. A weak groan left my lips when I pushed myself to sitting, many fingers and toes numb from the chill in the evening air.

Evening? How long had I been out?

Orange light stained the ground. My straining eyes struggled to make sense of my surroundings, blinking through a gnawing sensation of danger biting at the back of my thoughts.

I pushed up from the cold earth, teeth chattering as I found my footing again.

Dried blood flaked away from my skin as I felt the new injury just above my temple, prodding the area to assess the damage. My pinched eyes flew open at the memory of what sent me tripping in the dark.

I whirled around, a shaky laugh falling from my lips at the moss covered boulder squatting fifteen yards away between two tall redwoods. I shook my head, wincing when that shook loose another shooting pain through my temple.

Now which fucking way was it?

“Guys,” I asked, holding my breath as I awaited a reply from the madness in the voices of my guys. “I could use a little help.”

In answer to my call, a train’s horn sounded, loud enough to vibrate in my rib cage.

I darted through the trees, rushing toward the sound despite the protest of my body. Without caring about covering my tracks. I wasn’t going to lose it this time. No fucking way.

“Come on, bitch,” I urged myself, Ignoring the burn in my limbs. The pounding in my head. The desperate, *desperate* need for rest. The darkness consumed it all, spreading fresh adrenaline like a salve over my entire being.

I pushed my legs harder. Faster. Letting the sensation of flight as I soared over the earth, catapulting over fallen logs and darting around trees to provide me with the only fuel I needed to keep going.

Flashing images of my guys stood in the forest all around me, watching as I soared past them. Vanishing as soon as I turned my head.

Not real.

They’re not real.

The echo of the horn faded, leaving me in the wide wild wood alone.

“No!”

I kept on in the same direction, not altering my path. So focused on keeping my body moving, I didn’t notice the steep drop in the terrain or the break in the trees before it was too late. I sailed over the edge and slid on my knees over a bed of sharp gravel, my body flung against a hard iron bar.

Pain exploded in my rib cage and I curled in on myself, feeling the vibrations of the hit deep, deep down.

No. Not the vibrations of the blow to my ribs.

I gripped the iron track I'd landed on, feeling the rattle of the oncoming train a second before the horn blared again. The great metal beast charged from around a bend in the track, coming at me head on.

“Fuck!”

I ducked and rolled out of the way, scrambling backward over the gravel just as the train sped past, making my hair lash against my cheeks.

I tipped my head back, laughing up at the sky. The next curse out of my lips a much softer one. I fucking did it. And what was more. I knew these tracks. The train passed and I stepped into its wake, staring after it until its tail vanished around the next bend.

These tracks carved a path through Lennox. I caught movement from the corner of my eye and I fell back, whirling to see my father, pale and ghastly, crouched between the tracks.

I squeezed my eyes shut. Opened them again.

He was gone.

Jesus Christ.

I was losing it.

I shook my head, trying to get my rational brain working again. If I followed the tracks, they'd lead me to the trailer park on the outside of town where I'd lived with both my parents before Mom took off and Dad bit it.

And if I followed them a little farther, they'd take me past the spot where I'd taken my first life.

The night that set this whole goddamned mess in motion.

But I wasn't going to be taking a trip down memory lane today. Fuck no. The past was finished and I had too much to live for—too much to *do*—in the present.

I stepped off the tracks to the west, climbing the short bank back up into the woods on the other side, picking my way toward the road I knew wasn't more than five more miles away.

CHAPTER

Twenty-four

ROOK

I PEELED the wrapping from a fresh pack of cigarettes, putting one to my lips as Grey turned onto a dark backroad we'd already driven down three times since this afternoon. Just like every other road within the thirty-mile radius Diesel marked on the map for us before we left.

"She has to be here," Grey muttered to himself. We'd already searched every nook and cranny of Lennox, tempting fate by crossing into King territory even though Diesel expressly told us to keep a low profile.

We were relying on the older model two-seater Jag with the super tinted windows—Pinkie's prized possession—to keep us concealed and so far, it'd been working.

There was only one instance where I might've been seen, during a quick in and out at the local pub under the guise of taking a piss.

Kind of disappointing that they hadn't noticed us yet. I hungered for pain. Thirsted for blood. I wanted them to find us, maybe then I wouldn't need the poison burning a hole in my pocket to keep me going. I could inhale their souls instead.

"Unless you want to start knocking down doors, Bro, this is what we've got to work with."

He didn't answer, and I knew he was thinking that knocking down some doors might not be a half bad idea.

"Where was that service road again? We should go back and check out that way. Maybe there's a dirt road we missed?"

A trail?"

"We already looked."

"Well, let's look *again*."

I held the dart between my lips as I opened the map app again on my phone, zooming into our location, scrolling to the left to find the service road again. "Take the next right and then it's a left about a half mile down."

My heart beat out an uneven rhythm in my chest, and I coughed to cover a violent shudder, grinding my teeth as I set my phone down in favor of tapping the armrest. Mouth dryer than if it had been scoured out with a fresh kitchen sponge.

I couldn't wait anymore.

"Pull over, man. I gotta take a piss."

"Again?"

I fixed him with a look, gesturing to the bottle of bourbon by my feet and the water in the cup holder he'd been making me drink alongside it.

He rolled his eyes before pulling the Jag onto the shoulder. I stepped out into the moonlight, stalking a little ways into the tree line, limping, making a show of stretching out my legs while the Jag idled at my back.

A quick glance over my shoulder showed Grey's face illuminated on the light from his phone screen. Checking the map again no doubt. We'd planned to do one more round of driving through this area before starting on foot into the forest around the place where Grey's found footage cut off.

I wasn't looking forward to that, but I had something that would help get me through.

I took the silver ball of foil Dan the Man gave me at the Pub and opened it, careful not to drop any of the powder contained inside.

"Let's go!" Grey shouted out the window, honking, nearly making me drop it.

"Jesus Christ, I'm coming!"

I bent low, pretending to fix my boot lace as I fingered the blade from the sheath at my ankle, lifted a small mountain of white from the foil with the tip and snorted it from the sharp metal.

My eyes rolled back as the chemical burn shot through me, making my muscles ripple with it. The pull of exhaustion fleeing like a distant memory.

“Dude, are you taking a shit right now? Really?”

“Fuck, Grey!”

I heard the window roll up, and I wrapped the foil back over the blow, twisting it tight before sheathing the blade back where it belonged.

Rising to my feet, I luxuriated in the feel of a fresh white wave crashing through my system.

I stopped, squinting into the dark.

A light shone dimly through the trees ahead to the left. Headlights, I realized. Far away. On the road that intersected this one a half a mile up.

The car wasn't driving, though. The headlights were sedentary. Whoever it was, they were pulled over. On a random backroad. In the middle of butt fuck nowhere. At almost eleven at night.

A horn blasted, long and loud.

I raced back to the Jag, ripping the door open to throw myself inside.

“Did you hear—”

“*Drive,*” I roared, dread singing in my veins, vivid images of my Ghost, pale and unmoving on the side of the road strobing in my mind.

I braced myself on the dash, my heart a jackhammer in my chest as Grey peeled away from the shoulder back onto the road.

My skin tightened, flexing, constricting me like a cage.

“What is it?” Grey shouted over the roar of the engine.
“What did you see?”

“Go!” I hissed, urging him to speed up, my breaths coming ragged.

He took the turn at nearly eighty miles an hour and the Jag fishtailed out on the road, facing the minivan pulled over on the shoulder a hundred yards down.

The driver’s side door hung open to the night air, and in the cabin light I could see the woman making wild gestures with her arms, lifting them high. Trying and failing to fend off the person attempting to steal her wheels.

A glint of steel in the moonlight.

A flash of dark hair whipping in the wind.

I was already opening the passenger side door before Grey could slow the Jag.

“*Rook*,” he hissed, his fist twisting in the back of my jacket to stop me as the tires screeched, slowing the Jag and her face turned toward us, sea glass eyes violently unhinged.

Ghost.

I lost my footing, thrown to my damn face on the uneven pavement on the side of the road as I stepped out of the still rolling car.

She threw the woman from the drivers’ seat onto the ground and stepped into the minivan.

“No!”

The Jag purred as Grey floored it, cutting her off, the front of the van crushing against the side of the Jag.

“Ghost!”

She fell from the driver’s side door, coughing, struggling to get back to her feet. To run.

I chased after her, willing her to see me, hearing the Jag door open.

My Ghost limped as she ran, barefoot, wearing nothing but a bit of torn, dirty fabric on her naked body.

“Ghost!”

This time she jerked to a standstill, her shoulders heaving as she hunched her body, curling in on herself, her palms pressing tight to her ears. “No, no, no,” she muttered.

“AJ!”

Grey blew past me, catching up to her.

“Not now,” she was screaming, pounding on her head.

She lashed out as Grey neared, a skinny bit of sharp metal in her fist. She slashed at him violently.

“AJ. AJ, it’s me. *It’s me.*”

I panted, throwing an arm out to stop Grey from advancing on her.

“Ghost,” I said, calmer now despite the buzzing in my veins.

I knew that look.

The sheen in her too-wide eyes. The pupils dilated to extremes.

When I got my hands on the filth that drugged her, I was going to rip him apart.

“This is real,” I told her, shocked at the sting in my eyes. The ache in my gut that demanded I go to her. Touch her. Hold her. To make sure *I* wasn’t the one hallucinating. “We’re here.”

I felt the moment Grey caught on to what was happening, his body stiffening against my still-extended arm.

“We aren’t a hallucination.”

Her fist clenched around the bit of metal held out in our direction, face breaking as her gaze darted between us.

Behind her, the woman from the van ran down the road, shouting for help, but I could barely hear her over the thump of my own heartbeat. Didn’t give a fuck about anything or anyone else in this moment except *her*.

Ghost's grip on the bit of sharp metal faltered. "But..."

Her lower lip trembled, her watery gaze searching the air behind us as though there was something missing.

"If you're real, then..."

Her face broke and a heavy sob racked her body. She dropped her makeshift weapon, and I rushed her, pulling her into my chest, holding her tighter than I'd ever held anything in my miserable life. She shattered against me, her entire body shaking, making my darkness whisper sweet nothings in my ear about all the things we'd do to make sure this *never* happened again.

I pressed my lips to the top of her head, cradling her skull to keep her tight against me, tucked into the crook of my neck. Her scent, tainted by smoke and earth filled me. The feel of her, cold and small, made my primal instinct recoil when Grey tried to move closer, snatching her away from him. Keeping her close.

"I'm sorry," she croaked between sobs. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

The black thing in my chest splintered.

This time when Grey came close, I let him touch her, but I didn't let go. I wasn't sure if I could. Not yet.

He brushed the hair away from her cheeks. "Hey," he crooned in that way only Grey could. "Hey, it's okay. It's okay, you're safe. We've got you. We've got you."

She pulled away from his touch, shaking her head against me. "No," she sniffed. "It's not okay. It's never going to be okay again."

"*Shhh*," I whispered against the top of her head. "It will," I promised her.

"I'm sorry," she said again. "It's all my fault."

Grey took her chin, forcing her to look at him from the cocoon of my embrace. "Hey," he said, sharp. "None of this is your fault, you hear me?"

“It’s ours,” I growled, feeling the guilt of it like water in my lungs, suffocating. “We should’ve never let him get his hands on you. We should’ve found you faster. *We should’ve saved you.*”

“But you *did* save me. You were all there with me. Helping me escape.”

Grey frowned, his brows drawing down in confusion. “AJ, you aren’t making sense. You saved yourself.”

She shook her head again. “Not fast enough. Becca... *and Corvus,*” her voice broke on his name. “I wasn’t fast enough to save them.”

Shit.

I released my hold on her to hold her at arm’s length, needing her to see the truth in my eyes.

Her body shook with another sob, and I thumbed a tear away from her eye. “Corvus is alive, Ghost.”

She stilled, the fevered hope in her eyes spurring a fresh wave of tears.

“So is Becca,” Grey added, and her lips parted in mute shock.

“Corv was hurt bad from the fall,” Grey explained. “He’s in the hospital, but they’re hopeful he’ll make a full recovery. And Becca... she’s...”

“She’s going to be fine,” I lied, unable to tarnish the emotion I could see in her eyes.

She swallowed, her fingernails digging into my forearms where they held her, like she couldn’t let go of me yet, either. “Take me to them?”

“*Shit, AJ,*” Grey rasped, and I realized how he was looking at her. *What* he was looking at.

My pulse quickened to new, impossible heights at the shade of the skin showing through a tear in the shirt she wore.

I clutched a strip of it and ripped it off, revealing her naked body and a sweep of bruises all across her lower abdomen.

She tried to cover the injury with an arm burned from wrist to elbow, a raw mess of deformed skin colored in shades I recognized from my own victims. The kind of burns that usually preceded a long suffering death.

But on her. *On my Ghost*, it wasn't art.

I bent, my vision darkening at the edges as the shadow inside swelled, aching for vengeance, making me shudder.

"We need to get you to a hospital," Grey was saying, but it was like he was speaking underwater, growing more and more distant. "Come on, baby."

"Rook?"

I heard her call, tried to latch on to it, let it drag me to the surface, but there was a stronger call from the deep.

My vision tinted red as I rose up, watching Grey with Ava Jade cradled in his arms as he carried her back to the minivan, opening the side door to help her into the seat.

Her eyes locked with mine, disarming me like a pin put back in a grenade. The *need* there so clear that it rattled me back to myself, shaking liquid from the corners of my eyes.

I had no memory of movement, but suddenly I was there, stopping Grey from closing the door, slipping into the backseat with her, gently lifting her body so that she could lie across my lap. Her hands wrapped around my thigh, holding tight.

Grey shut the door behind us, jumping into the front seat.

I brushed the sweat-dampened hair away from her overheated forehead, hating how pale she looked. How frail he'd made her.

She shivered at my touch. "Promise me..." she said, her voice a low growl in the dark, beckoning to the most savage parts of me.

Grey pushed the Jag off the road with the minivan, grinding gears, alternating between drive and reverse, cursing under his breath until the dark backroad was clear and we were moving again.

“Anything.”

“Promise me he’ll suffer.”

My vision darkened as I threaded my fingers through hers, gripping tight.

“No one will ever suffer more.”



WHAT THE FUCK was taking so long?

I tapped my foot on the tile, flexing my jaw, leaning over my knees with my hands clasped together.

“Shouldn’t she be out by now?” Grey echoed my worry, pacing the hallway outside the door to the x-ray room at the hospital. The one fucking place the docs vetoed us from entering while they took comprehensive scans of her stomach and pelvic region, checking for anything worse than what we could see on the surface of her skin.

It was the last item in an hours-long endeavor to have every inch of her checked. Which she only agreed to *after* seeing Corvus and Becca for herself. Pinkie and a few of the other guys in the hall guarding both rooms regarded her with obvious shock, making way for her to pass with nods of respect. There had been no change in Becca’s status, and Corvus was doing well, resting with a knot in his brows even in sleep.

I was going to wake him, but Ghost said not to, leaning over to kiss his forehead and brush her fingertips over the shaved hair around the new scars on his skull before taking a seat next to him.

The only reason she left to have herself checked out at all was because Grey made Pinkie promise that he’d call us the second Corvus woke up.

They attended to her burns first. My Ghost refused the offer of pain medication before they set to cleaning the burns, removing the dead skin and applying grafts. She bore it with a

sort of numb resignation, the only indication it hurt at all the occasional twitch of her nose.

Grey and I each held a hand as a nurse performed a rape kit on her after she admitted she didn't know whether he'd violated her since she'd been unconscious most of the fucking time. She wouldn't look at us before or after the nurse finished, jotting notes down on a clipboard and promising the doctor would share them with her once the rest of her examinations were complete.

We waited as they inserted an IV needle into her arm to get her fluids she desperately needed. And while they drew blood afterward.

Always at her side.

Until now.

It didn't matter that we had the entire hospital filled with Saints now. Or that the staff were aware of a potential threat with all members of security holding a picture of Drake's face in their phones. Right now, this door separating us from her was the most repulsive object I'd ever seen, and if she didn't exit it in the next three seconds, I was going to break it the fuck down.

Grey's phone rang, and he lifted it to his ear, never ceasing his pacing footsteps in front of the door.

"What?" he answered.

"Who is it?"

"Dies," Grey replied, listening to something our father was saying on the other end. "He just got back."

I nodded.

"I can't right now."

I stood, feeling heavy and cold. My body aching for more of the white powder burning a hole in my pocket.

I didn't realize I'd stuffed my hand in, feeling the spiky edges of the foil until Grey snapped something at Diesel on the

phone and I tore my hand free, swallowing the taste of acid on my tongue.

I lit a cigarette, putting it to my lips as I strode closer to the door, trying to listen to what was happening inside. The ceaseless Christmas music blaring through the halls wasn't fucking helping my nerves, either.

"You can't smoke in here, Rook," Grey said, covering the receiver with his palm. "It's a fucking hospital."

I lifted a brow at him, ashing on the floor. "Watch me."

Thanks to a generous donation from Diesel of the rest of our working capital as well as a blackmail threat to some jackass on the hospital board, we owned this place. At least for the next forty-eight hours.

Nothing would be reported to the useless sacks of shit at Thorn Valley PD, and I doubted a bit of laced tobacco smoke was going to change that.

He rolled his eyes, saying nothing as he went back to his conversation with Dies. "Come up here, then. I'm not leaving —"

"Go," I told Grey, knowing our father would want a full account of everything straight from the horse's mouth. He'd want to know where we found her. *How* we found her. And anything else she told us. Which at this point was almost nothing.

She'd been painfully silent since we found her, but I knew that would change. She just needed a fucking minute to catch her breath. I'd wait. And Diesel would fucking wait, too.

"What?" Grey snapped, his gaze straying to the closed door. "I'm not—"

"I've got her," I told him, taking another drag. "I'll bring her back down to Corv's room as soon as she's done."

His expression tightened, but he nodded, speaking more roughly as he replied to our father. "I'll be down in a sec."

He spared one more longing look at the door before turning on his heel to leave, storming down the hall to the

elevator.

I inhaled deeply through my nose and stubbed out my cigarette beneath my boot, my hand absently going back to the tiny bulge in my pocket before I curled it into a fist and knocked hard on the door.

“Almost done in there?”

No answer. I tried the handle. Locked.

“Just a second,” came a muffled reply from the nurse. I couldn’t hear my Ghost.

I banged again. Harder.

“Open up!”

No answer.

My stomach dropped.

Three... two...

I stepped back, reaching for my gun to blow the entire handle off just as the door swung open and the nurse gasped at the sight of me, shuffling backward into the room.

I pushed past her to find my Ghost wincing as she sat up on the table, her legs dangling over the edge.

She smirked at me knowingly, the first sign of life I’d seen from her since we found her. “Can’t go without me for more than five minutes?”

I narrowed my gaze on her. “Not if I can fucking help it.”

She laughed, flinching as she got to her feet, walking around the wheelchair next to the bed.

“She should really be using that until the doctor goes over these x-rays,” the nurse pressed, indicating the wheelchair.

I lifted a brow at my Ghost.

She stared at me deadpan.

“Nah,” I said, reaching for her. “I got her.”

“Mr. Clayton, you can barely walk yourself. In fact, you should be using a wheelchair, too. Crutches at least.”

Ballsy, this one.

“She’s right,” my Ghost said, looking up at me with worry creasing her brow. “Your leg.”

It was my turn to smirk. “I’ll use the crutches if you sit your ass in that wheelchair.”

Her lips pursed.

“That’s what I thought.”

CHAPTER

Twenty-Five

AVA JADE

THE BROKEN PAIR of us used one another to stay standing as we walked back down the long hall toward the elevators. I choked on a breath, seeing my father standing behind the nurse in the box as the doors closed.

Not fucking real.

I squeezed Rook's arm, feeling how solid he was. *This* was real. I tried to make my tired mind remember the difference.

"Where did Grey go?" I asked.

Rook licked his lips, running his teeth over the piercing at the edge of his mouth. "Gone to tell Diesel what's up. We're headed down there now."

His hand trembled where I held it in the crook of my elbow. I squeezed it, but the tremble didn't quit. "Are you okay?"

A dark laugh passed his lips. "Am *I* okay?"

"That's what I asked."

He went from licking dry lips to biting them, his dark eyes downcast. A knot between his brows. He looked so pale, I realized. The hollows below his eyes were beyond normal Corvus levels and that was saying something.

Tonight, *he* looked like the Ghost. Not me. I wondered how long it'd been since he slept. If it was me, I wouldn't have wanted to sleep until I knew he was safe.

Scratch that, *I wouldn't sleep.*

At all.

I pulled him to a stop, making him turn his attention to me. Rook looked down at me with a question in his eyes. Deep brown overtaken with iris' blacker than I'd ever seen them.

My hand found his chest beneath the leather jacket he wore, and I pressed into him, needing him to feel me. To know that I was here and safe. That he could relax the tension I could sense all over his body. Pulling his shoulders tight. Flexing in his legs and up and down his tatted arms. He was wound tighter than a fucking top.

"I'm here, now," I muttered. "You can breathe."

Humoring me, he took a long, slow breath, but it came out shaky, and when he bent his head to mine, pressing our foreheads together, I felt the cadence of his heart beating against my palm.

A thundering gallop in his chest.

I gasped, pulling him closer, putting my ear to his chest, listening to make sure I wasn't mistaken. The insane speed of his pulse *thump-thumped* against my cheek like a cheetah at full sprint.

When I pulled away, I could see it written all over his face. The guilt and shame. The pain. *The fear.*

"What did you do?"

He looked away, his jaw grinding.

He wasn't going to get off that fucking easy. I snatched his hand and dragged him the few yards down the hall to a door labeled 'Supply Closet,' opening it and shoving him inside. I closed the door behind us.

"Where is it?"

He didn't even bother trying to deny it, instead his gaze tracked to his left pocket, and I dug into it, coming up with a small ball of foil.

Hot tears burned in my eyes as I clenched it in my fist.
"*Why?*"

“I needed it—”

“That’s bullshit.”

He bristled, still unwilling to look me in the eyes.

“Where did you get it?”

My tired mind was already trying to work through the logistics of how to proceed from here. What I needed to do. Slit his dealer’s throat was number one on the list, followed closely by chaining his rogue ass to something immovable until all of it left his system.

He backed away a step in the tight space, leaning against a shelf full of mop heads and jugs of bleach. The whole room stank of it.

“I asked you a fucking question,” I snapped, closing the gap he tried to put between us, needing him to see how serious I was.

I may not have been there, but I knew what he went through from the stories the guys told me and all the things they didn’t say about those dark years but communicated about with their solemn silence and looks.

It was bad. And it had been even worse trying to get him clean.

“That,” he said, nodding at my closed fist and the drugs I held. “From a guy in Lennox. But the first eight ball came from—”

He cut himself off, clenching his teeth.

“From who?”

“Take a guess.”

My lips popped open.

“He left it for me in the shed at the Nest. A gift.”

“And your first thought was *hey, I’ll just put this right up my nose?*” I was screaming now, but I couldn’t help it. My skin was buzzing, *burning* with rage.

I shoved him hard in the chest. “What if it’d been laced? What if he was trying to kill you and you just—”

“I didn’t do it when I fucking found it,” Rook interrupted, hurt in his coked out eyes. “I had it for weeks before I did it. It was only when—”

“When what?”

“Fuck, Ghost, let me finish!”

I stifled the very real urge to punch him in the dick and walk out the door.

He sighed. “When you didn’t come back. That’s when I did it. When I realized that something was wrong and *you needed me*. You needed us.”

His words dulled some of the anger and fear dancing behind my ribcage, but I’d heard excuses from my mom a thousand times before. Addicts would say anything to rationalize their actions. The reasons why they ‘needed’ to use.

I *tried*. I tried not to let those past experiences taint what was happening right here and right now, but the fear-fueled rage inside was already building.

“I couldn’t let myself sleep,” he added when I said nothing. “I needed to stay alert. I needed—”

I shook my head and he stopped talking.

The rage that’d been building didn’t crescendo, instead it shattered, my chest aching. Because it wasn’t rage at all. It was sadness. Fear. Guilt.

“You can’t do this to yourself,” I whispered. “I won’t let you.”

I opened my fist, looking down at the repulsive shining ball in the center of my palm, looking up at him.

Before I could drop it to the floor and stomp on it, Rook plucked it from my palm and did just that, grinding it under the toe of his black boot. “I don’t need it anymore,” he said quietly.

He reached into his jacket and grabbed the pack of cigarettes there, offering them to me along with a small metal flask he pulled from his back pocket.

“I don’t need any of it. Take it. I just...”

His Adam’s apple bobbed.

“I just need you, Ghost. I can’t do this without you.”

I swallowed past the lump in my throat, my eyes burning. “Do what?”

He gestured vaguely all around us. “Any of it. It’s like I’ve been living in the dark, buried six fucking feet underground since you...”

He dropped his arms, defeated. “It’s like I can finally breathe. Finally feel the sun. I couldn’t go back. I *can’t* go back. Not now that I know what this feels like. So take it. Take it all. I’ll be whatever you want me to be.”

I shakily took the pack of cigarettes from him, fingering one out to put it to my lips, looking up at him expectantly, a ball of emotion tight in my chest.

His lips twitched at the corner, and he held back a laugh as he took the lighter from his pocket and leaned in, lighting the tip as I inhaled long and deep.

I blew the smoke over our heads, my whole body sighing at the release from the tobacco.

“I don’t want you to change for me, Rook.” I tried to sound strong even though I felt far from it right now, with his words ringing in my ears, whispering that I was loved deeply. More than I ever thought I deserved. “Don’t brighten your darkness or blunt your edges *for anyone*. You’re perfect the way you are.”

I pointed to him with the ash end of the cigarette, waiting for his eyes to align with mine, for him to see the darkness there, before I spoke. “But if you *ever* touch that shit again, I will fucking destroy you.”

He grinned. “*Mmmm*,” he purred, and a gear shifted between us. “Is that a promise?”

“I’m not fucking around.”

He bit his lip ring, crowding me in against the closed door until I could feel his heat against my chest, his breath against my cheek. I took another drag of the cigarette, outwardly ignoring his antics even though inside, I was aching with a need for him so strong I thought it might tear me apart.

“Swear to me,” I said, back arching of its own accord as his teeth scraped along the sensitive skin below my ear.

“Hmm?”

“If you get an urge that you don’t think you can suppress on your own...”

He gripped my left hip, pressing his semi into my belly as he continued a torturous trek of teeth and tongue down my throat to my collarbone.

My toes curled.

“...that you’ll tell me. So I can help you.”

He pulled back, and I saw the war he hid from everyone raging inside. The one I was willing to bet he waged on himself every day, hiding behind an aloof exterior but always fighting the darkness, and the need to dull it by any means necessary.

The battle he was no longer hiding from *me*.

“I swear.”

I dropped the cigarette, and he crushed the remnants of it on the cement floor, dropping the flask to the ground with a clatter as his strong fingers curled around the back of my neck, pulling my lips to his.

He kissed me like a man who’d just received a pardon from death row. Like it was the first time and the last time he’d ever be able to hold me.

I moaned against his lips as he took me, his tongue finding mine as he inhaled me deep, his fist twisting in my hair. I clutched his jacket like it was the only thing anchoring me to this moment.

My body ached inside and out with my need for him. When he pressed between my legs, I cried out, and he stilled, backing off, his lips leaving mine.

His eyes found mine in the dark before slipping low, to the bruises across my abdomen now hidden by the baggy hospital gown whispering against my pebbled nipples.

I could sense his hesitation, only making me grip him tighter. “No,” I all but snapped. “I need you. *Right now.*”

I’d never needed anything more.

His grip on my hip loosened, and I swear to Christ I almost hit him, but he didn’t let go, just relaxed his grip. His fist in my hair uncurled to trace a gentle path down the side of my neck to my collarbone. I shivered and his teeth flashed in the dim light.

“Then you’ll have me.”

Confused, I cocked my head, a question on my parted lips as he easily untied the string holding my hospital gown to my body and it slipped to the floor.

A muscle in his jaw ticked as his black eyes roved my body, finding evidence of my need for him and more injuries than I knew he could handle seeing.

He bristled, falling back a step, but I caught him before he could go any further, pulling his hand back to my body. I placed it over my heart, needing him to feel it.

“I’m alive,” I said on a breath. “Let me *live.*”

The muscle around his right eye twitched as he closed them, tension clear in his jaw as he lifted his hand to cup my face, brushing his thumb over my jaw.

Rook pressed his lips to mine again, the kiss so slow and deliberate, so gentle that it broke me all over again.

His thumb drew a straight line down my body as he continued to kiss me slow, making my thoughts scatter. My fingers itched to grip him tight, to fist in his black hair, but I held still, letting myself indulge in the moment, knowing this show of restraint and tenderness wouldn’t—*couldn’t*—last.

“I told you...” I said, my breaths hiccupping as his tracing fingers found my inner thigh, turning their trajectory upward. “I don’t want you to change for me. I want *you*.”

...and you’re not gentle.

“This is me, Ghost,” he purred against my throat, the rumble of his voice vibrating down the length of my body. “This is me taking care of you. Let me.”

“But...”

“Shhh. The things I’m going to fucking do to you once you’re healed can wait. Right now, *this*...”

His fingers found my wet pussy, and I gasped, fingers digging into the door at my back.

“...is what you need.”

“*Roo*—”

He swallowed my cry with his mouth, pushing his fingers into me. I fought against the urge to clench my thighs, forcing them wider for him.

“That’s it, Ghost.”

Rook fucked me with his fingers, slow, adding a third until he had me stretched wide and dripping for him.

I buried my face in his chest, clenching my teeth, coming completely undone for him. He sucked a nipple into his mouth and I almost screamed at the dual sensation, my stomach flipping, pussy clenching tight around his fingers.

“More,” I whimpered, holding his head there with a tight fist in his hair.

He ran his teeth over my nipple and I bucked against him.

“*More*.”

He bit down on my breast and I sucked in a breath at the sting, grinding against his hand between my legs.

My nipple popped from his mouth and he switched to the other one while he rolled the one still wet from his tongue

between the callus pads of his fingers. Tugging and pinching until I thought I might come from that touch alone.

I jerked and clenched everywhere he touched me, my skin on fire. Alive with the feel of him. His scent in my lungs. His warmth, like a furnace. His *everything*.

“*Fuck,*” I croaked, my orgasm building as he quickened the pace with his fingers, rubbing my clit viciously with his thumb.

I could feel his smile against my breast as he sucked my nipple into his mouth again, rolling his tongue over it, drawing me to the edge.

I bucked against him as my orgasm tore through me, evicting a loud cry from my lips. The strength of it tore through my body, and I recoiled from it, the sensation almost too much to bear.

But Rook wasn't having it. He kept my legs open with a knee to my thigh and pressed his free palm flat against my chest, shoving me back, holding me still against the door as he continued to fuck me with his fingers. Wringing every ounce of the earth shattering orgasm from my body, ignoring my claws in his forearm or the way my legs shook.

He didn't stop until I was shuttering against the restraint of him, seeing stars, my throat dry from panting. Knees weak.

When I was able to focus on his face again, the stars receding, I saw a glint of wicked triumph in his black stare. I also saw the hard ridge of his cock pressing against his jeans and my core tightened.

I looked up at him hungrily and he slowly slipped his fingers from my pussy, bringing the glistening digits to his mouth. He sucked his pinkie clean, licking his lips when he was finished, making my breaths come heavy against his palm.

When my gaze found his cock again, he growled, pushing me beyond all limits of my control. I knocked his arm away and fumbled with the buckle of his leather belt, unable to wrench it free because of the infuriating shake in my fingers.

“Ghost—”

I dropped to my knees and drew the blade from the sheath at his ankle, feeling the sense of pure *power* with it in my hand. I stood, slicing through the leather with ease.

“Ghost, you’re hurt—”

I changed tactics, flipping the blade through my fingers, bringing it to his throat. “So are you,” I hissed, my thighs squeezing as he closed his eyes, chin tipping up to allow me better access to his carotid artery with a rumble of desire in his chest.

With my other hand, I pushed below the waistband of his jeans, wrapping his thick, silky cock with my fingers, making him jerk upright, standing at attention with a broken laugh on his lips. The piercings down his shaft bumped over my fingers, the feel of them making me soaking wet.

“Tell me you don’t want this,” I challenged him and he brought his chin down, staring into my soul.

“Never.”

I threw the blade and the lightbulb over our heads shattered as I shoved Rook back, out of the scattering glass and into the shelves at his back. Several broke, knocking mop heads and piles of cloth to the floor as I clawed his jeans from his body. He lifted me when I was finished, spinning us until my back was pressed against the shelves in the dark. His breath against my lips.

“Tell me if it hurts,” he whispered, and I didn’t know if it was because he wanted it to or because he didn’t. Both options left me wanting more. He pushed his cock against my opening, rubbing it over my clit before slipping it inside.

I bit the inside of my cheek, tipping my head back as he eased himself inside, each piercing on his Jacob’s ladder gliding in.

He curled a hand around my hip, fingers digging into my lower back. The ache in my belly was nothing compared to the immense pleasure of having him inside of me. Filling me.

“Ghost?” he asked, stopping.

I wrapped my legs around his waist, bracing myself on one of the shelves at my back, urging him closer. “I want every fucking inch,” I demanded. “I want it all.”

He sheathed himself inside me, groaning as he settled in to the hilt, his grip on my waist tightening.

I panted as I adjusted to his size, starting to move against him, needing to feel him move inside me.

Rook eased out, his piercings rubbing me just right, adding an edge to the pleasure that I could say with conviction I would *never* tire of.

His hand came around the back of my neck, holding me there, our eyes locked as he fucked me. No. As he made love to me, showing a restraint so beautiful it made me want to cry. As much as I craved all things distinctly *Rook*. His rough touch. The sharp bite of blades on skin. This hurt just as much, but in a different way.

I could feel myself unraveling as he thrust into me, pausing to roll his hips, grinding into my clit, making me tremble in his grip.

He looked down between us, at the joining of our bodies, his eyes heavy lidded. His grip on me changing, tightening as he struggled to contain his baser instincts.

“Fuck, Ghost, you feel so good.”

He let out a little growl and the sounds of his pleasure started the quickening sensation low in my belly, making me move with him, pushing him faster, harder.

“Oh god, Rook,” I moaned, licking my lips as my back slammed into the shelving behind me again and again.

“Fuck,” Rook hissed, lifting me away from the shelves, wrapping my legs around his hips, holding me up with hands locked under my ass as he guided me up and down on his cock, our bodies rubbing together just fucking right.

I grinded against him, using my thighs to hold myself up as I rode him standing.

“That’s it, Ghost, take it. Take it all.”

His breathy exhalation against my ear send shivers down my spine, igniting the fuse, and I came so hard I had to stuff my face into his shoulder to muffle the sound of my screams. Rook grunted as he poured into me, his hold on my hips turning violent as he thrust his last with my name a whispered promise on his lips.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Six

CORVUS

I CAME AROUND with a weight on my chest and a thudding in my skull. My jaw tightened at the persistent and fucking obnoxious ache that didn't seem to want to quit. My body sank deeply into the thin hospital mattress, left arm numb.

Despite my distaste for the aftereffects, I clicked the switch in my hand with prickling fingers, giving myself another small dose of morphine.

A sigh left my lips and the weight on my chest shifted, sending a stream of fresh blood into the dead arm. Dark hair brushed against my chin and I blinked, forcing my burning eyes to open, my lips parting.

Her body curled against mine on the small bed, a leg tossed over my thigh. Her arm across my chest. Head in the crook of my arm. My chest tightened, a different sort of ache twisting deep there, making my throat burn.

I discarded the morphine switch and wrapped my arms around her, feeling her sleeping body adjust to my movement, nuzzling in deeper. I suppressed a hard sob, not wanting to wake her.

Not wanting to wake *me*, in case this was a dream.

Jesus *fuck*, it better not be a dream.

I bent my head to hers, pressing my lips to the top of her head, breathing her in. Her sharp spring herb and sandalwood scent was almost entirely overpowered by hospital soap and something sour, but it was there. I couldn't dream that up.

This was real.

They found her.

They brought her back like they promised. And they did it entirely without my help.

I peered through blurred vision over my Sparrow's head, catching Grey's eye where he sat in the corner of the room. He nodded slow, but I could see the strain still in his face. In his clenched fists on the armrests of the chair. It wasn't over. They brought her home, but Drake was still out there.

The Kings were still on our doorstep and there was no telling if they'd walk away or use a battering ram to try to knock down our defenses and take everything we had left.

I let out a shaky breath and nodded back.

My Sparrow let out a little whine of discomfort, shifting, pulling her arm in close. The arm covered in a thick coating of bandages and gauze from her wrist up to her elbow. Angry red skin poked out from the top edge of the bandage that'd slipped since it'd been applied and my stomach twisted.

Rook crashed through the door, making Ava Jade spring up like a fucking jack in the box with a gasp on her lips. I sent him a scathing glare as he righted himself, a drink tray filled with iced coffee in one hand and a greasy paper bag in the other.

"Sorry," he grunted, pacing to the window to throw back the curtains to a bright and blazing afternoon.

"What the fuck, Rook?" Grey shielded his eyes, and I averted mine, the pain in my head that'd only just started to numb from the morphine returning in full force.

"*Rook*," I growled, and the blinds closed again.

"What? It's dark as fuck in here."

"Rook, what are you doing?" Grey demanded.

I could hear Rook's indecisive footfalls thudding and squeaking across the linoleum.

“I figured you’d all be sick of the hospital slop by now. I got takeout.”

When I managed to see through the brightness, Rook and Grey’s argument fell to the periphery as my eyes locked with hers. She looked down at me over her shoulder, with shattered ice in her blue-gray eyes, her jaw working.

“Hey, Sparrow.”

She shoved me, hard in the chest, making me cough. My ribs creaked, screaming in protest. “You *idiot*.”

“Uh, AJ,” Grey said uselessly. “He’s got a few cracked ribs.”

She shoved me again, and I sucked in a breath, letting her get it out.

“I—”

Shove.

“Fucking—”

Shove.

“*Know*.”

When I was finished coughing, I swallowed hard, grimacing at the coppery taste in the back of my throat. Sort of wishing I hadn’t tossed away that morphine drip cord. “You... finished?” I wheezed.

“I haven’t even started.”

I braced myself for her next attack, ready and willing to accept any and all forms of punishment, but she pressed her lips to mine instead.

I grunted in surprise against her mouth, but that only made her kiss me harder, her lips almost to the point of bruising before she finally pulled back.

There was fire in her eyes when I opened mine to find her inches from my face. “I hate you for this.”

“You should’ve hated me already, Sparrow.”

Her brows drew down, confused.

“I should never have said those things to you at the Docks. I didn’t know what I was—” I cut myself off, heat rising up my neck. “No, that’s bullshit. I knew exactly what I was doing. Because it’s the same bullshit I’ve always done. It wasn’t fair to lay the blame for Grey... for all of that shit on your shoulders.”

She rocked back to sitting, her face paling. “If I hadn’t taken that shot at Lenny Ace then maybe—”

“I sent Drake after you,” I blurted before I could change my mind, hammering the final nail into my coffin. “I fucking fell for his shit. I didn’t see him for what he really was. After you took off, I asked him to find you and...”

The bed dipped, and I found Grey sitting on the bottom right corner with Rook at his back. “We don’t have to do this now, man.”

“I do,” I corrected him. “She needs to know. She has to know that I’m the one that did this to her.”

Sparrow frowned, a muscle flexing in her jaw. But she wasn’t looking at me anymore. Wouldn’t meet my stare.

Good. It was what I deserved. And more.

She didn’t have to forgive me. Not now. But I would earn her forgiveness. No matter how long it took to do it. For whatever fucked up reason the devil wasn’t ready to claim my soul and I wasn’t about to waste this second chance at life with anyone else but her.

“You can hate me for as long as you want, Sparrow, but I’m not going anywhere. You’re it for me. And I’m going to make you believe it.”

She’d have to kill me to get rid of me.

“Did you lock me in a cell, Corvus?” she asked so quietly I wasn’t sure I heard her right. “Did you drug me? Tie me up? Make me watch a man I love fall to his fucking death?”

“I—”

“You didn’t do this to me. You fucked up. Royally. So did I. If I was able to control myself—”

“We might all be dead right now if you’d let Lenny Ace walk off that pier, AJ. No one knows what could’ve happened. We only know what *did* happen. And what happened was we annihilated the Aces before they could take us out. And all of us are still standing.”

Grey’s gaze found me lying in the bed and guiltily darted in Rook’s direction. He shifted foot to foot, holding most of his weight on the rail of the hospital bed.

“Well, mostly,” he amended.

“We had casualties,” Sparrow continued to argue, and the way she said *we* made me sag with relief even if that *we* didn’t include me. She still counted herself a Saint and that was a fucking win to me.

Rook shook his head. “There are always casualties. That’s the cost of doing business.”

Ava Jade’s cheeks tinted pink, and I could tell there was more she wanted to say but wasn’t sure how. She hadn’t expected us to forgive her almost as much as I thought she’d never forgive me.

She was making it clear as fucking crystal that she was angry, but *anger* I could work with. I couldn’t work with indifference.

“Grey’s right,” she said, leaning over to snag one of the iced coffees from the tray balanced on my shins. “It’s done now. There’s no point in dwelling on it.”

Her hospital gown fluttered open in the back, revealing a slice of peachy ass and the little hollows at the top of her hip bones.

Not even near-constant pain and morphine could dull the start of a raging boner as it began to take shape beneath the thin hospital sheet. I lifted a knee, groaning at the movement to cover it up, nearly spilling the rest of the coffee.

Rook was fast enough to save it, a curse on his lips. “Corv,” he growled. “That’s it. No coffee for you.”

He took the iced americano that was clearly meant for me and removed the lid, tossing it into the trash to drink straight from the plastic cup.

His nose wrinkled. “How can you drink this shit, man?”

“What? Not a fan of my quad shot americano, black, no sugar?”

He thrust it in my direction with a scowl, and I struggled to sit up and take it, thrown onto my back again when my Sparrow shoved me down, climbing from my side to stand on the floor beside the bed and hit the button to lift the top end. The motor whirred as my back rest rose, pressing me up to a sitting position.

“I’m not a fucking invalid.”

She fixed me with a look that brokered no argument.

“...but I’ll be one for you.”

She rolled her eyes, taking the americano from Rook to hand to me, but she pulled it out of my reach before I could take it. “Wait a second. Are you even allowed to have coffee right now?”

The door opened behind her, and she turned, the ice in the coffee rattling as she jumped.

My doctor poked his head into the room, his gaze settling on Ava Jade instead of me.

“Ah, there you are,” he said, entering the room, leaving the door open behind him. “Thought I might find you in—”

“Is he allowed coffee?” she interrupted.

The doc lifted a brow, glancing between my hard ass stare and the cup in Ava Jade’s hand.

“Uh, well, no. Probably not the best idea unless it’s decaf. It’s a natural blood thinner and...”

He trailed off halfway through his explanation since Ava Jade was done listening and had already crossed the room and entered the small private bathroom with the cup. The toilet flushed, and she came back empty handed.

She lifted her brows in challenge at my glare. “Doc’s orders,” she said with a wide grin and settled into the chair in the corner of the room where Grey had been. She fingered the greasy paper bag from the floor and settled it into her lap, digging into the food. Clearly pleased with herself.

“Do you need the room?” Grey asked the doctor, glancing between him and me. “More tests, or?”

“No, I’m not here for Mr. James at all, actually. I was looking for Miss Mason. I’ve gone over all of your test results and was wondering if I might have a word in private?”

Sparrow looked up like a deer caught in the headlights, with her mouth stuffed full of french fries and another fistful at the ready, ketchup packet hovering over the greasy bundle.

“Huh?”

The doctor tapped the clipboard in his hand. “A word?”

She swallowed a massive lump of fries and cleared her throat. “Uh, yeah. Sure.”

She dropped the fries back into the bag and wiped her palms on her hospital gown, swiping the back of her hand over her ketchup stained lips.

She stood.

“No,” Rook said, the dead calm in his tone worse than if he’d shouted. He turned his head on a swivel toward Ava Jade and pointed at the chair behind her. “Sit down.”

Surprising the hell out of me, she did as she was told, her eyes widening at Rook’s sudden need to take charge. “I think we’d all like to hear whatever you have written down on that clipboard, Doc.”

The doc fumbled with the clipboard before uncomfortably loosening the neck of his button up shirt, his gaze furtively darting between Rook and Ava Jade. “Well there’s patient confidentiality to be considered here, Mr. Clayton. I have protocols—”

“Fuck your protocols.”

“AJ?” Grey asked, speaking up.

She didn't look at him when she replied, and I realized she hadn't looked at him at all, or really even spoken to him since I woke up.

“Is this okay with you?” he asked, and I watched his fist curl into my blanket behind his back with a knot in my gut.

Sparrow sighed. “Yeah,” she said, though she didn't sound sure. “It's fine.”

The doc closed the door behind him and flipped a page on the clipboard. “Well, we'll start with the x-rays. You've sustained a stable pelvic fracture, but judging by the fact you're walking, I assume, without much discomfort, we're happy to keep an eye on it for now so long as you don't do any strenuous activity or running for a while.”

By the slight pursing of her lips I knew she'd already broken that rule, and for the first time since I woke up my critical mind kicked into a higher gear, demanding to know every detail of how my brother's saved her.

Finding that out would be first order of business after the doc finished giving us a list of Sparrows injuries... and everything we would do to Drake before we killed him.

“The second and third degree burns you sustained on your left forearm appear to have only damaged minimal nerve endings, but that coupled with the slight loss of muscle will make recovery a bit of a challenge. I'd expect full use of the arm and all numbness in the area, as well as any restricted movement in your hand and fingers from the nerve damage, to be gone within a couple weeks at most.”

My inner beast skulked within, and I could see its siblings in my brothers' eyes, thirsty for blood.

“Scarring?” Grey asked.

The doc's downcast gaze scraped the floor as he nodded. “Yes. Even with the skin grafts we applied, I expect there will be lasting scarring.”

“Is that all?” Sparrow asked, her breathing low and shallow.

“Well, there’s just one more thing, but I’m not sure if it would be better discussed in private.”

Rook let out a low growl and the Doc licked his suddenly very dry lips, flipping another page on his clipboard. It was then that I realized what other sorts of tests they would’ve run.

My Sparrow had been drugged, and that *bastard* had touched her. What if, after I jumped, he hadn’t stopped. What if...

“The results of the rape kit performed by Nurse Fellows were difficult to determine, but she remains confident that you were not violated by the assailant.”

The room seemed to sigh as one, but it didn’t change anything. I was still going to feed the fucker his own dick.

“There’s something else,” Rook pressed, his face hard and pale in the light. Too pale. A sheen of sweat slicked over his brow, and I recognized the tremble in his hand, but I couldn’t focus on any of that right now because Rook was right. There was something else. And it was clear the doc was hesitating to say it.

The doctor abandoned his clipboard, letting it drop down to his side as he fixed our girl with a sympathetic stare. “There is.”

He swallowed.

“Due to the trauma you sustained to your lower abdomen, it appears as though your ability to conceive may be significantly reduced, if not altogether eliminated. I’m so sorry.”

I didn’t hear him offering for her to come to him with any questions, and I didn’t hear him leave. Not really. It was like hearing something in another world, because in this one, my Sparrow stared dead-eyed after the doc, her lips parted as she processed how what Drake had done to her would impact not just the here and now, but the rest of her fucking life.

Rook crossed the room, kneeling in front of her, his hands on her thighs.

“What do you need, Ghost?”

The strain in his voice promised to make Drake his most macabre piece of artwork yet, but at least he said something. At least he could go to her. Speak to her.

I couldn't choke out a sound through the dam in my throat, cutting off my air supply. Making my face hot and full.

Grey watched Rook comfort our girl for another moment before turning his attention back to me with torment clouding his eye. I could see the same helpless torture he suffered reflected back.

There wasn't anything we could do. Nothing except kill the bastard who took this from her.

“He dies,” I promised Grey in a low voice. “*Slow.*”

CHAPTER

Twenty-Seven

AVA JADE

WE LEFT Grey alone at the makeshift command center he'd set up in Becca's hospital room, closing the door behind us. I'd wanted to check on her again, whisper to her that she was stronger than whatever was keeping her down. She was stronger than she ever gave herself credit for.

I needed her to wake up.

I needed *her*.

And selfishly, I wanted to rid myself of the added guilt on my conscience. If she woke up, I could let at least a small part of that crushing weight roll from my shoulders before I bought her a one-way ticket as far away from Thorn Valley as she could possibly get.

But I didn't get to whisper sweet nothings in her ear today. It was clear my and Rook's presence was distracting Grey from his work. His steady key-clacking on the keyboard balanced across his lap stuttered, the tension in his jaw spreading down to his neck and shoulders.

He wouldn't say it, but I knew he wanted us to leave.

Wanted *me* to leave.

I couldn't blame him.

Greyson Winters, known for being the hottest guy at Briar Hall. A heartless playboy with golden hair and a winning smile who could snap his fingers and have any girl naked and dripping for him.

But he wasn't that anymore. I'd disfigured him and even if I thought the black eyepatch he wore made him look somehow better than he did before, he clearly didn't think so.

I hadn't seen him smile once since I got back, and aside from the short embrace he gave me on that backroad outside of Lennox, he hadn't touched me, either.

I'd apologized a thousand times on that road. And a thousand more times between there and the hospital, but it was like he couldn't hear me.

"What is it, Ghost?" Rook asked, his fingers twining with mine as we made our way back toward Corvus' room. "Nervous about the meet?"

I snorted, shaking my head, happy for the excuse as to why I was so clearly sulking. "Which one?"

Grey would be meeting us in Corvus' room in an hour. It was finally time for me to go over, *in detail*, everything Drake did to me as well as anything I could remember about the underground shelter he'd kept me in. They'd waited patiently for almost two whole days, but both them and Diesel were getting restless.

Right after I went over the nauseating details with them, Grey and Rook and I would be going to meet with Diesel at Sanctum where we hoped to figure out some form of attack plan from my intel.

Except... I didn't have much.

Nothing that I thought would help. But a fuck ton that I knew would only hurt my guys to hear. I was already pulling apart all the details in my mind, trying to figure out what might be helpful and therefore worth mentioning and which parts I could omit for their own sanity.

"I know what you're doing," Rook muttered. "But you can't protect us from it. We need to know, Ghost. There might be something we can use that you don't think is important."

I bit the inside of my cheek.

“Besides,” he continued without missing a beat. “I need to continue developing the plans for his... execution. If your intel isn’t good for helping us find the bastard, then at least it’ll help with that.”

“You have plans?”

He lifted his brows, as surprised as I was. “Shocking, right? I don’t do plans, but this piece of shit has me making sketches and a detailed schedule of events for his disassembly.”

My lips twitched into a half smile that he returned, giving my hand a squeeze. “It’s going to be fine.”

“How do you know?”

“Because we’ve all faced wicked trials and twisted games, Ghost. We’ve survived the ugly and made a home in the darkness. We can handle your truth, because you handled ours.”

His words spoke to the deformed parts of me, making me think their sharp edges could be forged into something new and beautiful.

“Okay.”

I spotted the nurse from my testing and cleared my throat, untangling my fingers from Rook’s. “Go ahead,” I said, indicating Corvus’ room down the hall. “I’ll catch up. I wanted to ask the nurse something.”

The shadows over his eyes darkened, but I gave him my best *everything’s fine* smile. “I’ll literally be twenty feet from you. Just go.”

He rubbed his thumb over his lip ring as he considered the nurse in a way that had me fearing for her immediate safety. “You do you, Ghost. I know you don’t need a babysitter.”

His expression was at odds with his easy tone, but he walked away, adjusting his jacket across his shoulders as he did. I noticed his limp was getting better and sighed after him.

I swallowed, turning to lean on the high desk of the nurse’s station. “Excuse me,” I called over it, watching several nurses’

heads turn in my direction. No doubt they'd all been told to give me everything and anything I needed. Just as the hospital security seemed to also be watching my every move, judging every other person in my immediate vicinity for threats.

Rook may have *said* he knew I didn't need a babysitter, but it seemed to me someone thought I did.

...or they're just trying to protect you, my rational mind tried to remind me. Because they love you.

It's not as impossible as you think.

"Nurse Fellows," I amended. "Can I ask you something?"

The other nurses went back to their quiet chatter, going over files and keying information into the computers while Nurse Fellows abandoned the file she was going over and plastered on a polite smile.

"Is everything all right?" she asked, and by the empathy clear on her face, I knew she'd been briefed on all my test results. She knew I wouldn't ever have kids.

I pushed the thought from my mind, hating how my mood instantly soured. I'd been trying hard not to think about it, but there it was. The one thing that might make my guys reconsider wanting me as their one and only.

It didn't matter that procreating was the absolute *furthest* thing from my mind... If I couldn't give them that, then would they want to find it somewhere else?

I swallowed, my grip on the counter tightening. "I'm fine," I blurted. "Well, maybe not fine, but, I..."

I trailed off, gaze lifting to the others within earshot.

"Would you prefer to speak privately?"

She waved a hand to a small exam room down the hall, and I nodded gratefully.

"Just let me grab your file."

I waited while she dug it out of a locked cabinet and led the way to the exam room, shutting us inside.

“Have a seat.”

I shook my head, shying away from the exam table. “No, it’s not—I mean, I’m fine. Physically.”

“Oh.”

I realized I was about to worry a hole through the hem of my shirt and made myself stop, stuffing my hands into my pockets instead.

“Are you having negative thoughts, or—”

“No, it’s not that. It’s...”

Jesus fuck, just spit it out.

“Can sedatives cause hallucinations?”

Her face pinched in confused worry. “Perhaps some very specific types, and only in large doses, though it’s not common.”

I nodded, more to myself than to her, ready to admit to myself what I feared since the first time I heard the whispers in my head. *I’m crazy.*

The hallucinations seemed to be petering off since the guys found me, but maybe that was just because I was under less stress. Maybe all the drugs Drake pumped into my system unlocked something that’d just been waiting to be set free and there was nothing I could do to lock it back up.

I’d always felt like there was something separate to myself deep down. The darkness. A mirror self. A broken part of me that hungered for violence, thrived off bloodshed, lusted for pain.

Hearing voices shouldn’t have been a stretch.

“So then I’m fucking crazy.”

As if on cue, Grey’s voice whispered from beside me, as if he was standing right there. “All the best people are.”

My heart began to pound in my chest. A bubble of manic laughter only to be choked off in my throat. This wasn’t a laughing matter.

I was broken in more ways than one now. Not just physically, but mentally, too.

How could they want me now?

“Ava Jade, are you suffering from hallucinations?”

I blinked, peering from the corner of my eye to see if this hallucination was auditory only or if I was going to be graced with another full blown spectral vision of one of my guys.

The area to my right was empty, and I sighed. I hadn't seen them like that, as a hallucination, since the forest.

That was something at least.

“Hmmm?”

I couldn't remember what she'd just asked me for all the thoughts racing in my head.

“Are the hallucinations visual?”

I moistened my dry lips. “Not always. Mostly, it's just hearing things.”

She nodded, flipping a couple pages in the file. “The doctor should have spoken to you about the possible side-effects.”

“Side-effects?”

“Of the Haldol in your system. Ah, here it is.” She passed me a sheet of paper covered in a graph with numbers and short name code I didn't understand.

“What am I looking at?”

“You see this, here,” she pointed to a particularly high spike on the chart. “That's the level of Haldol that was in your system when you arrived at the hospital. And this here, that's the amount of Klonopin. That's ketamine. Not to mention a veritable cocktail of other narcotics of the legal and illegal variety.”

“What does this mean?”

She took the sheet of paper back, tucking it in the file. From the lack of judgment in her eyes, I knew that despite

Diesel's deal with the guy on the hospital board to keep things hush, at least this nurse and the doctor were made aware of where I'd been. They would have had to have been to know what to look for.

Heat flushed my cheeks, but Nurse Fellows didn't have pity in her pale green eyes, only a deep understanding that made me wonder what drove her to a profession as a nurse.

"It means that if you *weren't* hallucinating, I'd be more concerned."

I sagged against the exam table.

"Doctor Henry really should've gone over this with you, but it must've been missed given the rest of your exams."

"No shit."

She closed the file and came to lean casually on the edge of the exam table next to me. "You should also be aware that you could have some withdrawal symptoms given the amount of drugs that were in your system. From my understanding it was several weeks of usage?"

I nodded, still trying to reconcile everything she was saying.

"So symptoms such as headaches..."

Check.

"Nausea..."

Check.

"And anxiety..."

Check.

"Are all completely normal and to be expected for the next week or so?"

"And the hallucinations?"

"Those should taper off naturally. I'd expect them to be gone entirely in the next few days."

"And if they're not?"

She gave me an understanding smile. “They will be. You’re not crazy, Ava Jade. At least, not the kind of crazy that needs to be locked up in a psych ward.”

I snorted. “You sure about that?”

She pursed her lips, shrugging, her gaze lifting to the small window in the door, and Rook’s black eyes staring back at her through it. She shuddered, rising to unlock the door.

“Yeah, I take it back. You are crazy.”

Nurse Fellows opened the door and dipped her head as she squeaked out an *excuse me* and slipped past Rook into the hall, making her escape.

“Get what you needed?”

I pushed myself back to standing. “Yep.”

“Mind if I ask what that was?”

I winked at him as I exited the exam room, purposefully brushing against him as I passed. “Wouldn’t you like to know,” I teased, in higher spirits than I’d been in days.

So, maybe I was crazy, but at least it was the fun kind.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Eight

AVA JADE

“IT’S BEEN FIVE DAYS.” Corvus was snarling at the doctor when Rook and I entered his hospital room to find him struggling to untie the knotted hospital gown. “I’m done lying in that fucking bed.”

“If you could just allow a few more tests to ensure—”

“No.”

“Mr. James, it’s important for you to keep your blood pressure down. If you could just sit—”

“I said *no*.”

“Corvus *motherfucking* James,” I hissed from the doorway just as he managed to get his fingers on the strings at his back and untie them. His hospital gown dropped to the floor, showing all six feet five inches of glory that was his body. Even with the bruising over most of his left side and the bandages on his bald head, he was every inch the rock-god I knew.

Right down to the flaccid, but still insanely impressive length of his cock brushing against his thigh.

“Sparrow?”

“Sit the fuck down,” I ordered him, but he stood his ground, somehow managing to look intimidating despite the fact that he was just as naked as the day he was born.

His hands curled in like talons at his sides. “I can’t sit there anymore.”

“Too fucking bad.”

Rook cleared his throat, and I didn't have to turn around to see the smirk I knew I'd find on his lips. No one talked to Corvus James like this. No one except me could get away with it.

There was a thrilling sort of power in that. And call it a high from just finding out that I was not, in fact, totally insane, but I was feeling pretty damn good.

“Tell her what you told me,” Corvus implored the doctor, whose expression clearly said he'd already given up on trying to make this stubborn bastard do anything he didn't want to.

He ran his hand through his sandy hair and sighed. “I said that he was progressing well.”

“And?” Corvus urged, a vein in his neck bugging out as he crossed the floor on remarkably steady feet and grabbed a pair of folded jeans from the windowsill. The fact that the curtains were wide open seemed not to concern him as he bent to pull them on, covering himself.

“And that the scans we did this morning gave me cause to believe there won't be any lasting brain damage.”

Corvus padded barefoot to the private bathroom, making us all wait while he took a piss before he returned to the room.

The doc leaned in to whisper in my ear. “To be cautious, I'd like to keep him for another day or two under observation.”

“Then he'll stay.”

“The fuck I will,” Corvus growled, plopping his ass down in the chair in the corner to lace up his boots.

I vibrated with rage. “You're the idiot who threw yourself off a building,” I spat. “The least you can do—”

“*Ava Jade*,” he snapped back, inhaling deeply to check himself with palms rubbing down his face. “Rook told me you refused the wheel chair.”

“That's different.”

“It’s not. I’ve stayed in that bed like my father wanted. Like you *all* wanted for five days. I have a massive fucking headache and my whole body hurts, but the doc says I’ll be fine as long as I take it easy. Isn’t that right?”

The stare he fixed the doc with would’ve reduced a lesser man to a stuttering fool in a puddle of his own piss. The doc lifted his chin. “I did.”

Corvus jerked his chin in Rook’s direction. “You got a problem with this?”

I spun to give Rook a warning stare to which he raised his hands and stepped farther away from me. “Fuck no. I’m not getting in the middle of this shit.”

“What are you doing out of bed,” Grey asked, stepping into the room behind me, forcing me to get out of the way for him to come in.

“*Thank you,*” I said. “That’s what I’m trying to figure out.”

Corvus tipped his head back, letting out an exasperated groan. “Look, Sparrow, I’ll do whatever you want, okay? Anything except get back into that fucking sickbed, you get me?”

My nostrils flared. “Do the tests then.”

“What?”

“Can you schedule all the remaining tests you wanted to do for this afternoon? We have to leave here by six.”

The doc raised his brows. “That’s a bit short notice, I’d have to move a lot of things around and I’m not sure—”

“Move them,” I told him, leaning into that Saint power. “Corvus will submit himself to every test you want to run, and then he’ll come home with us, but you will send a nurse to check on him every morning until you’re certain he’s in the clear.”

Corvus pinched the bridge of his nose, clearly put off by my non-negotiable suggestions, but he’d finally shut his stubborn mouth so that was a win.

The doc's bedside manner mask slipped as he nodded, revealing just how pissed he was at this entire arrangement, and being the one on the hook for Corvus' recovery. I hated to think what Diesel St. Crow would do to him if Corvus didn't completely pull through from his injuries. It wouldn't be pretty.

"Thank you," I called after him earnestly as he left the room.

Corvus stood, going to fetch the shirt that went with the jeans Diesel left for him and pull it on. "Pretty fucking happy with yourself, aren't you?" he asked without looking in my direction at all.

"How does it feel to give up some of that control, Bones?"

At his nickname, he jerked his eyes up, and I watched something inside of him tighten with hope.

"Like I just swallowed a bitter pill."

"Get used to it, you'll be swallowing a lot more of them before we finish this."

I wouldn't make him suffer too much. I played a crucial part in our monumental fuck up, but there was one thing he was right about, and it was that I wouldn't stand for *any man* speaking to me the way he did that night on the Docks. I deserved to be reprimanded but not like that. Not from *him*. Not to mention that the jackass tried to kill himself to stop me being raped, as if one was worth the other.

As if stopping my pain and torment was somehow worth his entire fucking life.

That was what I was mostly angry about, despite how it also broke my heart in the most brutal, beautiful way.

Okay... *and* it was kind of amazing to watch him grovel.

Ava Jade, bringing big bad men to their knees since 2022.

"Speaking of bitter pills," Grey said, crossing the room to sit in the chair Corvus had vacated, opening a laptop. "Are we ready to get started? I've hit a wall with what I could find

based on the information AJ gave us already. I need more to go on.”

He spoke so matter-of-factly, I knew I couldn't be the only one to pick up on it. There was no emotion there. He'd cut himself off from me, and I didn't know how to stitch us back together.

My heart hurt, watching him *not* look at me as he adjusted himself in the chair, likely opening up a notepad on the screen to take any notes that might help him later on.

MY GUYS WATCHED me and with the searchlights of their stares blazing into me, I felt like I had an audience of thousands instead of just three.

“Take your time,” Corvus said, all the stubbornness he'd been holding onto gone now with something more important for him to focus on. I could tell, even more than the others, that he'd been starving for this moment. His analytical mind hungry for information it could store and use to our advantage.

No time like the present to disappoint him.

I imagined myself as an omniscient presence in the room, watching myself speak instead of doing the speaking myself. It was easier to get through it that way, telling it like a scary story rather than as something real and tangible. A thing I'd experienced.

If I let the disgust—the absolute rage—show on my face while I told them how he'd kicked me while I was down and unable to move, touched me while I was tied down, and every other sick thing he'd done to me, it would only hurt them too. Exacerbate their rage.

And right now, I needed them thinking clearly.

We all needed to be thinking clearly if we were going to beat him.

I didn't like how quiet it'd been since I escaped. Quiet wasn't good. It meant Drake was planning something and we

needed to stop whatever the fuck that was before he could follow through.

When I finished, none of them spoke. The room had a dark aura hanging over it, the sort of shadows not even the deep orange glow of the sunset through the curtains could cut.

“You set yourself on fire to escape?” Rook asked, his dark eyes stroking the length of the bandage on my arm with something close to reverence even though his face was a shade of pale green I’d never seen before.

I nodded. “It was the only way.”

Grey squinted at me in disbelief. “And then you ran over twenty miles through the forest to the road?”

“About that. I don’t really know exactly how far it was. That was what it felt like. It could’ve been less. I passed out somewhere in the middle.”

“And then you two just happened to find her on the road?” Corvus asked the guys, and I didn’t miss how they were focusing their inquiries on my escape rather than my capture. It took me a couple days to be ready to recap it. It would take them longer.

Rook nodded. “She was trying to hijack a minivan.”

“How else was I supposed to get back to Thorn Valley? Walk?”

Rook shook his head, his attempt at a smile dying before it could be born. “No one’s judging, Ghost.”

“What do you think he meant about Thorn Valley rightfully belonging to him?” Corvus asked, changing the subject.

“I don’t know, but I fucking knew Mav was just a front man. Guy has no balls.” Rook sniffed, rubbing his nose between his thumb and finger. No doubt it was still bothering him.

At least my intel gave him something else to think about. I didn’t realize I even had so many little useful tidbits until I started going through it all step by stomach-churning step.

Grey cocked his head to the side. “Does this mean we were right about the Kings gunning for us from the start?”

Rook sighed. “Diesel is going to shit a brick.”

A tap on the door interrupted their questions and I didn’t think I’d ever been so happy to see a man in uniform. “Mr. James,” the doc said, coming in without an invitation. “We’re ready for your final tests.”

“You heard the man. Get your ass out of here.”

His lips pressed into a taut line as he stood, coming to stand in front of me where I sat on the side of his hospital bed. He stared at me for a moment, with an emotion I couldn’t name raging behind his eyes. Then he brushed the hair back from my chest, his fingers running along the skin behind my ear as he leaned in and pressed a chaste kiss to my forehead. “I swear to you,” he whispered in my ear. “You will never have to endure anything like that again. Not while I’m still breathing.”

His hand fell away, and he walked past me to the door. “Don’t leave for Sanctum without me.”

“AJ, if I bring up a map of the area around where we found you, do you think you could pinpoint the location of the underground shelter? Or at least the direction?”

Grey turned the laptop screen around on his lap, and I frowned at the crisscrossed lines of the map there. “I-I don’t know.”

“Try?”

I sighed, but got to my feet, crossing the room to kneel in front of him, squinting at the screen. “Well, there’s the tracks I crossed.”

I pointed to them, tracing the line in a northeasterly direction. “I crossed about here, so maybe somewhere in that direction.”

Grey leaned over the screen, watching my finger trace a path further into the national park. He nodded. “Okay, that’s good. I can work with that.”

He turned the laptop back around, and when I didn't move from my spot in front of him, he lifted a brow at me.

“Thanks.”

The word was a dismissal, and I felt it like a slap to the face.

“Come on, Ghost,” Rook called for me, his hand extended in my direction. “I don't know about you, but I need a fucking drink before we head over to Sanctum. Want to go see what these docs keep hidden in their office drawers?”

“Only if we can go torment the emergency patients after.”

“It's a date.”



SOMETHING ABOUT LEAVING the hospital and driving the familiar streets to Sanctum felt surreal. And I realized that for all my stubbornness and shit talking in that fucking hole in the ground, I wasn't sure I'd ever be here again.

I rested my head on Rook's shoulder in the backseat as he smoked a cigarette out the window of the Rover, absently stroking his tatted fingers through my hair. I knew this wasn't going to last. The second we left this car and went into Sanctum, the little bubble that'd been forming around us in the hospital would burst.

If the Kings were out for Saint blood, it meant there was another war on the horizon. And the puppet master of the whole damned thing was still out there. He could be waiting around any corner. Hiding in the shadows. Waiting for the perfect opportunity to strike.

His number one target aside from me? My guys.

Even though my blood buzzed with the need for vengeance and a thirst for the blood of a dragon, I couldn't take it if anything else happened to them. Not because of me.

“You ready for this, Sparrow?” Corvus asked, catching my eye in the rearview from the passenger seat. “We can

postpone.”

“No we can’t.”

He worked his jaw, but nodded in reply, knowing I was right. Diesel had already begun putting precautions in place in case of an attack by the Kings. He’d also set up a meet with the Mexicans to get some more firepower. It was all hands on deck, now. The Saints were outmanned. But they weren’t outwomaned, and maybe that would be the difference that saved us all.

It was me Drake wanted after all. And since we’d already discerned he was the true head of that Kingsnake, I’d just have to cut his off to end it all before it could begin.

Before any more of us could die.

I didn’t know the other Saints very well, but I’d come to respect the hell out of most of them. Oddly enough, it was Axel’s death that hit me the hardest out of those who lost their lives in this bullshit. Even though he liked to watch Becca with fuck me eyes, I knew he was harmless, and would never touch her if she didn’t want that.

He was a good man.

So were some of the others who fell at the Docks.

All because I couldn’t help pulling that trigger.

I let out a shaky breath as the three story building came into view at the end of the downtown strip. Would they want me crucified?

Were my chances of ever truly being accepted into their ranks dashed now forever?

I shook my head, sighing at myself, finding Rook staring down at me curiously, with a dopey smile trying to curl up the edge of his mouth.

“I’ll cut anyone who looks at you sideways, Ghost. Promise.”

“How do you always do that?”

“Do what?”

“Read my mind.”

He shrugged, and I sat up in the middle seat, clutching the leather beneath me.

“Because it’s the same as mine.”

I snorted as we pulled into the parking lot out front. I hadn’t seen Diesel yet, either. He’d been through the hospital a couple times since the guys found me, checking on Corvus, bringing some supplies to the Saints he’d positioned there as sentries. But our paths hadn’t crossed yet, and I didn’t know if that was coincidence or by design.

I wasn’t avoiding him. Not really. Okay, maybe a little.

It was me who got his men killed. Who almost got his first son killed.

I was sure I wasn’t wrong thinking it was more by design than anything else. He probably didn’t want to see me any more than I wanted to see him.

I followed Rook from the Rover, chewing my lips as I tipped my head up, taking in the bar.

The shining tips of sniper barrels glinted in what remained of the sunlight filtering between the buildings, placed evenly in three of the six upstairs windows with another on the roof.

Turning, I found a further two in the building across the street. Diesel wasn’t taking any chances, it seemed, and I hoped they were all at least a decent shot.

Instinctively, I headed for the door around the back of the building that would lead downstairs to the underbelly of Sanctum, but Grey whistled to get my attention, indicating the front door with the inclination of his head.

I fell in line behind and between my guys, who crowded me in as we entered the main bar. A sign in the window said ‘Closed for Renovations’ but the guys had told me Diesel had no choice but to set up all the injured Saints here. Better to keep everyone together, close, in case of an attack. And it seemed, even now that nearly everyone was back on their feet,

he was still using the bar as a makeshift safe house and Saint headquarters.

The warehouse where they usually met was too in the open for comfort given all the recent threats.

Rock classics hummed at a low volume in the background as Saints chatted, sipping beer at the bar and racking up at one of the pool tables in the back.

Heads turned as we entered and some guy in the back lifted his pint, letting out a loud *woop!* Others followed his example until Sanctum echoed with the raucous cheers of everyone in the bar.

I dipped my head, shrinking behind Corvus for him to enjoy his welcome home with a ball in my throat at the warmth in the room.

“What are you doing, AJ?” Grey asked, gently tugging my elbow, guiding me back out into the open, where I realized they weren’t looking at Corvus as they clapped and jeered, sloshing beer over the floor as they raised their cups. They were looking at... me.

“*Welcome back, Ava Jade,*” Pinkie hollered, his throaty bellow reverberating in my chest from where he stood in the middle of the room.

I couldn’t move.

Couldn’t breathe.

“*A-va Jade,*” Vance called from his wheelchair, turning my name into a chant that others soon joined.

“*A-va Jade, A-va Jade, A-va Jade.*”

My gaze caught on a familiar pair of steel blue eyes watching me from the bar, but I’d never seen them like they were now. Crinkled at the edges, pulled taut from how he was smiling around the cigar clenched in his teeth. Diesel stood from the stool, clapping with the others in time with the chant.

My stomach twisted. My throat burned. My hand went absently to my throat, fingers grasping at empty skin where a black stone used to rest.

I whirled on my guys, who'd joined the chant with the others. So much pride in their eyes.

“What is this?”

“This is for you, Ghost,” Rook answered, his black eyes glittering in the light. “Welcome home.”

A hand grasped my shoulder, and when I turned it was to find Diesel standing behind me... wearing the leather jacket I bought for him.

“The boys filled me in on what you went through escaping that bastard,” he said, shouting to be heard over the chant. “Hope you don’t mind, but I shared some of it with the others. You got guts, kid.” He leaned in close. Squeezing my shoulder. “More than most of my crew.”

I didn’t know what to say, but I was hella fucking shocked when he pulled me in for a hug. My chest squeezed, making me clench my teeth to fight back the tears at the complete sense of belonging. The paternal sort of affection I thought I’d never feel again.

Diesel released me, and I quickly sniffed, covertly wiping my sleeve over my eyes as he spun back to face the crew of Saints in the bar. “All right, all right,” he hollered. “Calm the fuck down.”

The chanting slowly petered out, most of them going back to what they were doing, but Pinkie and a few others waded through the crowd towards us to greet me personally.

“Damn, kid,” Pinkie said. “I already knew you were a badass, but...” he trailed off, shaking his head. “I don’t think there’s another girl on this planet better suited for our Crows. Isn’t that right, boys?”

Despite myself, I blushed. Something about everyone here knowing I was intimately with not one, but *all three* of these guys made me just a smidge uncomfortable. But Pinkie wasn’t judging, and the others next to him had only respect in their eyes.

“You know it, Pinkie—”

“Boy, if you call me Pinkie Pie one more time, I swear to god—”

I laughed, the ball in my throat shrinking until I could breathe again.

“Oh, you think that shit’s funny, do you?” Pinkie challenged, fixing me with a mock glare.

I swiped a tear from my eye. “Fucking hilarious,” I corrected him. “I wish I’d thought of that.”

“Come on, you four,” Diesel said, interrupting before a red-faced Pinkie could take a swing at any of us. “Let’s talk, shall we? We’ll bring the others into the room once we’ve reached a decision. Pinkie, with me.”

“Yeah, boss.”

We followed Diesel and Pinkie through Sanctum toward the back room, the one where I’d taken the poison trial. Fuck, it felt like ages ago now.

The door swung closed behind us, muffling the loud conversation and music outside to a dull hum.

“First thing’s first,” Diesel said, passing Corvus something.

Whatever it was clinked familiarly as Corvus unwrapped it, coming to where I hovered at the edge of the long table.

The others sat down as he laid the cloth wrapped bundle on the table in front of me. “You might be needing these.”

He threw back the last bit of cloth to reveal my blades.

No, not just my blades. There were others, too.

The blue-eyed crow-handled blade Corvus gave me seemed to have spawned two more. One with a golden eye, and another with an onyx one. That crow had flames etched on wings. I loved them beyond words.

They made the fact that there were only two of my own blades remaining an easier pill to swallow.

“Here,” Corvus said, seeming to pull a fistful of black straps and holsters from out of nowhere. “There’s two for your belt. Two for your thighs. One for your ankle and a dual chest strap. I wasn’t sure what you’d prefer.”

“You should grovel more often,” I muttered for his ears only as I took the bits of leather and Velcro from him.

He snorted, saying nothing as I set to adjusting the straps, fixing the new holsters over my chest in a cross, where I put two of the three crow-handled blades, adding the other one to my inner thigh and the two others to my ankle and belt.

I sighed happily, the remaining tension I’d been holding on to sloughing off like dead skin.

“Just like that,” Rook said, snapping his fingers. “And my Ghost’s back.”

I smirked at him, sliding into the seat next to Corvus at the table.

“What do we have on this guy?” Diesel asked, not wasting any time, his stony gaze drifting over the four of us seated at the table with him and Pinkie before landing squarely on me. “The guys filled me in on some, but is there anything else?”

“We figured out a general area where the bunker could be in the national park, but we won’t be able to narrow it down until we can get some guys out there to search the area.”

Diesel nodded. “All right, but even if we find the bunker, your girl set it on fire, yeah? Likely there won’t be much evidence left there to use to our advantage.”

“But it’s possible,” I said before Diesel could continue. “Were there any fires in the area that emergency crews responded to?”

I posed the question to Grey, who shook his head. “Already checked. He must’ve gotten it under control before it could get out of hand.”

“*Fuck,*” I cursed under my breath, trying to think of another angle and coming up empty handed.

“All right, let’s forget the bunker for the minute,” Diesel suggested, leaning over the table. “This guy. Drake, Jericho, whatever his fuckin’ name is. If we can figure out who he is, we might be able to trace him. So what do we know? Let’s go over it.”

Corvus sat back in his chair, sighing, clearly frustrated to be going back over intel we already had. “We know he’s the true leader of the Kings.”

“And we know he thinks Thorn Valley should be his by right,” Grey added while Rook dragged a glass ashtray from the middle of the table over to where he sat and lit a cigarette.

“He was prying Becca for information on us and Ava Jade.”

Diesel nodded, trying to find connections from all the puzzle pieces.

Rook ashed his cigarette. “He was working Becca before Ghost even got here, though.”

“Wait. In those texts he said he wasn’t sure if it was you when he first saw you on the streets of Thorn Valley. The texts started, what, like a few days after you arrived?”

“Yeah. Something like that.”

“But you didn’t go anywhere near town during that first week, did you? You ran the trail off campus, through the woods.”

I shrugged. “Yeah, but I did have my aunt’s driver drop me downtown the night I arrived. Well, I practically jumped out of the moving car. I couldn’t stand another second with that bitch.”

The guys shared a look, and something uncomfortable slithered in my belly. “What?” I asked when none of them said a word.

“We saw you that night, too,” Corvus answered for them all. “Dragging your suitcase all the way up to Briar Hall.”

My lips parted, confused. “I’m not following.”

“That was the night we found Randy dead in the alley,” Rook explained. “With an A carved into his chest. We had to drag Randy’s body out of sight when Humphrey’s fancy car squealed to a stop right outside the mouth of the alleyway.”

Diesel held a hand up, a red tint to his cheeks. “Hold on a fucking second,” he hissed. “You’re saying this fucker was in Thorn Valley the night Randy was killed? In practically the same goddamned place?”

“Holy shit...” Grey breathed. “You don’t think he...?”

Diesel was already nodding. “I do.”

He stood suddenly, his chair scraping across the floor, his palms slapping against the table’s edge before going to his head, pushing his hair away from his face. “Jesus Christ. Lenny wasn’t lying when he said his men had nothing to do with Randy.”

He hit the table again, and it rattled all the way down to where I sat. “Fuck!”

I was still putting it all together in my head. The guys being there from the very first moment I arrived in this place. Randy. The war with the Aces. The alliance with the Kings.

Oh my god.

“It was him this whole time.”

“What?” Diesel asked, and when I looked up, all eyes were on me.

“It’s obvious, isn’t it?”

Or maybe it wasn’t. If it weren’t for the sick churn in my belly, I might’ve felt proud to have caught on before *the* Diesel St. Crow.

“He’s been working you this whole time,” I began, my heart thudding loudly in my chest. “He said it himself, he thinks Thorn Valley should be *his*. If he killed Randy, it was to push you into starting a war with the Aces. Which is exactly what you did. He wanted to hit you hard. Weaken your defenses. And *he did*. They weakened enough that you considered an alliance with the Kings.”

“Which was also exactly what he wanted,” Corvus picked up where I left off, his voice dripping with malice. “To get close to you, so that when the time came he could finish off the rest of us.”

“He’d have no competition for hundreds of miles in any direction,” Rook said, a dark laugh on his lips like he half respected the guy. I had to admit, it was a damn good plan. “He had you do all the heavy lifting. Taking out the Aces. The Dead Men. Leaving only us, weakened. For the first time since you and the other Saints created this empire, we’re weak enough that someone *could* have the upper hand.”

Diesel staggered back a step, his Adam’s apple bobbing. He slunk back into his seat, still pushed back from the table, and bent, rubbing his palms over his face. “Who *is* this guy?”

The question was meant rhetorically, but I realized I might have one last clue that could help.

“He had this lighter,” I said, and Diesel lifted his chin. “The one I used to set the chair on fire. It had initials in it.”

Rook flipped his own zippo lighter between his fingers, his brows drawn down. “I remember,” he said before I could finish. “He let me use it once. The initials were—”

“L.R.B.”

Recognition flickered in Diesel’s eyes. His body stilled, going practically rigid.

“Boss?” Pinkie pressed, worry in the creases on his forehead. “You don’t think it’s actually...”

Diesel stood, holding himself up with palms pressed flat against the table. He let out a shuddering sigh. “I think that’s *exactly* who this is. *God dammit*, why didn’t I see this sooner?”

“Who?” Corvus demanded, his hand curling into a fist on top of the table. “Who is it?”

When Diesel lifted his gaze to us, I felt the guilt in his cold eyes like it was my own. Saw the rage behind it. “My son.”

CHAPTER

Twenty-Nine

CORVUS

“*YOUR SON?*” I repeated, the throb in my skull pulsing double time now, seeing my adopted father through a red tint, my vision going hazy around the edges. “What the fuck do you mean, *your son?*”

“Carson.”

“Carson? That’s it. Care to fucking elaborate?”

The dark circles around my father’s eyes deepened, making him appear as though all the energy had been sucked clean from his soul from uttering the name alone.

“That’s not right,” my Sparrow argued, shaking her head, staring at Diesel with narrowed eyes. “The initials were L.R.B. No ‘C.’ Besides, you would’ve recognized your own son.”

I caught the way Diesel’s jaw flexed, and no one failed to notice his lack of reply.

“Dies?” Rook asked, his tone even. The vocal equivalent of going dead-eyed. Hiding his feelings from the rest of us.

Diesel inhaled deeply, holding a long meaningful look with Pinkie. The big guy was a shade of green.

“That’s because they aren’t Carson’s initials,” Diesel finally replied, going for the decanter of good scotch by the far wall to pour himself a few fingers of amber liquid. He drained them and poured two more, bringing the bottle to the table with him. It thudded against the table as he folded himself back into the chair. “They’re his mothers.”

Rook curled his fingers, indicating the scotch and Diesel slid it all the way down the table, into Rook's waiting palm.

"Pinkie, you mind? Leg's bugging me."

Pinkie rose to get Rook a class. "Sure it is. Lazy ass."

"Diesel, I need you to start fucking talking here." The words rushed from my mouth, chased out by the slow-building feelings of absolute betrayal in my gut.

Diesel had a son? One that shared his blood?

How did I not know this?

Why hadn't he told anyone?

"L.R.B," he said on a breath. "Lilliana Rose Bates. The lighter belonged to his mother. The first woman I ever loved. His name is Carson Gregory Bates. Born March 31st, '96."

Rook filled himself a glass of scotch before sliding the decanter back down the table to Diesel, who'd already drained his second glass. I stopped it before it could reach him. "Keep talking."

Diesel licked his lips, abandoning the glass to steeple his fingers in front of his lips. "I haven't seen him since he was twelve. He didn't look anything like he does now."

I could tell there was more he was holding back, trying to decide what to say first.

"I wasn't around," he admitted. "When I got Lilliana pregnant, I was... I was with Jacqueline."

"Are you serious?" Grey asked, disgust tainting his tone, offended on behalf of a woman he never had the chance to meet. But meet her or not, we knew her from the countless stories Diesel and the guys told about her. Their memories bringing her to life in our minds just as though we *had* known her ourselves.

Diesel was her everything. And we thought she was his, too.

"Not my finest fucking moment," he sighed. "Lily had this way about her. She could get you to do pretty much anything."

Manipulative. You know the type. Anyway, Jacqueline and I had just gotten hitched and we were trying to have a kid. Well, Lily got it in her head to try to trap me before that could happen and split Jacqueline and I for good. She seduced me into her bed—”

“No. You don’t get to put it like that,” Sparrow corrected him.

I nodded, glaring at our father. “You fucked another woman. That was *your choice*. Own it.”

His upper lip twitched but he gave a tight nod. “Yes. It was. She’d poked holes in the rubber and within weeks she was at my doorstep, waving a positive test in my face. She thought I’d leave Jacqueline on the spot. Do the right thing.”

“You obviously didn’t,” Ava Jade put in, tapping the table, clearly more than a little put off by Diesel’s past. But I had a feeling the worst was yet to come.

“Yes,” he answered plainly. “I did do what was right. I stayed with the woman I vowed to spend the rest of my life with, and I offered Lilliana more than she deserved. I bought her a little place in Lennox. I sent monthly payments. More than enough to cover anything she needed.”

Rook sipped his scotch before running the pad of his middle finger over the rim, not looking at Diesel. “And the kid?”

“Jacqueline and I just found out the week before that she couldn’t have kids. I couldn’t...” He choked on his next words. “I couldn’t do that to her. Make her see the one thing she wanted most in this world and could never have. I never admitted the affair to her for fear she’d figure it out herself. The house and the money, they were contingent on Lilliana never telling a soul who fathered her son.”

“Where is she now?” I heard myself asking.

“Dead,” Pinkie answered before my father could. “For years now.”

Diesel rubbed a palm over his beard. “Murdered, by her son...when he was twelve.”

“He fucking strangled her to death,” Pinkie added, his face twisting. “In her own bed.”

My Sparrow let out a little gasp, and I remembered her telling us about all the photos she’d found on Drake’s, no, *Carson’s*, computer. Of women who’d been strangled. How they’d all sort of looked like her. I had to wonder if my Sparrow looked a little like Lilliana Rose Bates. His first kill. And whether that was why he’d been drawn to her.

Sour bile coated my throat, making my mouth fill with warm saliva. I choked it down. “That’s when you saw him last,” I said, not really a question, but I was damn sure expecting an explanation. “That’s what you said.”

“I went to see him in juvie. Offered to pay for him to get help. He didn’t even know who I was.”

“She hadn’t told him?”

“No.”

“I’m guessing he didn’t take your offer?” Ava Jade asked and I could see the gears turning behind her sharp eyes, putting it all together.

Diesel’s rings caught the light as he spun them round and round on his fingers. “No. But he found out soon enough who I was. He wanted in. To be a Saint. As if I could have someone like him anywhere near my Jacqueline. He started writing me letters after that. Pinkie?”

“Yeah, boss,” Pinkie said, leaving the room.

“You kept them?” Grey asked, and it was hard to miss the hurt in his voice. I knew, for him more than the rest of us, our makeshift family was everything. Finding out Diesel had another son, a biological son, wouldn’t sit right with him. Neither would the fact that Diesel left that son, just like his mother had left him.

“I did. They’re in the office. The letters got more and more insistent, borderline psychotic. Before they stopped altogether about five years ago. The last one I got from him was the day he was released from Folsom State after a long lull between letters. In it he said he understood why I couldn’t have him in

my crew. That he would work on himself. Become *better*. Worthy of the Saint title. And then he would come see me. I never heard from him again.”

Pinkie returned with the letters, dropping them on the table in front of me. Each yellowed envelope was stamped with the Folsom State Prison seal. Printed with its address, Carson’s name almost illegibly printed in the blank space provided.

I lifted the one on the top before letting it fall back to the table. “I don’t give a fuck about some letters he sent you years ago. You should’ve told us.”

“I didn’t think he would—”

“He was a threat,” Rook interjected, slamming his now empty glass onto the table. “Not just to you. But to us. And now to Ava Jade, too.”

“All because you abandoned him,” Grey growled.

“He was a fucked up kid who wouldn’t accept my offer to get him help, what was I supposed to do? He *killed* his mother.”

“Did you ever ask him why?” Ava Jade asked our father with murder in her eyes. The still-beating thing in my chest ached at the pain in her eyes, realizing what made her ask the question. The things her own mother did to her. Except that was before my Sparrow found her wings. While she was still earthbound, trapped in the skin of her weaker self.

Diesel narrowed his steely eyes on Ava Jade. “The kid killed his mother,” he tried to remind her.

“And now that same kid has also had a hand in killing off half your fucking men,” she spat back. “He murdered at least twelve other women. For fuck sake’s, he had Corvus *kill himself*. He almost...”

She trailed off, her face turning a shade of pale green.

“And you think I could’ve stopped any of that?”

“Maybe,” Grey spoke up. “If you were there.”

Rook tapped his glass on the table, and I shoved the scotch back at him. He poured. “Even if you couldn’t have changed how he turned out, at least you might’ve been there.” He took a sip before reaching over the table to offer the rest to Ava Jade. She shook her head, and he drained it himself instead.

“For what?” Diesel demanded.

“To put a piece of fucking lead between his eyes before he could hurt anyone else.”

Diesel jerked back at Rook’s words, and I knew my father well enough to see that he was coming to realize we were right. But they were all forgetting one thing.

“It doesn’t matter now. What’s done is done. Diesel might’ve had a hand in creating this monster, but now it’s all of us that have to deal with him. Grey?”

My brother was already nodding, lifting his phone from his pocket. With this new intel, there had to be more we could find on this guy. Hopefully, it would lead us straight to him. “I’m on it. We need to get back to the Nest. I need my fucking computer.”

We all stood, ready to leave. To get to work.

“I’m going to make this right, boys,” Diesel promised, making us all hesitate before leaving. His guilty eyes found mine, holding fast. “I’m sorry.”

I knew he meant it, but an apology wasn’t going to fix this.

Blood and lead would.

CHAPTER

Thirty

GREY

ONE BY ONE, our surveillance cameras went online. Two for every one of Drake's we removed based on Ava Jade's direction. It was a condition of being able to return to the nest. Not only would we bring half our remaining force with us, but also surround the place in tiny glass eyes where we couldn't watch.

That and trigger alert systems all along the road leading up to the Crow's Nest. Along with a handful speckled through the forest just in case the surveillance cameras became compromised.

The three land mines lovingly laid to rest six inches beneath the dirt by Rook around the house felt a touch overboard, but I wasn't about to argue. Not when it came to her safety.

If it was up to me, I'd have put her on the first flight to our cousin gang in Arizona under an alias. Have Uncle Ransom bury her so deep there that no one could find her. Not even us. Until this was over.

But I knew there was absolutely nothing I could say that would coerce her into leaving. She may have been finished with me, but she wouldn't leave my brothers. And as long as she stayed, there was a chance I could win her back. Missing eye and all.

I tabbed through each camera, flipping from a view of the woods to one of the road. The parking lot. Behind the Nest, toward the thinning wood that led to the cliff side. I watched

the Saints Diesel sent with us skirting the buried mines on their way back inside. It was about to get real fucking cozy in here with all of them crammed in with us.

AJ gave up the loft Becca and she shared for a few of the more injured ones to sleep in proper beds. The rest would camp out in the living room or the garage.

Once I was satisfied that every cam was up and running, I grabbed the radio walkie from the desk. “All good up here,” I told Pinkie. “Let Dies know we’re set and then settle in, yeah? It’s late.”

“Roger.”

I let the walkie clatter back onto the desk, rubbing my burning eye. Strange, even though the other one wasn’t there, it somehow burned with exhaustion, and I pressed against the black eyepatch covering the place it used to be all the same.

“Grey?” AJ’s voice came muffled through my bedroom door.

I pushed my hair back, sliding out from the desk to smooth the front of my shirt. “Come in.”

AJ hesitantly opened the door, a mug of something steaming in her grip. “I, *uh*, thought you might like some tea. Figured you’d be up for a while, so it’s that green blend you have in the cupboard, with a bit of honey.”

She cringed when our eyes met and something in me deflated and I felt my shoulders slump with it.

“You don’t like honey in your tea, do you?” she asked, staring down at the mug like she might shatter it against the nearest solid surface. “That’s okay. I can make you one without. I’ll drink this one. Be right back.”

“Don’t,” I blurted before I could stop myself, my mouth going dry. “I like honey.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, I was just—just surprised to see you is all. I figured you’d be with one of the others. Getting things ready for Sunday.”

There was still the issue of a lack of funds to purchase our new firearms and ammunition from down south. Which we would desperately need if we were going to stand a chance against the Kings who outmanned almost two to one.

Surprisingly, it was Rook who came up with the solution for that problem. With Diesel's contacts in the black market, all we needed to do was pay a little unsolicited visit to Viola Humphrey.

Unsurprisingly, AJ didn't so much as balk at the idea of breaking into her aunt's mansion at the edge of Thorn Valley. In fact, she was ready to lead the charge, almost giddily eager for the heist. She'd said each one of those Fabergé eggs were worth tens of thousands of dollars. Those combined with anything else we could find would fetch more than enough for all the munitions we needed.

And the old bag fucking deserved it.

She nodded. "I was. But they can handle getting the rest of it together without me. I thought maybe I might be able to help up here."

AJ padded across the carpet, settling the mug down carefully away from the monitors, but within my reach. She hunched down, squinting at the three screens now showing a myriad of surveillance angles.

She visibly recoiled, and I frowned.

"What is it?"

She shook her head, clearly trying to play it cool even though I could tell something had really bothered her. "It's just... Drake, I mean *Carson*... he had a set up almost exactly like this. Cameras and all."

The comparison made the muscles across my back flex and strain, but I knew she didn't mean anything by it. I just hated to have anything at all in common with the fucker. But if he had even half of the shit I had here set up, then he knew what he was doing.

"Sorry, *uh*, can you switch them to night vision? Might be hard to see much with these."

She pointed to the ones around the side of the house and the others in the forest.

I tapped a few keys and changed the upper right camera to night vision, showing Rook's kill shed and the rear ends of a few parked cars in vivid green light.

"Awesome."

"Yeah?"

"Fuck yeah. I don't know why, but anything night vision just gives me such a lady boner. So cool."

I found myself smiling. "Yeah. Same."

Shit.

"I mean, not about the lady boner, but... you know what I'm saying."

She laughed nervously, pushing off her knees to return to standing, taking in my room as though it was the first time she was seeing it when we both knew that wasn't true. She wandered to the shelving across the room, fingering the neat rows of manga before she stopped. I didn't have to look to know she'd found one of my many hiding places.

Behind the manga, in a nook of carved out drywall, rested an old six shooter, loaded and ready to be fired if needed.

If she continued toward the closet, she'd find a go bag filled with money, a change of clothes, a fresh passport, a flare, and enough water and protein bars to last me several days. But she didn't continue to the closet to find my hiding spot, she turned suddenly, sharply, clapping her hands together. "So, is there anything?"

I cocked my head at her, not understanding.

"Anything I can help with," she amended, putting all her weight on foot before switching to the other one.

She was... nervous.

It became so utterly, painstakingly obvious, that my lips parted in surprise. I wasn't sure I'd ever seen her like this. Vulnerable. Almost afraid.

Of what?

“Not really,” I found myself saying. “I have it all covered.”

“Oh.”

She bit her lip, her sea glass eyes darting to the door.

“But you can stay if you want.”

She visibly relaxed, her body heaving a sigh as a small smile pulled the edge of her mouth. “Only if I won’t be distracting.”

But she was already settling herself on my bed.

I laughed quietly to myself, tossing her the stack of letters Carson sent to Diesel. “Might as well make yourself useful. Want to sort those by date and then we can go through them? Make sure there’s nothing we can use.”

AJ snatched them up hungrily, seemingly eager to be helpful. She tucked her legs beneath her, chewing her bottom lip as she focused all her energy on the letters, quickly pulling them from the envelopes and beginning to sort them.

It was harder than it should’ve been to pull my eye from her and return to the screens in front of me, but I found her reflection in the monitor on the left. Despite her wish that I wouldn’t be distracted, I knew that wasn’t a possibility. Not with her on my bed. No more than a few feet away.

I cleared my throat, dogging the erection begging for attention in my jeans with the firm press of my palm.

It took me twice as long as it should’ve to find anything on Carson Bates. There were the things I expected. His mother’s obituary. Some other easily accessible documents. But nothing useful. No property in his name. No corporations. No medical records. The guy was basically a fucking ghost. Which I guessed I should’ve expected. But it frustrated the absolute fuck out of me all the same.

There was still no fucking sign of him or the Kings and with each day that passed, I knew we were edging closer to him making a move.

“You know, I don’t really agree with Dies peacing out on his kid, but I think he did the right thing not bringing him in.”

“What?”

I pushed away from the desk, wheeling my office chair around to face her.

She waved the letter she was holding in her hand. “Kid was fucked up. Right from the start. Some evil is made, but I think this monster was born rotten. He goes into *detail* in this one about how much he hates cats. Like, how he used to trap the ones in his neighborhood and beat and skin—”

I held a hand up to stop her there. I could watch a man be brutalized beyond recognition, but animals? Not a fucking chance. Something about their absolute naivety. Their innocence. Didn’t sit right with me.

“Sorry,” she said in a hush, setting the letter down. “I said I didn’t want to distract you and that’s exactly what I’m doing.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“Do what?”

“Make yourself so uncomfortable. You don’t need to be in here at all if you don’t want to. You don’t owe me anything.”

Someone had to say something. I needed it out in the open. So we could deal with it. So I could see if there was any chance for us or if I needed to lock myself away from her forever. Resigned to being happy for my brothers, but not enjoying her attention myself.

“Wait... *what?*”

The confusion on her face gave me pause. Her lips twisted.

Then she was shoving all the letters aside. “Come here. I think we need to get something straight.”

I dragged my ass from the chair, not daring to hope as I slid onto the bed across from her. When I caught her looking at my eyepatch, I dropped my head, making my hair fall forward to cover it from her view. My jaw clicking.

She darted forward and grabbed my chin, dragging my gaze back to hers before letting go. “Don’t do that. You don’t have to hide it from me, Grey. I should be made to look at it. If it wasn’t for me, you’d still be whole.”

I snorted. “What?”

“I don’t know what you’re thinking in that big beautiful head of yours, but I’m only uncomfortable because you’ve carved a fucking line between us deeper than Mariana’s Trench.”

What?

“And I get it,” she continued. “I really, really do. It’s my fault and you’re angry with me for it. You could’ve died and you were this golden boy. Fucking perfect down to every last hair and now—”

“I look like a fucking cyclops?”

Her face screwed up and for a second I thought she might hit me. My brain was still playing catch up, trying to figure out what was happening right now, but I couldn’t seem to shut myself up and listen, speaking over her instead.

“...and every time you look at me you’re disgusted and probably filled with guilt even though *it wasn’t your fault at all*. So instead you do your best not to look at me at all. Tell me if I’m warm?”

A deep sadness filled her eyes. “I do feel guilty,” she admitted. “But Grey, you’re still you. You could be missing *both* eyes and both your fucking arms and I’d still love you.”

It became clear all at once. Like swiping a hand over a fogged mirror to see the truth reflected back at you in all its startling *realness*.

I was sitting there thinking Ava Jade was disgusted by the sight of me. Wouldn’t ever be able to look at me the same way because of my deformation and the fact that she thought she was the cause of it.

Meanwhile, she was over there, on the other side of the trench between us, thinking I was blaming her. Hating her.

I dropped my head, shaking it, a smile pulling at my lips. A soft laugh on my lips. My fists twisting in the sheets. I hadn't lost her at all.

She wasn't leaving me.

AJ was going to stay.

She would always stay.

My heart squeezed. "Well, I'm not planning on losing another eye," I choked out. "Or either of my arms. So, we have that going for us—"

She tackled me, knocking me onto my back as she pressed her knees to either side of my hips, lying over me until I could feel her hard pebbled nipples brushing my chest. Smell her hair as it tickled along my jaw.

"Greyson Winters," she said, holding back a smile of her own. "You are a monument to idiots everywhere."

"Takes one to know one, babe." I winked.

She let out a breathy moan as her mouth landed on mine with crushing force, stealing the breath from my lungs. I couldn't get my hands on her fast enough, running fingers up her sides, grabbing, pulling, digging in so deep that she wouldn't ever be able to disentangle herself from me again.

She moaned against my mouth, but the sound was spiked with pain, and I immediately loosened my grip, breaking the feral kiss. "Wait. Wait, wait, wait. I don't want to hurt you. You're still healing."

AJ grinned wickedly in response, gripping the collar of my shirt in her fist. I barely felt the pull on the back of my neck before she tore it all the way down to the hem, exposing my chest and abs to her.

She hungrily followed the line of my body all the way down to where my waist vanished into my jeans in a tight V. I adjusted my position, flexing the muscle there for her, making her jaw clench with need.

I meant what I said. I didn't want to hurt her, but I sure as fuck wasn't about to deny her, either.

She reached down, easily unfastening my belt before pulling it through all the loops and discarding it on my bedroom floor. My buttons were next and my throat went almost painfully dry as my breaths deepened. My cock, rock hard, twitched at the slightest brush of her hand as she worked to pull my jeans off, letting it spring free.

I lifted my hips to help her, seeing how much she wanted this written all over her face. Maybe almost as much as I did.

AJ stood back a second, her wicked stare fixed on my erection as she licked her lips. “Did I ever tell you that you have the most beautiful cock I’ve ever seen?”

A smirk twitched on my lips. I wouldn’t tell her she wouldn’t be the first person to tell me that. Instead I tucked my hands behind my head and cocked my head at her. “Is that so?”

“*Mhmm.*”

She crawled back onto the bed. “I don’t think there’s a single flaw.”

Her gaze flicked up to my face, tracing every ridge. Every hollow. “In fact, I don’t see a single flaw *anywhere.*”

“Neither do I.”

She bit her lower lip, making my body burn with a need for her so strong I worried she might go up in flames if she came too close.

But my girl didn’t fear fire.

CHAPTER

Thirty-One

CORVUS

SHE HAD to be hungry by now.

The last time we ate was back in the hospital this afternoon. I was sure there was something I could scrape together with whatever was in the freezer and cupboards... since everything in the fridge had long since rotted.

Sparrow said I should grovel more often. She was going to get that wish. I'd make her see it. Stuff it down her tight little throat until she couldn't take it anymore. Until she begged me to stop. She would. Because she and I both knew that she *liked* it when I took control.

...most of the time.

I didn't bother knocking, but maybe I should've.

Ava Jade and Grey pulled apart as I entered.

Grey lay naked on his bed, his proud cock at attention, wet and glistening with my Sparrow's saliva. Her lips were swollen from all the work she was doing, on her knees, praying to the church of Greyson Winters like the devout Saint she was.

"Damn," I coughed, waiting, giving myself a minute to choose my next words more carefully since the first one came out all on its own. My Sparrow told me she wouldn't choose, and I knew she meant it, but there would always be a part of me, some leftover vestige of the possessive caveman I knew still clung to some part of my brain I couldn't fix.

"Glad to see you've made up."

Grey lifted a brow, unfazed by my entry, while Sparrow glared at me with something halfway between hatred and hunger glittering in her watery eyes.

My fist curled, and I turned to leave them to their makeup fuck, half wondering if I'd get such a gift. It was the season of miracles after all. Might be time to make my Christmas wish.

“Wait,” Sparrow called hoarsely. “Stay.”

She didn't have to ask me twice. I slammed the door, coming for her like a bull let loose at the gate.

“No,” she hissed, stopping me in my tracks with a hard look. “Watch.”

“What?”

She indicated the computer chair to their right and kicked its base so it rolled over the floor to the corner of the room. Where she would have a perfect line of sight to me. And I her.

And Grey.

Fucking.

“Is this my punishment, Sparrow?”

She shrugged, leaning over Grey's cock to lick the bead of precum there, making him shiver.

“You're wicked,” Grey said, his voice heavy with desire as he tipped his head back. “Let him join, AJ. I don't mind.”

“I do.” She jerked her chin to the chair. “Besides, you heard the doctor. No elevated heart rates allowed.”

“He said no coffee,” I argued.

Another shrug. “Same thing.”

Fine. If this was what she wanted. I'd watch.

I stalked to the chair, sinking into it, gripping my thighs to hold myself there when it was almost impossible not to strip her naked, tie her up with her own clothing, and stuff my rapidly growing cock down her little throat for daring to try to control *me*.

As if she could sense where my mind went, she opened her mouth wide, taking Grey all the way in to his hilt. His hand found the back of her neck, hips tilting up to push his cock in even further, until she couldn't breathe.

Only then did she pull back, her hands digging into Grey's thighs, urging him to fuck her mouth. He did. Thrusting up into her mouth until his eyes rolled back and the veins in the arm that held her in place jutted out from his skin like snakes.

When he let her come up for air, it was me she looked at, a wicked curve to her mouth. "Enjoying the show?" she teased.

Challenge accepted.

I unzipped my jeans, pulling out my cock as evidence of just how much I apparently did, surprising the both of us.

I'd long since gotten used to the idea of sharing her with my brothers, and almost losing her cemented the entire beautifully twisted arrangement for me. If she would have me, I would have her in whatever way she would have me in return.

At least, that's what I'd thought at first, but now, watching them together, I knew it was more.

I wanted her for me.

But I wanted her for them, too.

Her lips parted, the bottom one swollen and damp, making me even harder as she damn near drooled over the length of iron dick I now stroked.

Ruffled at my reaction, her cocky grin faltered.

Grey took the opportunity with her distracted to catch her under the arms, lifting her swiftly, making her yelp as he flipped her onto her back and hovered between her legs. "Eyes on me, baby," he purred, a finger under her chin.

She smiled up at him, and for a moment I was entirely forgotten as she tugged his lips to hers, arching her back to help him remove her pants.

Grey didn't waste any time, tossing her jeans and panties like fucking party favors around the room. He pressed his fingers to her opening, and I watched her squirm at the touch of his fingers, her chest heaving. Nipples hard against the thin gray t-shirt she wore.

Fuck.

I reached for the lotion at the edge of his desk and pumped cool ropes of it all over my cock, sliding my hand over the slippery skin, adjusting my pressure.

Grey leaned down to taste her, and I groaned, licking my lips as if I could taste her sweet pussy on my own lips. My Sparrow's breaths quickened as he drove her to the brink of climax, her breasts heaving with each breath as she fought to muffle her cries with one fist between her teeth and the other twisted in the blanket.

I jerked off to her pleasure, gripping the armrest of the chair with my free hand.

I could see the moment she was going to come, her body fucking rigid as a corpse. Practically levitating, her back arched, lifting from the bed until she couldn't take it anymore, thighs crushing against either side of Grey's head.

Her moan was loud enough to wake the whole fucking house, but I didn't think she cared. I knew I didn't. Let them hear what we were doing to her. How she moaned and cried out *for us*.

Let them hear that she belonged to *us*.

Grey licked his shining lips as she released him, her whole body shaking from the aftershocks of her orgasm. But before she could fully recover, he flipped her onto her belly, lifting beneath her hips gently to avoid the bruising still hidden by her shirt there.

She lifted for him, shuffling to the edge of the bed like a lion stalking its prey in reverse. Her sharp gaze found mine as Grey fumbled with something behind her, getting himself into position.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I whipped it out, a bolt of panic racing through me, but it was only Max. *Again*. As if I could even fucking consider the tour or record deal she was trying to cram down my throat.

I silenced the call and tossed my phone onto Grey's desk.

"Now just relax for me, AJ," my brother warned her, and I lifted from my hips, never stopping the stroking of my hand, to watch as he slowly fed a massive plug into her ass. She closed her eyes against the sensation, a mix of pain and pleasure twisting her beautiful face.

She settled once it was all the way in, biting her lip.

"There you go," Grey whispered, curling a hand around her hip as he positioned himself at her opening. He looked at me with a teasing smirk as he slid into her, sucking a breath in through his teeth.

Sparrow gasped as Grey thrust himself into her balls fucking deep, settling himself there with a groan, his mouth slack.

"Fuck, AJ, you're so wet for me."

She pushed back against him, bending her chest to the bed, preening like a cat. "*Mmm*," she purred, and he began to move, pressing a palm flat against her lower back as he thrust up and into her sweet pussy, making stuttering moans fall from her pillow-soft lips.

I increased the pressure with my hand, focusing on the tip until my breaths came out stuttered too as I pictured myself deep inside of her. Feeding every inch of my massive cock into her pussy until she almost couldn't take it. She'd had little trouble after my show in Lodi, but I knew it wasn't without some discomfort. There wasn't a pussy on this planet that could take this dick easy.

Grey increased his speed and there were stars in her eyes as she lifted them to the ceiling, snaking a hand down between her legs to rub her greedy clit with a groan.

My brother bared his teeth, his knuckles white as he switched to holding her for dear life by the hips, close to his

own climax.

“Fuck...” my Sparrow cried. “Grey!”

“That’s right, baby,” he said between pants, fucking her harder. “I told you... I’d have you... screaming my name.”

She buried her face in the blankets, her shoulders flexing with lean muscle as she spiraled closed to orgasm.

“*Come on, Sparrow,*” I found myself saying on a breath, making her crane her neck to find my face through the haze of her ecstasy. “Come on his cock.”

Her upper lip curled and her lethal gaze narrowed, but she did as she was told, winning the battle, but losing the war as she screamed my brother’s name, shoving all three of us over that edge.

“*I want it,*” she cried, her voice strained as she tried to speak through her orgasm as Grey pumped his last, teeth bared as she buried his cock in her cunt.

She opened her mouth and I stood, brought to my climax the instant the head of my cock slid onto her warm tongue. She sucked greedily on me, making me catch a fistful of hair just to keep myself standing, shuddering against her perfect mouth.

CHAPTER

Thirty-Two

AVA JADE

MY MOUTH WATERED at the plate of food Corvus slid across the center island to me.

It was the third dinner he'd prepared for us all since we came back to the Nest. Three days and we still had *nothing*. I was getting restless, and I could tell everyone else was, too. Grey set to shoveling the brown butter potatoes and rare steak into his mouth, but I could tell he wasn't really tasting it. He had that faraway look in his eyes. The one he'd worn since the morning we woke up after he fucked me until I couldn't see straight.

He'd gone straight back to work, wrapped in a blanket instead of bothering to get dressed. And even now, as he ate, he was still fucking working. His scholarly mind trying to find an angle he hadn't already thought of.

Rook stood, elbows leaned on the center island as he pushed his steak and potatoes around on his plate with a scowl on his lips.

"Eat," Corvus ordered, glaring at both Rook and me as he slid into the last stool, dropping his own plate in front of him. "I didn't spend an hour mothering those potatoes for them to get fucking cold."

I sighed, popping one into my mouth. It was incredible, but so was everything he'd ever cooked for us. I couldn't bring myself to give a compliment tonight, though. We still had another day before our planned heist of female Hitler's fancy eggs and pearls. Grey needed a specific type of decoder to get

past her home security system, which should be arriving tomorrow morning.

And then we'd have to wait a day or two while Diesel secured a black market buyer.

The day after that was the planned meet with the Mexicans, when we'd need to have the cash in hand no matter what happened any of the days before.

Once we had those weapons and ammunition, there was still the teeny tiny problem of not knowing where the fuck Carson was. Or the rest of the Kings for that matter.

While we sat here, eating a gourmet meal surrounded by grouchy sleep-deprived Saints, they could be planning their next move.

At least Corvus was looking and feeling better. And I had to admit the time spent at rest made all the difference for me, even if it wasn't what I wished I was doing. The burns along my forearm were still gnarly as fuck, but they'd stopped seeping, and in another few days I figured I could remove the bandages for good. The bruises along my stomach had turned a sickly shade of yellow, and would fade completely soon... even if the internal trauma couldn't be so easily healed.

But the main thing was the complete and utter *lack* of voices in my head. Aside from some very vivid dreams and night sweats, turned out that nurse was right. I wasn't crazy. At least, I wasn't *hearing voices crazy*. I was definitely the other kind.

"Try the horseradish sauce," Corvus urged, pointing the sharp end of his steak knife toward my plate and the white sauce spilling over the sliced strips of steak.

I let my fork clatter to the plate and sat up, leaning to my right to take Rook's half-drunk glass of the good bourbon he'd been slowly working his way through this week.

"I can get you your own," he offered, and I lifted a brow at the hostility in his tone.

"I don't want my own," I parried, tossing the rest of it back with a shiver as the burn flushed down my throat to my belly.

He gave me a look before going to get himself a brand new glass from the cupboard.

“Someone’s grouchy,” I muttered to myself, setting the empty glass down.

“How’s the search coming?” Corvus asked Grey, and I caught the way he flinched at the question. It was all anyone wanted to know. The Saints asked him every time he left his room to take a piss. Diesel asked him every time he called. He didn’t need the pressure from us, too.

“Would you leave him alone?” I snapped. “He’s doing everything he can.”

Grey stood suddenly, the legs of his stool scraping over the tile as he wiped his mouth with his napkin and tossed it over his half eaten dinner. “I don’t need you to baby me, AJ. I’m going back to work.”

My nostrils flared as I leveled a murderous stare on Corvus. “And what have you done, hmm? Aren’t you supposed to be the one that thinks of everything?”

His brows lowered over his eyes, making the bright blue darken to a stormy navy under their shadows. The threat of thunder in the hard set of his shoulders and bulging biceps. “You think I haven’t been doing everything I can to find this fucker, too? What is it you think I’m doing in my room all hours of the day and night because it sure as fuck isn’t napping. I’ve exhausted all my resources. It’s like the guy doesn’t fucking exist.”

“Well, he does, and he’s still out there.” I pointed toward the window, to the long road curving away into the trees down to Briar Hall.

The reminder that not only was I likely going to be a dead girl within the week, but I’d also be a dead *high school dropout*, just made me even angrier.

Going back to class was completely out of the question. There were too many opportunities for Carson to get to us there, not to mention the possibility of innocent teens being put in the line of fire. But whether the reasoning was sound or

not didn't fucking matter to me. I'd worked *hard* to get to where I was with my grades, and it was all for nothing. Christmas break would be starting in two weeks and then it would be an entirely new semester with new classes. No way to make up for lost time or projects from the previous semester.

But who fucking cared, right?

Not like you needed a high school education to handle a weapon.

Dad would be so proud.

"You don't think I know that?" Corvus growled. "You don't think it makes me sick knowing he's out there, walking free, *breathing*, after what he put you through? *Hmm?*"

"Then why are you in here 'mothering your potatoes?'"

The darkness ebbed and flowed, fully set free to swell and crash against my walls inside. A part of me knew I wasn't being fair, but I couldn't seem to help it. Couldn't seem to stop.

Couldn't fucking sit here anymore.

Corvus snatched his dinner from the counter and pitched it into the sink, shattering the plate before he stalked from the room.

Rook slid onto the stool next to me as though nothing had happened at all, sipping his fresh glass of bourbon.

"Damn Ghost..."

He grabbed the bottle to top off my glass. "You really know how to clear a room."

He knocked his glass into mine in a mock cheers before draining the rest of his drink and lighting a cigarette.

"Corvus will kill you."

Rook smirked around the cigarette at the edge of his mouth. "Nah. He'll stay in there the rest of the night now."

He took a drag and ashed onto his plate. “No one gets to him like you do.”

Rook took my untouched glass of bourbon and put it to his lips.

I bristled. “Thought we weren’t sharing,” I said bitterly.

He bit his lip ring, sliding the glass back my way. When I reached for it, he settled his hand over mine, and I noticed the fresh ink on his middle finger. A little ghost with black oval eyes. My rage slipped away, replaced by a fierce tightening in my chest that almost had me choking.

“We’re all a little on edge right now, Ghost. For what it’s worth, sorry I snapped at you.”

I lifted his hand, studying the new ink. He grinned. “You like it?”

I shifted my gaze to the hand wrapped around the bottle of bourbon, and the name ROOK displayed over his knuckles, and I understood the significance. He fought for himself with that hand, but now I’d always be right here, on his left. The other thing he would go to his grave fighting for.

I opened my mouth to tell him how perfect it was when a horn blared long and loud out the window.

Saints rushed in from the living room, their weapons drawn.

Voices crackled over the radio.

“Incoming!”

The horn honked insistently now, over and over again as the sound drew nearer. Rook slid from his stool with a spark of life in his eyes I hadn’t seen in days as he drew his gun. I loosed two blades from their holsters, making a beeline for the side door with Rook on my heels.

“Hold your fire!” Corvus bellowed over the radio, but I didn’t hear the rest of what he said as Rook and I left the Saints behind, rounding the house, positioning ourselves behind a parked car, backs against the cool metal.

“Ready?” Rook asked.

“Ready.”

We jumped out from behind the car just as the dark green truck appeared down the road. I reeled my arm back to throw, but Rook caught my wrist, stopping me.

“What are you—”

“It’s my uncle,” he hissed, releasing me as he stepped out into the road, waving his arms at the truck. “Damien!” he hollered.

“Rook, get out of the way!”

My heart lurched, legs poised to tackle him out of the truck’s path and take the hit myself, but the tires screeched as Damien St. Vincent ground the truck to a stop, cranking the wheel sideways to spew gravel in our direction as it came to a jarring, shuddering stop. I sheathed my blades.

“What the fuck, Uncle D?” Grey slammed the front door behind him and Corvus as they stalked into the driveway and Damien St. Vincent shoved out of the truck.

“Get in,” he said, his face flushed. “I just got off the phone with the hospital. She’s awake.”

The words were a punch to the gut, and my hand flew to my chest as tears sprang to my eyes.

She’s awake?

A sob grew in my chest, and it let free as someone’s arm came around my waist, breaking me out of my frozen state.

The driver’s side door shut and Damien revved the engine as we raced to the back of the truck, launching ourselves into the cargo bed.

“We’re right behind you!” one of the Saints, Mickey, shouted, tossing a set of keys to someone. The engines of all the cars in the driveway turned over as one as Damien chewed gravel, whipping the truck around to go back the way he’d come.

Someone squeezed my hand, and I glanced up to find Grey there, giving me a comforting nod as tears raced down my cheeks and the ball in my chest grew. I sniffed, squeezing his hand back, reaching for Corvus.

I squeezed his knee, and he gave me the same reassuring look. “Be ready,” he said over the rush of the wind. “They could be waiting for us.”

The hope and joy that’d been churning in my gut turned back to heavy lead, and I drew my blades again, ready for anything. I fucking dared him to try something now. There was nothing on this mortal coil strong enough to stop me from getting to that hospital. *Nothing.*



THE GUYS and I led the charge into the hospital with Damien St. Vincent and the other Saints flanking us, ready for anything.

I’d been courteous enough to sheath my blades, and the guys had holstered their weapons, but it was clear to anyone with two eyes and a brain that we were all armed to the teeth. Whether long t-shirts or jackets concealed the majority of our weapons or not.

“Is she in the same room?” I asked Damien, gaze fixed on the hallway ahead, and the stairs that would lead up to the next floor where I would take an immediate left and find her room.

“As far as I know,” he replied gruffly, starting to flag behind.

This made Grey pause, his sneakers squeaking on the tile floor. “You’re not coming?”

“Why would I? She doesn’t know me. Just... just let me know she’s all right, would you, lad?”

“Yeah,” Grey replied before I heard the rush of his footfalls hurrying to catch up to the rest of us as we blew into the stairwell. I had no patience to stand in the hall and wait for an elevator.

“There’s no chance this is a trap, right?” Corvus asked, taking the stairs two at a time in stride with me.

His words sent a spike of ice stabbing into my chest. If this was some sort of trick... if Carson had used my best friend against me *again*...

“It’s not,” Rook answered before I could, putting my apprehension to rest. “Damien would’ve sorted that out quick.”

His reassurance didn’t rid me of the disquieting thoughts altogether, though. Thorn Valley had seemed eerily quiet on the way over here. And with still nothing from Carson or the Kings, I couldn’t help feeling that something big was coming. There was no way they were just going to crawl into a hole and disappear for good.

Carson would come for me. I knew he would. It was only a matter of time.

I bulldozed through the door to the second floor with a hard lump in my throat, seeing a willowy silhouette sitting up in bed through the curtain to her hospital room.

Nurses whispered outside her door, shaking their heads. “Such a shame,” one was saying. “Mr. Hart only just left to sign that merger. If he’d stayed another half day he would’ve been here when she woke up.”

“He’s assured us he’s on the next flight back.”

“Doesn’t change the fact that she had to wake up alone. Poor thing doesn’t have any other family—”

“Yes she does,” I argued, shoving between the two nurses and into the room.

“Becks?”

My friend was shakily bringing a plastic cup to her lips, but stopped dead when we entered, her unfocused eyes squinting at me like she didn’t recognize me.

My heart stopped.

“Rebecca?”

“Who...”

Her voice was a hoarse whisper.

She set the cup down, swallowing hard as her brown eyes flicked to the guys behind me, clearly struggling.

No.

“Becks, it’s me.”

I went to her side, sitting on the edge of her bed. I reached for her, but she shied away, her face paling. Fuck, she looked so frail. With her big brown eyes wide and fearful. Her body shrunken and weakened from being stuck in this bed. A weight settled in my stomach, yanking tears from my eyes.

“Sparrow...” Corvus hedged. “Memory loss is common in coma cases, maybe you should give her some—”

“It’s me,” I implored her, ignoring Corvus as I saw a flicker of recognition in her eyes, making my pulse pound. “There you are. It’s me, babe. It’s Ava Jade.”

She dropped her head, shaking it, her eyes closed tight. Grimacing.

I gripped her cold hand tight between mine and this time when she lifted her head, her lips parted. “Aves?”

“Oh my god,” I choked out, pulling her into a solid embrace. *“Becks, you’re okay.”*

Her arms came slowly around me, squeezing as well as she could. I felt her back heave as her tears stained the collar of my shirt, leaking over my collarbone.

“Holy shit,” she cried, clutching me almost as tightly as I was clutching her now.

“Let’s give them a minute,” Rook said somewhere behind me, and I heard the door to the hospital room click shut.

I sniffed, pulling away from her shaking embrace to hold her at arm’s length. “You scared the shit out of me.”

“Me?” She sniffed. “You’re the one that was just... gone. But, you’re back. Where did you go? How could you just...”

just leave us like that.”

She wiped the back of her palm over her nose, falling against the inclined back of her raised hospital bed as if she couldn't stay sitting up anymore on her own. I realized there was so much she didn't know.

Sensing where my mind had gone, she took my hand in hers. “Babe? You were just staying away because you were angry, right?”

I wished I could lie to her, but I'd decided a long time ago that I needed to stop doing that. This bitch was my ride or die and just woken up from a coma or not, she deserved the truth.

“No, Becks, I wasn't. But we don't have to talk about this now. The important thing is that you're awake. You're all right. I'm... *fuck*, I'm so sorry this happened, Becks.”

She shook her head. “Did he...?”

I clamped my mouth shut.

Her nails dug into my palm. “Tell me everything. I want to know. I *need* to know. Is he dead at least? Did we get him? Did my painting help?”

“It did,” I assured her, remembering the guys telling me how smart she was to hide the painting before Carson could get to her. I didn't care what anyone said about her, she was a badass bitch. “It helped so much more than you realize.”

Because of that painting, Diesel dissolved the alliance with the Kings before they could act. She might've single handedly saved at least thirty lives.

“But he isn't dead, is he?”

Her hand went absently to her chest, to where a bandage covered the bullet wound an inch away from her heart. I could sense her fear in the way her body went rigid, her hand trembling in mine, but I could also see the fire in her eyes. The absolute feral rage simmering below the surface.

“No. He isn't. We can't find him.”

“Did he hurt you, Aves?”

My non-response was response enough.

“Oh, fuck, babe. I’m so sorry. You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to.”

She leaned forward to hug me again, and I let her hold my broken pieces together for me, just for a minute, wondering how I’d ever gotten by without her.

“We’re going to find him,” she promised with a harsh whisper in my ear. “And he’s going to pay. For all of it.”

I nodded against her shoulder. I couldn’t tell her right now, but once she was on her feet she needed to understand that there wasn’t a *we* when it came to dealing with Carson Bates. I’d get my pint of blood out of him on her behalf, but she wouldn’t be anywhere near this place when that happened.

Someone tapped at the door, and Becks and I pulled apart as the guys came back in. “Hey, Becca,” Grey said with a winning smile. “How you feeling?”

She tucked a length of rich brown hair behind her ear and tried to return his smile. “I’m awake,” she replied. “So that’s a start.”

Becca’s gaze flicked to Rook and filled with an anguished sort of warmth. “Thank you. The nurses said that you saved my life.”

I frowned, turning to face my dark prince. He winked at my bestie. “Anytime, love.”

I mouthed a *thank you* of my own to him, wondering why the fuck no one thought I should know that little tidbit. But of course he saved her. I doubted there was a reaper strong enough to take a soul Rook Clayton refused to give up. I was just glad he’d decided hers was worth holding on to.

“What the fuck happened to you?” Becca asked Corvus, her face screwing up at his new buzz cut.

Corv scratched the still healing puncture wounds on the back of his head. A habit I was trying to break him of. “I fell off a building.”

“Fell?” I pressed.

He cleared his throat, waving a hand toward Becca. “You look good.” Corvus coughed, not so sneakily changing the subject.

Becca gave a short laugh. “Right. And you’re a good liar.”

“I’ll get you your things from Briar Hall,” I offered. “Just text me the list and I’ll bring it for you.”

She shook her head. “They didn’t have my phone.”

I looked askance at my guys, but they shook their heads. Clearly Carson had taken it.

“Take mine,” Corvus offered, shuffling over to slip his phone onto her lap. “Code’s 26637. All of our numbers are already programmed in.”

I smiled gratefully at him.

“I know it’s not the time,” Grey hedged, licking dry lips as he rested his hands on the rail at the end of her bed. “But we’ve hit a wall trying to find Carson and—”

“Carson?”

“Jericho,” I explained. “His real name’s Carson. He’s Diesel’s biological son.”

She jerked back as though slapped, trying to process. “What? Wait. Slow down. Diesel has another son?”

I could tell we were going to need to fill her in on all the dirty little details. If we did, then maybe she would remember something that would link us to Carson. Or lead us to the Kings. I’d take any scrap of helpful evidence at this point.

“If you’re sure you want to do this now—”

“I am. I want to know what happened while I was out.”

I nodded. “Corv, can you ask one of the guys out in the hall to wrangle some peanut M&M’s and a cherry cola for Becks? We’re going to be here a while.”

CHAPTER

Thirty-Three

ROOK

THE COMPLETELY DESTROYED ROSE garden out front of Diesel's house told us three things.

1. That they were still out there. Waiting.
2. That Carson was furious.
3. And that he wasn't through with us.

The bastard couldn't help himself, he had to take the one thing our father had left of his wife. He knew where to hit him to inflict the most damage outside of killing us, and he didn't waste his chance. With all of us busy between Sanctum, the hospital, and the Crow's Nest, Diesel's place had been left almost entirely open to attack. All he'd had to do was cut the power to the street and there was no evidence of his presence. No video footage. Nothing.

It was an act carried out in spite. He wanted to scare us, but all he'd managed to do was piss us off even more.

Ghost nudged me in the backseat of the Rover, the moonlight shining on her face revealing a soft, sympathetic smile.

It'd been like pulling teeth dragging her away from her friend in the hospital to come with us for the heist. She'd only come at all because we left half the Saints that'd been with us there to guard her friend. Despite her father's loud ass protests when he finally arrived a few hours ago. They'd made themselves scarce, but they were under strict orders from my

Ghost herself not to leave the second floor and cover all points of entry at all times.

It didn't surprise me that they'd taken her orders without question. My Ghost was born to lead.

"How's Diesel?" she asked, breaking the tepid silence in the Rover. She'd been in the shower when we got the call, and I was glad she didn't have to hear his explosion when Corv put the call on speakerphone. Distraught wasn't the right word. He was rattled. Broken. Breathing fucking fire.

"Not good, Sparrow," Corvus answered honestly from the front seat, his head propped up by his fist against the window. "Not good at all. It was all he had left of her. I've never heard him so..." He trailed off, his voice shaky.

"Is there anything we can do?" she asked, leaning forward in her seat. "There has to be something salvageable. Maybe we can replant it and—"

"It's done, AJ," Grey interjected, flicking his hard stare to her in the rearview. "Dies said there was nothing that could be saved."

I shifted in my seat, fucking hating how some ruined flowers planted for a woman I'd never even met could make me absolutely feral, ravenous for blood. Or maybe it was just the fact that I hadn't had anyone to punish for their sins in far too long. I told myself I was just saving it all up for one person who would be punished far beyond anything I'd ever accomplished before.

His anguish would be music to my fucking ears. I couldn't wait to smell his fear. Watch him bleed. Hear him fucking beg. I sucked in a breath and the air rattled in the empty vestiges of my chest.

I needed a fucking cigarette.

When I took out the pack, Ghost stole one from the stack, putting it between her lips.

Not more than a second after she had it there Corvus was reaching back between the seats to snatch it out of her mouth.

He rolled down the window and chucked it out. “You’re not starting that shit. It’s bad enough he still smokes.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be groveling?” she asked, a dangerous lilt to her tone.

“I draw the line at letting you give yourself fucking cancer.”

“Oh, but for Rook, it’s totally fine?”

I smirked as I lit my cigarette, rolling down my window to blow smoke out into the night.

“You try making Rook do something he doesn’t want to do,” Corvus said lazily, going back to leaning against the window. “Call me when you succeed.”

Ava Jade rolled her tongue over her teeth, sitting back in her seat to cross her arms. I knew if she didn’t agree with him, she would’ve just taken another. But there was nothing like my tobacco mix to take the edge off a hard fucking day.

I took a long pull, holding the smoke in my mouth, and leaned over to her, kissing away the scowl on her lips. I blew the smoke into her mouth and she inhaled, her body pressing up against mine.

She blew it out with a haughty look in Corvus’ direction, but my brother just rolled his eyes in the side view mirror before giving me a pointed, warning stare I knew to take seriously.

He’d let me poison myself all I wanted, but he *would* have my ass if I let her get addicted to this shit.

I rubbed out the smoke between my fingers and dropped the dead butt into the pack with the others. “So these eggs,” I started casually, trying to forget about ruined roses and just enjoy the night. We hadn’t had to pull off a heist in a while, and even though this shit was about as low key as it got, it was still making me hard thinking I’d get to do it with my Ghost at my side. “Do we know where all of them are?”

Ghost nodded. “I clocked each one the first night I spent there. There’s four upstairs in the hallways and my aunt’s

bedroom. Another five on the main floor. One in the foyer. One in the dining room. One in the living room. Another in the drawing room, and one in the sitting room.”

“What’s the fucking difference?” Grey asked. “Between a living room and a sitting room and a—what was it?—*drawing* room? Isn’t that all the same shit?”

“Rich people shit,” Ghost said with a shrug. “Don’t even bother trying to understand it.”

Up ahead, the rich bitch’s estate sprawled in rolling hills of gated off green, the mansion itself still hidden in the hills.

“Switch,” Grey announced, pulling off to the side of the road so he and Corvus could swap seats. The convoy behind us slowed, pulled off as well. It was less than the contingent of Saints that Diesel wanted with us, but I had to agree with my Ghost. Becca needed just as much protection as we did. Maybe more.

Thanks to her we now knew of the existence of a ‘factory.’ Carson mentioned it to Becca a few times, and she’d figured it was just a story he concocted. Another lie. But there was detail there. He said he’d needed to meet his leader there not once, but three times during the time they were “dating,” probably to get out of spending any more time with her than he needed to. There must be at least a hundred factories in between here and Lodi, but Grey was already looking into every single one. Open and operating. Shut down. It didn’t matter.

If it was a place where shit was made, he was finding the name on the lease, looking for any cracks in the facade.

With any luck, by the time we secured our new firepower, we’d have them by the balls.

Grey opened his laptop in the passenger seat, tapping keys as Corvus pulled away from the road. “I just need to get within range. Pull up another mile, but stay out of sight of the cameras at the main gate.”

Corvus grunted in reply as Grey rolled down his window and held a black box with an antenna outside, his hair blowing

in the wind. There was silence for a minute before Grey said, “I’ve got it. Pull over.”

He continued to hold the device with one hand and tapped away at the keys on his laptop with the other. My Ghost peered curiously over the seat, watching with squinty eyes. “How did you learn how to do this?” she asked.

Grey took a second to respond. “Trial and error. One of us needed to know how to hack and these two were both way too impatient to learn.”

“Hey, man, I tried,” I argued weakly.

“Yeah, two broken laptops later...”

“I said I *tried*. Didn’t say I succeeded.”

“What about you?” Ghost asked Corvus.

“No broken laptops. My talents were better put to use elsewhere.”

“Like singing to yourself in your closet?” Grey asked with a playful lilt, tapping the final key with a loud stab that I knew meant he had cracked the coding.

“Fuck you.” Corvus elbowed him.

I laughed, but Ghost was frowning. “Have you called Max back yet?” she asked seriously as Grey announced he was in.

Corv scratched the scars forming at the back of his skull. “No, but I will. When this is over.”

“Okay that should be enough footage to loop,” Grey said, mostly to himself as he did whatever magic he did to make it look to Old Lady Humphrey’s cameras as though we were never here.

“Take us to the gate, Corv.”

The other Saints pulled ahead to the service road down the way as we turned up the short stretch to the main gate. They’d wait there, tucked away in case we needed backup, until it was time to make our getaway.

Grey stepped out of the Rover and attached a small screened device to a port on the back of the big silver box with the number keys. It took him less than twenty seconds before an electronic horn sounded and the gates slowly swung inward.

Pleased with himself, he slipped back into the passenger seat. "Now it's just the home security and we're good."

"Like your new toy?" Ghost asked him as my brother practically stroked his new brick-like device like it was a newborn babe.

"I've always wanted one of these," he muttered.

She gave him a playful shove. "You're such a nerd."

He laughed and Corvus killed the headlights as we crept up to the imposing mansion.

"It's so dark," she said, her brows furrowing.

Corvus pulled down the narrow road that led to the caretaker's shed and the vegetable gardens on the east lawn, parking between the hedges.

"You think something's up?" I asked Ghost.

She lifted a shoulder. "Don't know. It's just, even in the middle of the night, there were always a few lights on. You know, the staff getting things ready for the next day. Cleaning and all that. My aunt hated them puttering around her during the day so she had them all work at night."

"She's a real piece of work," Grey sighed, gathering his new device into a black bag as he stepped out into the night air. Ghost and I followed, going around to the trunk to collect the duffles filled with packing foam to protect the eggs once we had them.

Ghost pulled on a pair of tight fitting leather gloves and flexed her fingers.

"Masks?" she asked the others as they came around to the back.

“Grey shook his head. “Won’t need them. I’m going to shut down the whole system while we’re in.”

“Won’t that set off some warning bells?”

“Not until your aunt realizes her shit’s gone. They’ll check the footage from the security cams and find a gap in the feeds.”

“I wish I had one of you back in Lennox,” Ghost mused. “Would have made a lot of our jobs go *a lot* smoother.”

She’d mentioned before how she and her Dad used to run jobs together. Conning unsuspecting shop owners and the wealthy elite. But the reminder made me thirsty for something other than blood. I bit my lip ring, watching her double check the placement of all her blades before nodding confidently at me, scrunching her eyes at the look I was giving her. “You ready, Rook?”

“So ready.”

This was going to be fun.

“Let’s move,” Corvus commanded, hunching low as we circled the hedges, stealthily moving over the lawn in the moonlight to the side entrance. The one the staff used to bring groceries into the house. Ava Jade keyed the code into the small pad above the door handle from memory, but it chirped at her when she was finished. The light turning red.

“Shit.”

She tried again. Red light.

“Stop,” Grey said before she could enter it a third time. “You’ll have Thorn Valley PD crawling all over this place if you get it wrong three times.”

“I’m not getting it wrong,” she growled in a whisper. “That was the code.”

“Then the old bag is smarter than we gave her credit for,” Grey whispered, shuffling in front of Ava Jade to access the code panel. “She must’ve changed it after the shit show that was Thanksgiving.”

He used a flat bit of steel to carefully pry the box back, revealing a shining green panel with connected wires. He dug in his bag, connecting his device with some copper clips. “Just give me a sec.”

“Come on, come on,” Ghost repeated restlessly, bouncing from foot to foot. We had five minutes to get inside before the motion detection on the camera above our heads sent an alert to the alarm company.

“Got it,” Grey announced, detaching the device to reveal a green light.

“Move in,” Corvus urged. “We have to get to the coms room.”

We spilled into the mansion, greeted with the stagnant scent of musty old furniture made worse by the cover of expensive potpourri.

“Through here,” Ghost whispered, leading the way even though we’d gone over the location three times already. I followed her lead through the kitchens and dining room, across the marble floor in the foyer and to the little closet sized room around the dark side of the curving staircase.

Grey got to work right away, accessing the system with ease. He erased the couple minutes of footage that showed us coming up the side lawn and got ready to make it all go black.

“Can’t you loop this footage too?” Ghost asked, but Grey shook his head. “It’s an old system. Making it go dark is the best I can do.”

“Hold on,” I barked, grabbing my brother’s wrist before he could shut it all down. “Look.”

I pointed at the old bubbled screens and the fuzzy images they displayed of the mansion in darkness. There were angles of almost every room in the whole place. And there wasn’t a soul to be found in any of them.

“You don’t think she left town?” Ghost asked, leaning in to get a better view.

“After what happened?” Grey asked. “I wouldn’t be surprised if she left the state.”

“Shut it down,” Ghost told Grey, sliding from the room like a wraith in the dark on silent feet. “Rook, let’s sweep the place. The staff quarters are down the hall, all the way to the end on the right. I’m going to check my aunt’s room. They were the only ones without feeds.”

I guessed the old bitch drew the line at her staff watching her sleep.

I nodded, drawing my gun more out of habit than necessity as I tiptoed down the hall. There was no reason to be silent, though. Ghost came back down the stairs to the foyer at the same time Corv and Grey left the security room and I came back from the staff quarters.

“Empty.”

“*Empty*,” Ghost echoed with a laugh.

“Well this just got a whole lot easier.”

“You mean more boring?” I corrected Corv.

He rolled his eyes.

A cunning smirk spread on my Ghost’s lips. “It doesn’t have to be.”

She had me at the smirk.

I tailed her to the living room with the others following close behind me.

“What are you doing?” Corvus asked as she crossed the Persian carpet to fiddle with the modern sound system that looked painfully out of place among the cloth bound books and antique wood of the bookshelves. She plugged an auxiliary cable into her phone and flicked the dial, cranking the volume as one of my brother’s songs came on, blasting over the surround sound.

Hide and Seek.

I felt my lips pull into a venomous grin, watching her move on her toes, a sparkle in her eyes.

“AJ, what—”

Ghost slipped off her shoes and my jaw flexed, legs burning with something other than the pain they’d been made to feel the last few weeks. They burned with the need to *chase*.

Her shirt went next and she threw it in my direction. I caught it with one hand and put it to my nose, inhaling deeply.

She bounced on the balls of her feet, her tits heaving in the lacy bra she wore as she looked around her, and I could tell she was thinking of all the places she could hide.

“I’m betting you’ll never find me,” she shouted over the blasting music. Over Corvus’ haunting voice warning of the things he would do once he found his prey.

“Hide and seek, Sparrow? Really?”

I slung off the duffle bags and jacket, tossing it over the back of the couch, never taking my eyes off her. “You don’t have to play, Bro,” I growled. “I’ll gladly have her all to myself.”

“Fuck that.” Grey was already setting his bag down and Corvus cursed, rolling his shoulders back.

“You have until the song ends, Ghost. Then you’re mine.”

She took off like a shot, and I put her shirt back to my face, breathing deeply of her before discarding it on the couch with my jacket. Instinctively, I bent at my knees, ready to give chase. I listened hard through the music, trying to hear her on the stairs. Or above on the second floor. But she was too good for that.

I smiled to myself, my fingers twitching as the song came close to its end.

The others weren’t here anymore.

There was only me and *her*.

The predator.

And the prey.

The final note chimed and another song began, setting me free like the shot of a gun at a fucking horse race. I darted from the living room, catching the edge of the wall to slingshot around to the adjacent hall, my chest growing with each breath as I charged to the kitchens.

I heard my brothers on the stairs, but they weren't my prey. And they wouldn't find her.

I would.

“Oh, Ghost,” I singsonged over *Gravedigger* playing muffled through the walls. “Come out, come out, wherever you are...”

The patter of little feet rained across the floor above my head, and I licked my lips, taking off at a sprint.

She had no idea what sort of monster she'd just unleashed.

CHAPTER

Thirty-Four

AVA JADE

I TUCKED myself into the tight cupboard at the base of an old converted hutch in the grand bathroom upstairs, kicking towels aside to fit. My heart raced in the dark with the words of Primal Ethos' *Gravedigger* whispering of violence in my ears.

I regretted my choice of hiding place as soon as I closed the door, but it was too late. I could hear footfalls I recognized as distinctively Rook's thundering up the steps.

My breaths came heavy and ragged, and I closed my mouth, forcing the air to enter and exit silently through my nose. The others had gone down the other end of the hall, but Rook sounded like he was headed right for me. Like he knew exactly where I was.

I clasped my palms over my mouth, a thrill going through me as his dark shadow crossed the threshold of the bathroom, passing it by.

Even if I wanted him to find me, a part of me—the part that willingly decided I was the prey—instinctively wanted to run. Knowing this predator wasn't just a threat. He was apex. And if he found me, I didn't think even he would be able to control what he would do.

I'd seen a glimpse of it that night after he fought Conor Jones in the ring at Sanctum and he came after me in the streets afterwards. The thrill in his black eyes. The way he stalked around me, turning us in circles. A dance of villains and thieves.

Of primal desire and the need to *dominate*.

I pushed further back into the cupboard as the song switched, changing to the quicker tempo at the opening of *Run, Bitch, Run*.

Fitting.

A cold sweat coated my chest and slicked over my forehead as I heard Rook crashing through the rooms down the hall, growing closer by the second.

As though on cue, my ass knocked something solid hidden at the back of the cupboard. Something glass. A bottle. It tapped against the wood. Such a quiet sound, but I could feel the change in the air.

Like it was thicker to breathe.

“*Shit,*” I cursed with a manic laugh, kicking out of the cupboard to scramble over the slippery tile, sloppily as I unfurled, finding my feet. I raced from the bathroom, conditioned air rushing over my bare stomach, whipping my hair back from my face.

At the end of the hall, Grey and Corvus tripped over each other exiting a bedroom. Behind me, I could feel Rook’s presence like a heavy shadow.

“*Got you,*” he snarled, far too close, and I gripped the banister, launching myself over it, my stomach soaring as I tumbled through the air, landing on the balls of my feet in the foyer, rolling to lessen the impact. The roll turning right back into a full sprint.

The floor beneath my feet trembled as Rook jumped down behind me with a loud grunt.

Oh god.

Oh fuck.

I crossed the living room in a split second, rushing through the dining room as *Run, Bitch, Run* hit its first base drop. I could hear him behind me. In the living room. He’d be on top of me in seconds. The others not far behind.

Glass shattered in the living room, and I sucked in a breath, spying the dark space beneath an oversized ottoman in the sitting room. I slid across the hardwood floor, disappearing into that darkness an instant before Rook crashed into the room.

A clatter sounded above me. The bottle I'd knocked against the back of the cupboard in the bathroom must've fallen.

"She's back upstairs," Grey shouted, and I was sure if they came any closer, they'd be able to hear my heart thudding as loudly as I could hear it in my own ears.

Two sets of racing footfalls departed, but there was still one set lingering. Even with the slightly heavier right foot from his injuries. I know the sound of him anywhere. Rook knew I didn't go back upstairs.

Run, Bitch, Run slowed, coming to an end, giving me the opportunity to hear him take a long breath in through his nose. Was he... trying to scent me?

Wetness slicked my thighs beneath my leather skirt and I bit down hard on my lip, wanting to run but also aching to be found. I pressed my thighs together as the next song started, gasping as the leather hugging my thighs creaked.

Fuck.

Strong hands gripped my ankles, and I let out a squeal that was stolen away by the raucous beat of the next song as Rook dragged me out from beneath the ottoman.

I twisted out of his grip, clawing the carpet to escape, but he had me again a second later, his hard body crushing mine into submission, face down on the floor. "Where do you think you're going, Ghost? You're mine now."

A feral sound escaped my lips as I reflexively struggled to find a way out, my heart racing like a trapped animal. His knee slipped from my spine, and I took the opportunity to flip onto my back, launching a bare foot into his chest. An *oof* left his mouth as he fell back, and I scrambled to my feet, hurtling over the couch.

He was up in an instant, and I stood there like a deer mesmerized by bright headlights as I watched his shoulders expand. Rook gauged the distance to me. The height of the couch between us. He stepped to his left, and I jerked to the right, the bulky couch the only thing stopping him from getting to me.

“Ghost...” he warned, his tone dripping delicious venom.

I licked my lips, trying to taste it, and then bolted.

The thud of the couch being tossed from his path made shivers of fear and anticipation electrify every step. I didn't even get back to the main living room before making the critical mistake of turning to see how far behind he was. My foot caught on the arched leg of a side-table in the entry, and I went crashing back to the floor.

I flipped to my back right as he descended on me. I raised an arm to strike, but he already had my wrists and pinned them high above my head, making me struggle and writhe beneath him.

“*Mine.*” His guttural declaration vibrated through his chest.

I cried out as he bent over my chest, biting the mound of my right tit, nearly breaking skin, making me see stars.

I got an arm free and raked my claws over his neck but that only excited him more. He fought to regain control, twisting my arm, my body, until I was facedown and entirely unable to move. I felt the press of cold steel against the base of my spine and shivered. But it was the press of his warm, hard cock through his jeans against my ass cheek that had me panting for him. Salivating.

Wanting.

Needing.

Begging.

“*Please.*”

He flipped up the hem of my skirt and sliced the thin string of my thong in one quick movement, exposing me to him. He pawed my left cheek before squeezing it so hard a yelp tore

from my throat. His hand came down on the same spot an instant later, making goosebumps race along my body.

I arched, trying to move, that instinct to run still persistent in my blood, but he leaned over my body, and I felt the sharp edge of a blade under my chin, making my pulse skip a beat. “You aren’t going anywhere, Ghost,” his warm breath fanned over my cheek. “I *won*. Now I get to claim my prize.”

“You found her,” Grey’s excited voice came from somewhere to my right and Rook’s answering snarl made his steps falter, shuffle back a foot.

The sting of the blade nicking my skin made me suck in a breath as a droplet of warmth slid down my throat, finding a home between my breasts. I closed my eyes against the wave of endorphins, bristling beneath my dark prince.

“I found her,” Rook roared and the possession in his voice made my toes curl. “I get to claim her first.”

“Fair is fair,” Grey replied cautiously, and the remaining struggle leached from my coiled muscles.

Rook scraped the blade down my throat just as *Anthem of the Broken* began to play, raising gooseflesh in its wake. “Now be a good Ghost and don’t fucking move.”

He released my arm, and I let it drop to the floor, wincing as the overextended muscle returned to its natural state.

My breasts pressed against the floor with each rise of my chest. The blade withdrew from my throat and without warning, Rook impaled me with his cock, tearing a scream from my throat as my fingernails dug for purchase on the hardwood. “That’s right, Ghost, scream for your Rook.”

I didn’t catch my breath before he was rearing back to slam into my dripping cunt again, hitting something so deep I was sure the echo of him inside me would repeat forever.

Rook set a brutal, bruising pace, fucking me so hard I knew I’d feel him there for days after. But the pain shifted swiftly to a pleasure so intense I howled, his animalistic sounds, my moans, and the slapping of our bodies creating a song all our own.

I sucked in a breath, my chest lifting from the floor when he snatched my hair, pulling hard, making me have no choice but to hold myself up on my hands, pressing back into my knees as he drove into me with a feral possession, claiming me like he promised he would.

He came hard, the blade forgotten, dropped to the floor. His rough fingers grasped my hips tight as he arched his back and poured into me with a ragged cry. The sound of his climax brought on my own and I ground my cunt against his base, trembling against the floor, my core tightening around him, squeezing out every last drop.

Rook eased out and I fell onto my side, still riding the wave of my orgasm, drawing my knees in with a soft moan. He smiled devilishly at me, bending to press a kiss to my ankle. “So, hide and seek?” he asked, breathless, his pupils slowly returning to normal.

“My new favorite game,” I admitted with a dopey smile, craning my neck to find Grey and Corvus hovering in the entry, their eyes burning with lust.

“It’s not over yet,” Corvus said dangerously, making my pussy tighten again.

He crossed the room, mindful of Rook as he wrenched me to my feet, and shoved me back onto the couch. Mine and Rook’s combined release smeared over the luxurious fabric, and I opened my legs, helping it along. A wicked thought forming in my mind. I wanted to trash this place. I wanted to fuck on every surface.

“Want me to hold her down for you, Bro?” Rook asked, running his tongue over his teeth. “She’s a slippery minx.”

Corv jerked his chin in reply, and Rook lurched forward, grabbing me from behind, pulling me against his solid chest on the couch, wrapping his ankles around mine to keep my legs flayed. Arms locked between our bodies behind me.

Bones went to his knees in front of us, catching a decorative pillow Grey tossed his way. He ran the tasseled end of it over my slit, cleaning me. I gasped, throwing my head

back into Rook's shoulder when he removed the pillow and dove for my pussy with his mouth, his tongue thrashing wildly against my clit as he ate me like a man starved. I struggled against Rook, the sensation almost too much after the initial attack, but he held me there, arms locking around me like iron bars.

"You're going to come for me, Sparrow," Corvus said between assaults. "Whether you like it or not."

He didn't have to fucking tell me twice. It was a useless fight and one I was already losing, the beginning of my climax spiraling through me like a tornado, sucking me up just as hard as Corvus was sucking my clit.

I screamed again as I came on his tongue, trying uselessly to get my legs free from Rook's hold, but they were both determined to make me ride out every stomach churning drop, until my body sagged, trembling against Rook. All the fight gone out of me.

"Give her to Grey," I distantly heard Corvus saying. Almost completely out of it as my body was moved, passed from hands to hands. Body to body.

An erection pressed into my lower back, and I moaned as the scent of Grey filled my nose, petrichor and heady engine oil. I lifted an arm lazily to reach for him behind me, my finger tangling in his hair. His lips found mine, and I moaned against his tongue as it lashed into my mouth, taking me.

"You ready for us, baby?"

Us?

Grey lay down on the couch, pulling me with him, our lips disconnecting as my head lolled back against his chest.

I DID as I was asked and Corvus pulled my legs together, wrapping his hand around my crossed ankles to hold them high. "Think you can take two at once, Sparrow?"

Danger flashed in Corvus' eyes as he ran his pinkie finger through my wet slit, lower, to my other point of entry. I

clenched my teeth as he prodded the opening with his pinkie finger, prepping me slow. Rook leaned over the back of the couch, flipping his hair back before lighting a cigarette, settling in for the show.

The burn as Corvus added a second finger made me groan, but I didn't want him to stop. I'd been craving this for longer than I could remember, and I wasn't going to let a little fucking discomfort stop me from having it.

"That's it, Sparrow," Corvus purred, releasing my legs and withdrawing his fingers. He settled them on either side of me.

"Lift your hips for me, AJ."

I did as I was asked and Grey guided the head of his cock into my ass, making me grit my teeth. It was nothing like the plug from the other night. As Grey fed every perfect inch of himself into me, I knocked my head back against his hard chest, only letting out the air in my lungs once he was fully settled there and had a second to adjust. He'd taken my ass once before, on the spinning table at the Docks, but it felt like the first time all over again.

When I opened my eyes again it was to the sight of Corvus taking his massive erection out of his pants. Letting them fall to the floor as he kneeled on the couch between both Grey's and my legs.

OH FUCK.

I suddenly wasn't so sure I could handle this. I mean, I was the one who declared I wanted all three of them, but seriously, how could they both fit?

Corvus flattened a warm palm on my belly as Grey began to rock, moving his cock in and out of my ass in controlled increments. It felt... good.

Really good.

Corvus pressed the tip of his cock into my opening and the stretch—the dual sensation—was almost too much. I struggled to catch my breath, aching for a pillow to scream into as he pushed in an inch further. Another inch.

“Oh fuck,” I cursed, trying to lift up on my elbows, crooking a leg to try to shove him back. “Wait. It’s too much. I don’t think I can—”

“You’re going to take every fucking inch of this cock, Sparrow.”

I let out a yelp as he jerked my leg out of his way, holding it at arms-length as he eased even further inside, both of them filling me to fucking bursting.

“Look at that pussy stretch,” Rook crooned, and I found his black eyes above me, smoke drifting around his sharp cheekbones. “Damn, Ghost.”

Corvus locked into me, thrusting the rest of the way in, making my eyes roll back and a broken moan escape my lips.

I leaned up, needing to see for myself. Not quite believing I had them both inside me. At least not until Corvus started to move, his cruel strokes making my ass rock back and forth over Grey’s cock. The twin pleasure coursing through had me clutching at anything, everything, to hold myself together because surely I was going to tear apart.

Rook snaked an arm down to me, and I clutched it, holding myself halfway up so I could grind on them both. My nails bit so deep into Rook’s forearm that tiny tracks of blood raced to his elbow, making his eyes flash with lust.

“That’s it, Sparrow. There’s my good girl.”

I cried out as an orgasm with the intensity of a fucking plane crash began spiraling down through me. Different, but good. The pulse of it tightened around Grey’s cock in my ass and stole all the breath from my lungs.

“Fuck, AJ,” Grey hissed in my ear. “I felt that.”

“Another,” Corvus demanded. “Rook, hold her leg.”

Rook dragged my leg up the side of the couch, pinning it there with his free hand, allowing Corvus a better angle. His cigarette hung from his lips as he watched with rapt attention, his eyes fixed on mine as I rode out the last wave of the anal orgasm with a shuddering moan.

Corvus pounded into my pussy, the new angle hitting something even deeper inside.

He added his fingers, and I was a fucking goner.

“Fuck...yes...” I managed to get out between panting breaths, my legs starting to shake as another orgasm built, this one surging up through my core, making my back arch. “Bones!”

He slapped my clit hard, and I gasped. “Now, Sparrow! Come for us.”

I screamed as my cunt clenched around his mammoth length, and he came with me, letting out a cry in time with the crescendo of Fuckface. Grey’s hands on my hips squeezed, and I felt the moment he fully lost it, jerking against my back as they both poured into me and I split into a thousand pieces, my vision darkening for an instant before I came back, every muscle protesting the aftershocks of the orgasm still quaking deep within.

I shivered, letting my hand slip from Rook’s arm as Corvus pressed a hot kiss to my inner thigh and took his time pulling out. Once he was, my legs fell closed and Grey lifted me easily, his cock leaving my ass.

He turned me until we were both on our sides on the couch, his body conforming to the shape of mine from behind as he pressed a kiss into my hair. My arm was at an odd angle, but I was too spent to bother trying to move and fix it.

Hearing someone coming, I slitted my eyes open to find Corvus coming back into the living room with something in his hand. I hadn’t realized he’d left.

He knelt at the end of the couch, readjusting my hips gently to allow him access. He cleaned me with a warm cloth, making me sigh for an entirely new reason. He tossed the soiled cloth onto the back of an antique wingback chair in the corner and for some reason I found that so fucking funny.

“We should get those eggs,” I murmured sleepily.

“In a minute,” Grey whispered into my hair. “Rest, baby.”

I snuggled into his embrace, worrying that if I closed my eyes I might actually fall asleep right here, naked on my aunt's couch.

My eyelids fluttered.

“What was that?” Rook asked, and something about his tone had me snapping my eyes back open, my exhausted body coming back to life.

“What?”

I followed his eyes to the window, peering out into the night through the gauzy curtains.

“There. Look out over the hill.”

The glow of light over the hill could only be one thing. Headlights.

“They're supposed to wait on the service road,” I growled, angrily forcing myself to my feet, searching for my shirt. My ruined panties could stay.

“They are,” Grey replied, rushing to climb from the couch and get dressed too. He waved his phone at me. “They wouldn't move in. Not without saying something first.”

“You don't think...?”

“Fuck,” I hissed. “Cut the music!”

Rook ripped my phone from the auxiliary cord, plunging all of us into a ringing silence and tossed it to me. I caught it with ease, tugging my shirt over my head. “Fuck, the eggs! Move! I'll take the ones upstairs. You three split up down here. Remember where they are?”

“Yeah.”

“Yah.”

“Got it.”

“Meet back at the Rover,” Corvus added as I pulled my shoes back on and darted for one of the duffles, disappearing into the hall, spurred by the headlights now flashing across the windows in full streams of luminescent white.

I took the stairs two at a time despite the aching between my legs, muttering curses to myself the whole damn way. Couldn't a bitch get a nap after taking two dicks? Was that really asking too much?

I started at the end of the east hall, carefully scooping the eggs from the hall to place them into the foam.

The front door opened and I dropped to my knees, drawing a knife, but my aunt's haughty tone echoed up from the foyer, and I sheathed it again, knowing no matter how this went down, I wouldn't need it.

Want it, maybe. But that was a whole other gray area. I didn't want to murder a sad old lady. Bitch or not. But I also wouldn't spare her if she got in my way. Not after what she did.

Blood or not.

"Such a shame," she was saying. Her voice making me gag. Fuck, she really was repulsive. How I'd managed to spend more than a day with her or agree to her stupid arrangement was beyond me now. Past Ava Jade needed a slap. Preferably another spanking. From Rook.

"It really has gone downhill since the last time we visited, don't you think?"

"Yes, Madame Humphrey," her stuffy butler replied as I crept down the hall, closer to where I could hear coats being removed and luggage rolling over the parquet floors.

"And to think they actually expected me to take a junior suite. *Junior*, can you believe it?"

"No, madame."

I stayed low as I raced on tiptoe across the stairway, catching Corvus' severe face down the hall. He waved violently for me to get out from where he hid in the shadows, but I shook my head. I wasn't leaving yet. The real cheese was in my aunt's room. The most expensive of the eggs. Not to mention all her precious pearls and diamonds.

I wasn't about to leave any of it behind. That would just be wasteful, and I did not waste.

Out of sight of the foyer, I inched her doorknob to the right, twisting it until the latch released and I could sweep into her room without a sound, pulling the door back shut behind me.

It took me less than two minutes to add the egg to the others in the duffel and find her jewelry, grabbing it by the fistful to stuff into the duffel. I snatched the last of the pearls just when a shrill scream filled the mansion.

“My eggs!”

Oh no.

I bit my lip, tossing in the pearls and zipping the duffel, turning in a circle to find a better exit strategy. The balcony.

It was a second floor room.

Okay. No problem.

I rushed to the double doors, fumbling with the lock before managing to throw them open.

I could hear them coming up the stairs now.

A delicious thrill went through me, sharpening my focus, making a laugh bubble up my throat. I stopped it before it could escape, allowing myself a wide grin instead.

Down below, I caught movement in the bushes.

“Grey?” I hissed, and he spilled out onto the lawn, looking up at me with a furrowed brow.

“AJ?”

I tossed the duffel down. “Catch.”

Grey cursed, racing forward to catch the delicate eggs before they could smash on the lawn. Vaguely, I heard him calling up to me, warning me against the drop most likely but it was already too late. I climbed over the railing and used what remained of my strength to lower myself as far as I could go before dropping the rest of the way to the ground.

A ripple of pain raced up through my heels, but I grimaced through it.

“The balcony!” Humphrey cried above, and I threw my head back and howled, grabbing Grey’s hand to haul him away with me into the dark.

CHAPTER

Thirty-Five

GREY

I WENT over everything I had to present at the meeting that would start in the next fifteen minutes, bringing the image up on the tablet screen before shutting it down to wait for the rest of the crew and Diesel to arrive.

This was it. The piece we'd been searching for. With a little luck, we'd have the Kings by the balls.

I pressed my palms together, resting on the bar upstairs at Sanctum, pressing my fingers to my lips. There was going to be blood. A lot of it. The fun of the last few nights was at an end. Now, it was time for war.

“Holy shit.” Rook said beside me, choking on his whiskey as he squinted at something on his phone.

“What?” AJ asked, leaning over from his other side to see what he was looking at.

It spoke to the level of stress we'd been under lately that my stomach instantly soured before my brother could even respond.

“Humphrey,” he said, pushing the phone toward AJ. “The bitch bit it.”

AJ's eyes widened as she snatched the phone from him, scrolling through something on the screen there.

“She what?” Corvus asked from behind the bar, guzzling a bottle of water.

AJ let out a long breath and let the phone fall back onto the bar, looking at Corvus. “She’s dead.”

“What? How?” I demanded, a spike in my gut. Had Carson gotten to her? Was he there when we were there? Was he that close to getting his hands on AJ again?

“We killed her,” AJ added.

“What do you mean, we killed her?”

“Heart attack,” Rook answered. “She was pronounced DOA at the hospital a few hours after we made away with our fancy eggs.”

I looked past him to AJ. “Are you okay?”

She bit her lip. “Fine. Is that bad? I feel... nothing.”

“She was a bitch.” Rook shrugged, finishing his drink. “She wasn’t your family, Ghost, just blood. There’s a difference. You don’t have to feel a damn thing for that woman.”

AJ nodded to herself, subconsciously agreeing. “I’d be lying if I said I hadn’t considered doing her in myself after finding out she could’ve saved my dad.”

“There you go,” Rook said, reaching over to give her shoulder a squeeze. “This was you don’t have to get your hand dirty. Did you finish the article?”

“No, why?”

“Her staff dumped her at the hospital and none of them could be reached for comments.”

“They all took off?” I asked, incredulous.

Corvus’ lips twisted into a wicked smirk that looked foreign on his usually severe face. “With all the good silver and artwork, I suspect.” He laughed.

“So you can stop worrying about our DNA being all over the place. No one’s going to be reporting any stolen goods any time soon, Ghost.”

“That’s some fucking luck,” she snorted.

This girl, she still didn't get it. She wasn't running with the likes of a wannabe gangsters. The Saints were all but untouchable. Diesel had seen to making it that way. This was the weakest we'd been in the history of the gang since the very beginning when the three original Saints split ways. "We would've blocked the investigation before it could be elevated to the feds anyway, AJ. Not to mention the fact you're her straight A's niece and we spent Thanksgiving there. It would stand to reason our prints would be all over the place."

"And the *other* evidence?"

"We had a party while your aunt was out of town. Like teenagers do."

She shook her head, but there was a smile on her lips, and I realized I would do *anything* to keep it there.

"And fuck if it wasn't the best party I've ever been to," she played along, her thighs pressed together on the stool. I knew she was remembering it. It'd been almost thirty-six hours since the heist turned fuckfest, but it was still the number one thing on my mind. I'd had a rock solid hard-on off and on since I woke up the next morning.

A sharp whistle behind us had us all swiveling our seats.

Dies held the back door open across the mostly empty bar, his icy stare fixed on me. "Let's see what you got, Grey."

Hello to you, too, Pops.

He'd been easily irritable since what happened to the garden. It had been a shrine to his wife, and he'd tended it meticulously for as long as I could remember. I imagined it was like losing a part of her all over again.

"We'll be right down."

AJ slid off her stool, the pink flesh of her forearm looking better today than it did yesterday. Rook was walking with barely any trouble, and Corv's nurse finally stopped coming around. They were all mostly whole again. And I was starting to think a missing eye wouldn't be the thing that stopped me, after all. Target practice over the last few days had proved it.

With some minor adjustments, I was just as good as I'd always been.

“What are you looking at?” AJ asked curiously, her brow lifting.

“You.”

She gave me a cheeky look, coming to loop her arm through mine. “Come on, Superman. Let's go start a war.”



THE UNDERBELLY OF Sanctum was packed with faces, new and old. In the corner, a few seniors I recognized from Briar Hall stood with their arms crossed. They were the ones the guys and I identified as potentially strong enough to join our ranks. They stood tall, trying to appear unintimidated by the battle-hardened criminals surrounding them.

Then there were the other potential candidates. The ones brought in by the others. They consisted of cousins and friends. Brothers and sons. All men who wanted an in with the Saints, and now they'd get their chance to prove themselves worthy.

This feud with the Kings, and the eventual bloodbath it would come to, would be their only trial. Honestly, I counted them lucky. The trials could be far, *far* worse.

“Where's Uncle Damien?” Corv asked, scanning the room. “Thought he'd come for the meet.”

My good mood turned rancid in an instant. “Dies said he left town after Becca woke up. Guess he got what he came for.”

“What's with the hostility? You know he's got his own fucking chapter to run down south. He couldn't hang around here forever.”

I shook my head. “Yeah. Right. Just on edge.”

My disappointment rolled off my back. If Diesel was too fucking stubborn to ask for help, then why should I have

expected Uncle Damien to force it on him?

This—what we learned today—was a win. And I wasn't going to let anything ruin it. I'd worked too fucking hard.

Rook snapped at the guys from Briar Hall as we passed and when they jerked back from his shining teeth, he blew them a kiss, settling between two other new faces by the bar to ask Pinkie for another drink. The newbies gave him a wide berth, casting furtive glances his way as they cautiously sipped their beers.

I leaned into the side of the nearest one. "Just don't make any sudden movements," I warned with mock seriousness, and his Adam's apple bobbed. When Rook turned, drink in hand, he couldn't get out of the way fast enough, sloshing beer onto the floor.

"Hey," Rook growled, glaring at the poor guy. "Clean that shit up. This isn't your mama's house."

Diesel clapped his hands together at the head of the long table, getting everyone's attention. "All right, listen up, if you're a new implant, get the fuck out. The rest of you gather 'round. Grey has something to show us."

The new recruits filtered out as me and the others made our way to the table. I applauded Diesel's caution, but the new recruits were hardcore vetted by both Pinkie and myself. They had no connection to Mav, the Kings, or Carson fucking Bates. And when it came to blood, they'd be with us anyway. Pumping up our numbers. Giving us a better chance.

Human fucking meat shields with something to prove.

I waited until the last of them were gone before starting.

"This has got to be it."

I leaned over the table in Sanctum's underbelly, pushing the tablet into the middle so everyone crowded around could see it, too. The aerial view of the factory was pixelated. A snapshot courtesy of google maps. If it had been on a major road, we'd have better images, but the old metal manufacturing plant was set away from the hustle of Lennox, hovering far onto its outskirts, backing onto the national park.

“I almost passed over it at first, until I remembered Mav’s real name isn’t Maverick. Took a lot of fucking elbow grease, but I found out his real name is Clancy, and then I went over every factory *again*.” I jabbed the screen with the pad of my index finger. “The lease on this factory is in the name Clancy Moore.”

Diesel nodded at the grainy image. “You did good, Son.”

“We still need to scope it out. I’ve looked everywhere but wasn’t able to find any building plans or schematics for this place. We need to know all the entry and exit points. If there are cameras. Safeguards. We can’t rush in blind.”

“I’ll do it,” AJ offered. “I’m small, and I’m fast. I’ll be in and out before they know I’m there.”

“Fuck no.” It was Diesel who said it, but it was the echo of what the others and I were thinking. “Sorry, Ava Jade, but last time my boys lost you they almost lost themselves, too. I’ll send Mickey.”

AJ’s expression soured, but for once she didn’t argue.

Mickey gave a terse nod from across the table, his already hollow cheeks sucking in as he worked his jaw. “I’ve got it, boss.”

“Go prepare what you need. You leave after nightfall. I want that intel by morning.”

“If you go through the national park to come up on it from the rear, watch for surveillance in the trees,” I called after him, making him stop. “And if you see any trails or *anything* that looks like the entrance to a bunker, take note of the coordinates.”

Mickey gave another nod and left.

“Have you secured the buyer for the Fabergé eggs and jewelry?” Corvus asked.

“It’s done. We have the cash. The meet with the Mexicans is tomorrow and we’ll have everything we need.”

“You want us there for that?” Rook asked eagerly, but I could tell from Dies’ expression that he was about to decline.

“No. I need you here to keep a lid on things. This is our second rendezvous with Los Diablos. We’ve been a good earner for their illegal sales. Despite what we thought at the start, I don’t believe them to be a threat. In fact, they’re shaping up to be a regular supplier. They’re cheaper than our contacts to the east, and they’ve been in the business since before I was fucking born.”

“Could be a mistake,” Corvus put in, but Diesel was already decided.

“It’s a risk we’ll need to take.”

I turned the aerial image of the factory around to face me, looking for weak points to exploit in the grainy image. “If this is it, what’s the play?”

“We attack,” AJ answered from my left, drawing the attention of everyone in the room. “We can’t wait for them to hit us first. We don’t have the numbers. We hit *them* first. Hit them hard. Leave no survivors.”

“*Fuck*,” I heard Rook groan under his breath, turned on by our girl’s penchant for violence. I had to admit, it turned me on when she took control like that, too.

“She’s right,” Diesel announced and a few whispers went up through the crew.

“They might have the numbers, but we have this.” He thumped a closed fist over his chest.

“And this.” He jabbed two fingers into his temple.

“If we plan this just right, we can wipe them from the board with one stroke. Finish it for good.” He pushed himself to his full height. “Get ready, crew. We’ll be feasting on King flesh by the weekend.”

CHAPTER

Thirty-Six

AVA JADE

MICKEY'S SKETCHES of the factory were fucking atrocious, but they would have to do. He confirmed it. The Kings were there. Holed up inside. He heard arguing inside and there had been at least fifteen cars parked along an old dirt service road leading up to the place.

There hadn't been a Jeep, but that didn't mean Carson wasn't there. He had to be there. We had eyes on the only exit road branching off from the service road now, and only one car had left while two others returned since Mickey got back.

They were definitely camping out there and the only exterior precautions they were taking were a few trip wires and from what Mickey could tell, only one security cam facing the road.

The plan was simple, and we went over it for the fifth time since its inception.

"Pinkie, you're coming in from the northwest with Greg. Mickey with Ryan from the southeast side."

"And we're hitting it direct from the southwest face," Grey finished for Diesel.

"Right. Each of you chucks your grenades into the windows, here, here, and here on my mark."

"That will filter them out through the front exit here where the rest of our force will be waiting," I added, practically knowing the whole damn spiel word for word now. "Now can we go?"

“There’s one last thing.”

We waited, chomping at the bit to go outside with the others packing the vans full of everything we needed.

“Ava Jade, I’m going to need you to stay back with the other snipers.”

“What?” I demanded, my voice dripping venom.

“Look,” Diesel said, raising his hands in a placating gesture. “Before you go biting my head off, hear me out.”

I looked to my guys for help, but it didn’t look like I was going to get any.

“I’d bet my left nut that you’re a better shot than any of the others on your worst day. You’re a natural. I need that kind of skill at my back. I need someone up in the nest who isn’t going to take my head off trying to take out the enemy beside me.”

“And you trust that I won’t?”

“Well, if you keep looking at me like that, I might reconsider.”

“I don’t want to be way up on the hill, Dies. I need to be down there. With them,” I gestured to Rook, Grey, and Corvus. I shoved Rook next to me. “Say something.”

“It would be more fun if she was with us.”

Diesel pinched the bridge of his nose. “Rook, that is such a shit argument I don’t even know where to start.”

“Corv? Grey?” I tried, but Corv was chewing his lips and Grey was toeing the carpet. “Seriously?”

Corv scratched the back of his head, where sandy blond hair had begun to grow back, covering the scars a little better. I’d give him new ones if he didn’t pipe up. “Sparrow, it’s not a bad idea. You are a crack shot. Just yesterday you hit a rolling barrel at two hundred fifty yards and still managed to hit within the second ring of the bullseye. You’re the best we have. Even better than Grey.”

“Especially now,” Grey muttered, and I knew he was thinking about how his ability with the sniper had taken a hit with the loss of his eye. He had to handle the weapon on the opposite side, needing to learn it all over again.

“Not what I meant,” Corv said to Grey before turning back to me. “Think about it for a sec. If you’re up there, you can eliminate any threats that come at us before we can ever see them coming.”

“And if it gets too messy and you can’t get a clean shot on any of them, then you’re not so far away that you can’t run into the action,” Rook added with a wink. “I’ll save you a few.”

“I don’t like the thought of her being alone up there, though,” Grey said on a breath.

“She won’t be,” Diesel argued. “There will be two other snipers with her.”

I groaned inwardly, breathing deep to suppress the wrath building in the shape of my darkness as I thought it through.

Fuck.

I’d hit Lenny Ace straight through the heart at two hundred yards despite the wind rolling in off the lake. It really was a beautiful shot. And honestly? I’d bet Diesel’s left nut and his right, that I could do it again if I needed to. Being able to watch over my guys while they were down there wasn’t a half bad idea, either.

“You have the comms, still?” I asked Grey, and he grinned up at me, digging in his black pack for them.

“Thought you said they’d be too distracting.”

Grey scattered the little ear pieces on Diesel’s kitchen table, and I lifted one up, inspecting it. “I did. But if I’m going to be watching from above, then it might be helpful to warn you if trouble’s coming your way.”

“You’ll do it, then?” Diesel asked, trying to confirm as the screen door banged closed and Pinkie appeared in the hall.

“We’re all packed up, boss.”

“Yeah, I’ll do it. But if it looks too hairy down there I’m leaving that fucking thing on the hill and I’m coming down.”

Diesel offered me a rare grin. “Deal. If the other’s come down with you just ditch all the ammo first, yeah? Don’t need our enemies using our own hardware against us.” Diesel’s brows drew, his gaze flicking back to Pinkie. “What is it, Pinkie? Why are you hovering?”

“The vet’s shitting a brick, Dies. You sure we need him with us?”

A muscle in Dies’ jaw twitched. “I’ll handle it. Go make sure the snipers packed Big Red. Ava Jade’s going to be up in the hills with them.”

“Nice,” Pinkie said. “I’ll go check.”

Diesel followed him out the front door while I turned the ear piece this way and that between my fingers. “How’s the range on these?”

“More than good enough.”

“Is he always such a buzzkill?”

“Might as well be his middle name,” Rook said with a rough laugh. “Where do you think Corv gets it from?”

Grey scooped up all the comms gear and deposited it back into his bag.

“Come on, let’s go gear up,” I said, my fingers itching for my blades as we left the house. One way or another, each one would kiss the skin of our enemies tonight. And one way or another, Carson Bates would be ours before the night was through.

“Should we do it now?” Grey asked as we stepped out into the night to a swarm of Saints double checking their weapons. Strapping on vests and other gear.

“Do what now?” I asked.

Rook caught my elbow, dragging me to the open back of a nondescript black van. “Diesel got a wide selection, but if

there isn't one here that suits you, you can borrow one of ours for now."

"What are you talking about?"

Corvus stepped ahead of Rook, flipping back a swath of grey fabric laid in the bed of the van to reveal an arsenal of handguns.

Grey wrapped his hands around my shoulders from behind, looking over my shoulder at all the weapons. "Call it an early Christmas present."

A thrill went through me and I found myself grinning. "I get to pick one? Whichever one I want?"

"Yep," Grey said in my ear. "Personally, I'd recommend the Smith & Wesson or the Colt 1911." He indicated two near identical guns save for the difference in grip. One had a reddish colored diamond pattern grip that looked to be made of horn while the other was a lighter oak-looking wood.

"You know I'm a sucker for a Browning," Rook added, lifting a gun from the cloth that looked similar to his own, save for the darker grip. He disassembled it in a matter of seconds, checking the parts before clicking it all back together and handing it to me. "Looks solid."

"She can't go wrong with the Beretta or the Colt," Corvus spoke up, passing me another in my other hand. This one was a simple black number, sleek and smaller than the Browning. I tested the weight of each in my hands, truly feeling like a kid on Christmas fucking morning.

I set both down, deliberating, my eyes raking over the options until one caught my attention. The black cherry grip with a carved out starburst design was so unique by comparison, and I lifted it, feeling its weight. A winged pewter medallion in the middle of the grip reminded me of my Crows. It felt like the right size.

"Your girl has expensive taste," Diesel said, coming up behind us. "Not going to lie, I was kind of hoping she wouldn't choose the Wilson Combat. It's a beauty."

“Yeah?” I asked, holding it at arm’s length to look down the sight, ensuring I wasn’t pointing it at anyone. It was heavy enough that I knew the mag was loaded, but the safety was still on.

“Yeah,” Diesel echoed. “It’s a solid choice—basically what would be born if the Colt and the Browning had a baby. Here.”

He reached around me to grab two extra mags. “They’re a fifteen round capacity.”

I took them from him, hating how this man could make me furious one minute and then *like this* the next. “Thanks for doing this, Dies. I appreciate it.”

He nodded. “Of course. ’Bout time you had your own weapon *aside* from your blades. Here, I grabbed a couple holster options for you. Thigh, ankle, or chest?”

Considering I already had my blades across my chest and strapped to both ankles as well as my belt and one thigh, there was really only one free space. “Thigh,” I said, but Corvus took the strap from Diesel before I could reach out and grab it, kneeling at my feet.

“Spread your legs for me, Sparrow.”

Yes, sir.

He set to fastening the straps in place, anchoring them to my belt, attaching the gun holster, positioning it just right. “Gun.”

I handed it to him, and he slipped it into place. “How does that feel? Good?”

I swallowed hard, tongue-tied, making Diesel clear his throat and excuse himself. “Yeah,” I answered finally. “That feels perfect.”

He gave my thigh a squeeze before rising back to his feet. “It suits you.”

I ran my hand over the grip. “Yeah. He’s a beaut.”

“He?”

“Oh yeah, definitely a *he*. Jealous?”

“If you keep stroking it like that, I might be.”

I laughed, realizing there were several other Saints looking my way. Some appraised my new weapon with admiration, but most wore grave expressions. Especially the newest recruits.

“This is going to work, right?” I asked my guys, keeping my voice down.

Rook nodded. “Yeah, Ghost. It’ll work.”

There was no other option.

A tingle of apprehension raced down my spine watching the vet breathe into a paper bag near the front door as Diesel patted his shoulder. For a guy who treated some of the most gnarly wounds I’d ever seen, he was far less butch than I thought he’d be. I still hadn’t met him officially, but it was clear to anyone watching that this guy was *not* here of his own volition.

In his late thirties, he was built slim, with a whip of red hair that touched the tops of his ears and an overly pointed chin. He looked so out of place among all the beef and brawn surrounding us. But he wasn’t wrong to be afraid.

The Kings still outnumbered us two to one, and if they got so much as a whiff of our advance, there was a good chance most of the men here wouldn’t be coming home to their families.

But that was why we went over the plan a million fucking times.

Because it *had* to work.

“Don’t worry about the vet,” Grey said, reading me wrong. I wasn’t worried about him. I fucking pitied him his complete and utter lack of balls. “He’ll be hanging at the back of the advance. Dies only wants him with us to treat the wounded on site. We lost too many men at the Docks that he could’ve saved if we got them to him faster.”

“I know,” I replied. “He won’t be armed, right?”

Rook shook his head. “*Pffft*, as if.”

That was good at least. A gun in those shaky hands was sure to cause a fucking catastrophe.

“We ready to roll out?” Corvus called to Diesel, adjusting the straps on his vest before visually checking mine. I gave him a pointed look.

“Five minutes,” Diesel shouted, and everyone on the lawn and driveway spread the word.

My blood buzzed with adrenaline and I blinked slow, shivering as a pool of it enveloped me in its warm embrace, making me tip my head back.

“Cool it, Ghost,” Rook said, hauling me back against him so I could feel the start of his erection through his jeans. “Or I’ll have no choice but to take you right here on this lawn in front of the whole crew.”

Was it bad that I was thinking about letting him do just that.

The others nearby looked at us like we were crazy, and they weren’t wrong. Where their faces were long and drawn or tight with worry, my dark prince and I smiled, thriving on the promise of violence.

The sound of a horn broke us apart, and I was about to cuss out whoever’d done it. They were going to wake the whole damn neighborhood with that noise and the last thing we needed was curious neighbors coming out onto their lawns.

But it wasn’t one of ours. Headlights flashed bright across the lawn as a truck I recognized pulled right up onto the grass in front of us, followed by three other cars that parked down the street.

A few Saints drew their weapons, but Grey lifted a hand. “Lower your weapons.”

Damien St. Vincent opened the door of his truck, standing on the kick bar to look out over the assembly, a bright smile spreading wide on his face as he found Diesel by the door. “Glad we caught you, Brother!”

“Damien?” What the fuck are you doing here?”

“A little birdy told me you might be able to use a hand.”

He whistled, and those in the cars down the street exited, coming to join us on the lawn.

“No fucking way,” Grey said excitedly, speed walking across the grass to where two guys approached with a group of others behind them. He embraced the first one and got tackled to the ground in a bear hug before the other one hauled him back up and into a back thumping embrace of his own.

“Who are they?”

Rook ran a thumb over his lip. “Well, shit. Now it’s a fucking party.”

The two guys waved at Corv and Rook, coming over. The one on the left had a smile that practically glowed in the dark, while the other, though he looked happy to see my guys, had an aura of danger around him like a black cloud I doubted ever saw sunlight.

“Hardin, Kaleb, how’s it going, you fucking beautiful bastards?” Rook said, answering my question for me, slapping smiley guy’s hand before tugging him in for a hug and fist bumping the other one.

“Shit, Corv, the buzzcut does *not* suit you man. You got to grow that shit out,” the smiling one said, jerking Corvus in for a hug while rubbing the top of his head like a lucky charm.

“You always knew how to give a guy a compliment, Kaleb. Hardin,” Corv shook the other one’s hand. “What are you guys doing here?”

“Shit, wait. We need to make the proper introductions,” Rook said, completely interrupting Hardin’s reply, earning himself a glare in the process. He put a palm to my lower back and shoved me forward. “*This* is Ava Jade.”

Hardin’s bright eyes ran the length of me before giving a nod. “Nice to put a face to the name.”

“No shit?” Kaleb said excitedly, snatching my hand to shake it roughly in his. I lifted a brow at him and yelped as he jerked me forward, using his firm grip on my hand to spin me

in a circle before letting me go and giving me a good appraisal himself. “Damn. They don’t make ’em like that in SoCal.”

I snorted, changing my mind about stabbing him for the unsolicited dance. “So, who exactly are you guys?”

Kaleb put a hand to his chest, looking at my guys with wounded puppy eyes. “They didn’t tell you about us. Now, I’m just hurt.”

“Hardin St. Vincent,” the brooding one said, extending a hand, which I took. “And this jackass is my brother, Kaleb.”

“St. Vincent?”

“They’re Uncle Damien’s sons,” Grey explained.

“You’re here for the fireworks, then?” Rook asked, his black eyes alight with enthusiasm in a way that told me I could trust these two.

“Seems that way,” Hardin answered. “D said you could use the help.”

Kaleb shoved Corv. “Couldn’t miss the chance to come up and see your ugly mugs.”

I caught sight of Damien and Diesel speaking in hushed tones near Damien’s truck, and looking around at all the now-hopeful faces of our crew, I truly hoped Diesel didn’t turn down his brother’s offer. I scrutinized Damien St. Vincent in a new light. I would’ve never pegged him as the fatherly type, but then again, I would’ve never guessed Diesel to be a father, either.

His sons didn’t look much like him aside from Hardin’s dark hair and wide-shouldered build. And maybe Kaleb’s face shape, with the sharp edged brows and even sharper jawline.

They were pretty, but not pretty enough to go saying *my guys* had ugly mugs. Joke or not.

Damien wrapped an arm around Diesel, drawing him over to where we stood on the lawn while they continued their conversation.

“You know I can handle my own shit, Damien,” Diesel was saying, and I wanted to fucking hit him.

“I know,” Damien said. “But you don’t have to. Besides, I’m looking forward to fighting alongside my brother. It’ll be like old times.”

Diesel’s hard exterior seemed to crack at that, his lips pulling into a half grin.

The rest of Damien’s men came forward, saying their hellos to my guys and Diesel, who graciously welcomed each one.

“This is all I could spare,” Damien said, indicating the additional twelve men on top of himself and his sons.

“It’s more than enough, Brother.”

Damien let out a loud whoop, slapping Diesel on the back before tearing his jacket off to reveal a menagerie of polished steel strapped over his chest and around his waist. He stuffed his tatted hand into his pocket, and when he withdrew it, gleaming brass knuckles glinted in the moonlight as he raised his fist. “Move out! *Let’s go kill us some motherfucking Kings.*”

CHAPTER

Thirty-Seven

AVA JADE

WE MOVED ON FOOT, under the cover of darkness, the only sound the *shhh* of branches brushing thick canvas and the crunch of boots over dry dirt. My guys flanked me as we made our way, them with their guns out and aimed low, me with two of my blades in hand.

As much as I was tempted to use my new gun, I wasn't acquainted with it well enough to choose it as my first line of defense. He'd get his turn if I lost my blades in battle, though.

I adjusted the sniper bag on my back, feeling the burn in the muscle across my shoulders from carrying it the four miles from where we parked back at a trailhead near the Lennox exit.

Grey wandered closer to my side. "Want me to take it?" he asked in a whisper, but I shook my head.

"We're almost there."

I could feel it. Mickey said it was about five miles in, and my body knew the distance from running my whole life. As if on cue, I squinted into the dark, seeing how the terrain changed, sloping upward. That was the hill. And somewhere below it, nestled in a small valley clear of trees would be the factory.

"Hey, Sniper," a guy called Donny whispered, jerking his chin up and to the right. "This is us."

Another guy with a sniper bag made his way over while the rest of them continued their careful pace through the trees.

Diesel stopped at the head of them and the rest paused with him. He stared right at me, giving me a meaningful nod. *Watch over my sons*, he said without the need to speak at all.

I nodded back, and he twirled a finger in the air before butting his AK to his shoulder, continuing into the dark.

“Fuck, I change my mind,” Corvus said, his jaw clenching tight. His eyes looking brighter than ever with the black war paint slashed over his sharp features. “Maybe you should come with us.”

“You’re the one who convinced me to do this,” I argued, my whisper cracking like a whip. “I already agreed.”

He cursed, his gaze fixing on Donny and the other guy whose name I could never remember behind us. “You watch her fucking back,” he told them.

“We will.”

“Bones, I’m going to be fine. We all are. And who do you really think will be watching whose back up there?” I challenged, leaning into the darkness, letting it bring me the confidence I needed to do what we were about to do. I was fucking *fast*. If anyone came up behind us, I’d be the one laying them out with my blade before either of these fuckers could even draw their weapons.

Corvus put his forehead to mine. “See you when it’s over, Sparrow.”

I nodded against his forehead, and he pulled back.

“Comms check,” Grey said, tapping his ear piece. “Come in.”

His voice echoed in my ear, and I nodded, tapping my ear piece. “I hear you.”

Rook and Corvus nodded, signaling that they could hear me in their ear pieces, too.

“Let’s move,” Donny said. “We need to be in position before it begins.”

Grey surprised me with a rough kiss before Rook stole me away with a fist grip on my pussy through my tactical pants. I opened my mouth in surprise, and he used the opportunity to dive into my mouth with his tongue. I moaned into his mouth, and he bit my lip, drawing blood.

He released my wet cunt, and I blinked up at him, having to shake myself to get my focus back.

“Catch you on the flip side, Ghost.”

“Be careful down there.”

They turned away from me, falling into step with Hardin and Kaleb, the five of them moving like shadows through the trees. I watched until I couldn't pick them out from the others anymore, and Donny nudged my forearm. “Come on, there's nothing you can do for them from down here. Let's climb.”

I sighed, sheathing my blades as we hiked the steep slope all the way to its summit, having to resort to digging my fingernails into the hard dirt and rock to get up the last fifteen feet to the mostly flat top. Jagged rock made finding good spots to set up a challenge and peering down over the lip of stone, I knew trying to jump down and run into the action would be more of a challenge than I originally thought.

I would be more likely to roll down the steep face than run.

The other two snipers and I got into position, and I knew it wasn't a mistake that they placed themselves to either side of me, Corvus' orders to watch my back likely still ringing in their ears.

I looked down through the trees as I set up Big Red just like Grey taught me, able to see the outline of the factory in the ambient moonlight. Cloud cover was pretty heavy tonight, which provided an added layer of cover we were all grateful for, but would also make everyone's jobs harder. Including mine.

Once Big Red was in position, I hunkered down in the dirt, lying out against the cold earth.

“In position,” Donny said, his radio crackling.

A jolt of electrifying panic shot through me, and I rushed to look through the scope, making sure I had the angle I wanted. My breaths fogged in the air, stomach packing the dirt with each deep inhale.

My finger trembled as I rested it next to the trigger and I willed myself to calm down, blowing out a slow breath, tapping into that hyper focus still hovering just out of reach.

The factory loomed a couple hundred yards down the bank, settled on the flattest stretch of earth, surrounded on its left and back sides by trees set twenty paces back from the brick exterior. To the right, a long dirt drive was choked up with tens of vehicles. In front, where my sights were trained, a flat expanse of crumbling pavement stood between the large entry doors of the factory building and the tree line.

I LOOKED ALL AROUND, trying to find Diesel or my guys or anyone in the trees, but they were doing their jobs well. I couldn't find a single one for almost a full minute until I spotted Mickey getting into position, creeping forward through the trees. Which meant my guys were somewhere out there, behind the building, readying their grenades.

I SWUNG my barrel to the right, trying to find the other team, instead I found a King. He reached into the open driver's side window of a car and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. He plucked one out and put it to his lips. Ten feet away, a Saint crept up on him from behind, using the parked cars as cover.

The air froze in my lungs as I watched, praying that they could take him out quietly. Quickly. Before someone noticed. I had a clean shot, but the echo would be worse than whatever sound the guy might make as he died.

THE SAINT RUSHED FORWARD ALL AT ONCE, gripping the King around his face with a palm over his mouth. My eyes gaped wide as his neck snapped and the Saint set him down easy. I

realized it wasn't just any Saint. It was Hardin. I watched him drag the body out of sight before darting through the maze of parked cars to the back of the building.

Damn. He was good.

"Get ready." Diesel's voice came over the radio, and I turned my sights back to the front doors, peering over the edge of the hill to find a line of Saints crouched like boulders along the tree line, waiting. Ready.

Goosebumps rose on my arms and that next level focus snapped into place as I watched Mickey race forward from the left and the other team rush up from the right, dipping between cars to get to the side of the factory wall.

My body tensed.

The *bang bang bang* of the grenades went off like dominos, echoing through the night. Vibrating in the air. Screams followed and orange light exploded out the sides of the factory, smoke rising up to the sky.

The front doors burst open, and just like Diesel said they would, the Kings rushed out, coughing and spluttering. Some injured, others with their weapons raised, ready for the fight they seemed to at least have some inkling was coming.

They were all armed to the teeth, but as Diesel and Damien led the charge from the trees, they were caught entirely by surprise. Gunfire sounded like firecrackers in the dark, and I watched as one King fell, then another. Waiting for my guys to join the fray. Looking for one specific face amid the absolute massacre.

Everyone was on strict orders not to kill Carson if they could help it. We wanted to take him alive. But I wouldn't complain much if he had a few non-lethal holes in him when they handed him over.

Donny fired next to me, and a King with a grenade in his hand went down before he could throw it, blowing himself and the guy next to him into pieces. My guys came through the smoke, charging forward like gods of war personified. Rook slit the nearest King's throat with a swipe of his arm and

roared in the spray of blood as Corvus pumped two bullets into two more Kings and Grey narrowly dodged an attack by the third, getting his arm around the guy's head. He pulled up sharply, and the body attached to it slumped. He discarded the King, kicking him out of the way as they continued the charge.

Fuck, they were beautiful.

Shit!

Diesel fired the last round in his mag and it dropped to the pavement. He bent to reload and a King behind him lifted his weapon, aiming it at the back of Diesel's head.

I fired, and the King's head exploded, raining brain matter over Diesel's back. He gave a two finger salute our way before taking out another King in his path with his brother now tight at his side, watching his back.

I swiveled back to the guys, but they were doing just fine, dispatching justice like the cruel Saints they were.

Three more Kings exited the building and I recognized Maverick among them. I set my sights on him, but his sights were firmly trained on my guys. I watched him point their direction and the goons to either side of him raised their weapons. I fired, and took out the one on Mav's right, jerking back the lever to push another round into the chamber, but it made a metallic *chckk* in my ear and wouldn't pull back the full way. I tried again.

"Jammed."

Keeping an eye trained down the scope, I tapped my earpiece. "The door!"

Corv spun, firing, laying out the goon to Mav's left.

Maverick raised his weapon and a fucking fresh army of Kings emerged from the smoke behind him. Way more than there should've been. Double the force we knew about. I worked mercilessly to unjam my gun, shouting at the other snipers. "The door. Shoot them down!"

My heart pounded in my skull as sloppy fingers worked to pry back the lever. Donny shot. One round. Then another.

“Where the fuck are they all coming from!” The other sniper to my left cried, reloading.

“I don’t know!”

The lever popped back, and I cried out in relief, dislodging the bullet. I reloaded and pried it back again, a cold shiver rushing down my back as I settled back into position, took aim, and fired at the first King I saw.

I chewed through all the rounds in a matter of what felt like seconds before I needed to reload again.

“There are too many.”

“Sparrow, there are too many,” Corvus’ gruff voice echoed my own words in my skull through the earpiece, making all my muscles seize and burn. “Hold them back!”

“Donny, why aren’t you firing?” I screamed.

“I’m out! I’m out!” he shouted back. “No more ammo. Fuck this, I’m going down.”

Before I could say a word to stop him, Donny was over the ledge and rolling over sharp rocks and loose dirt, all the way down to the bottom of the hill.

I finished reloading and started firing again, doing my best to hold them back.

Fearful faces lifted in our general direction as their brothers fell at their feet, .50 Cal rounds in the center of their mass.

“Sniper!” I heard someone shout far below, and the Kings crowding outside the entry scattered, some returning back into the building, others into the trees. Others right into the waiting lines of fire of Saint guns.

I picked off two who tried to escape to their cars before I was out of ammo again and reached for more only to find my canvas empty.

“Shit! I’m out!”

I looked down my sights again, trying to find my guys. To know which direction to head once I launched myself off this

hill. I found Diesel and his men fighting the bulk of Carson's force to the left, but where...

I found them.

Grey, Corvus, and Rook formed a tight circle, nearly back to back as they fought hand to hand against five Kings. Guns and shell casings littered the ground at their feet. Clearly everyone was out of fucking bullets.

Okay.

The other snipers and I managed to put a good dent in the extra men and from what I could see, despite their inflated numbers, we still had the upper hand. Though I cringed as I found several familiar faces among the dead.

I tapped my earpiece. "I'm coming down."

But just before I moved my eye from the scope, I caught sight of a familiar head of dyed blonde hair, and I gripped the rifle tight, following him as he skirted the left side of the factory.

"It's Carson!" I shouted, holding down the button in my earpiece. "Northeast corner of the factory, coming to the front!"

"Shoot!" I yelled at the other sniper. "There! The northeast corner of the factory! Take out his legs!"

He angled the shot and fired, missing Carson by a fucking hair.

"Again!"

"I need to reload."

"Fuck!"

"Don't," came Grey's voice, out of breath and muffled by the sounds of battle around him through the earpiece.

I found them again through my scope, and watched Rook dispatch his enemy and the one about to get a hit on Grey, bathed in blood. He put his hand to his ear. "*Where?*" he snarled.

I turned back to set my sights on Carson, just catching him as he doubled back and took off into the tree line to the northeast. “In the trees! Fucker’s running!”

But he wasn’t going to get away. Not this time. I stood, pushing sweat and hair away from my face as I assessed the drop one last time.

“Wait,” the other sniper called after me. “They’ll fucking kill me if I let you—”

I jumped, managing to land on my feet. My heels dug into the loose dirt and stones, sliding down the slippery slope.

“Sparrow, stay fucking put!”

I cried out as a rock jabbed into the soft part of my foot through my boot and fell onto my side, rolling, rocks and debris scraping along my arms and across my cheeks. My body was tossed from a sharp ledge at the bottom of the slope, and I landed hard on my stomach, crouching, tasting dirt on my tongue. I lifted my hand to my ear to tell them to meet me at the northeast corner, but my earpiece wasn’t there.

It’d come out in the fall.

I reached for my phone in my back pocket. My fingers grasped at nothing but thick material and gritty dirt. I felt around me in case either landed nearby but came up empty handed.

“God*fucking*damnit!” I coughed, pushing to my feet, the volume of the battle happening no less than forty feet in front of me so loud now it was near deafening. My ears rang with it and my vision blurred as the earth heaved beneath my feet as I got my balance and the dizziness dissipated enough to move.

I drew two blades, ignoring how my left hand was slick with blood from where my still-fragile skin tore open in the fall, and took off after Carson. I couldn’t waste any time. We couldn’t let him get away this time. One way or another, this ended tonight.

I wouldn’t wake up to another message from him on my phone. I wouldn’t sleep with one eye open, worrying what he might have planned for my Crows. I *couldn’t* do it.

Narrowly missing running straight into a tree, the last of the dizziness burned off as my muscles pumped fire through my veins.

They know where I'm going, I told myself. I'd said northeast corner, right?

They'd be right behind me.

Fuck, maybe they were already ahead of me. Maybe they had him.

That thought made my chest vibrate with the feline purr of my darkness.

Running steps off to my right had me tucking behind a tree before I could round to the northeastern side of the building and follow Carson's trail.

Damn.

I peered around the tree and looked down the barrel of a gun twenty paces away. It fired, and I just whipped my head back as tree bark exploded over my face. I bent low, rolling out from the cover of the tree, bullets puncturing the dirt in my wake. I threw.

His scream was abruptly cut off by a gurgle.

I leapt to my feet and ran, bending to tear my bloodied blade from his jugular to keep going. I'd never catch up with Carson if I didn't *push*.

The *crack* of another shot glanced off a tree as I ran passed it, but I kept on, altering my running steps into a messy zigzag with no pattern as bark snapped and scattered over my path with each missed shot.

Once I had a good idea where the fucker was, I mentally kissed the blade in my right and turned to throw it, knowing I didn't have time to retrieve it. It embedded in the burly chest of a King I didn't recognize, but I didn't wait to make sure he was down before I whipped my head back around.

I'd be too far from his line of sight soon, anyway.

I took a sharp left, going deeper into the national park where I saw Carson enter the tree line.

He could be so far ahead by now that I'd never catch up.

No, the darkness whispered. *We'll catch him.*

Yes.

I will.

I was born to run.

I took the other crow-handled blade from my chest, the one strapped over my heart. The one with the onyx eye and pushed myself even harder, feeling more than knowing that he was there. Somewhere ahead. Just out of reach.

The clouds overhead shifted, uncovering the moon long enough for its light to spill over the forest floor in dappled patches. A trail. There was a trail back here. A narrow channel of red dirt that carved through the forest in an almost straight line.

A large shape far to my right had me pausing, panting, lifting a blade to throw, but the clouds shifted again and my heart sputtered. The large boulder squatted amid its wooden cousins, and it wasn't the first time it'd tricked me into thinking it was something other than a harmless chunk of rock.

And suddenly, I knew where I was going.

Where he was taking me.

I raced for the rock, grimacing as I scratched a giant X into its face, blunting the edge.

Please find me.

I set my sights on the trail, finding fresh tracks in the dirt.

Got you.

I caught my breath before pushing myself onward, following Carson's trail, marking several more trees with vicious slashes of my blades. Breadcrumbs for the Crows.

Until suddenly, there it was.

I skidded to a stop, falling onto my side in the dirt before managing to scrape back to my feet, huffs of moisture clouding in front of my face even though I was *far* from feeling cold. I was far from feeling *anything* except this burning desire to hunt. To kill.

The cellar door hung open in the middle of the small clearing, welcoming me into its dark depths with open arms. Smears of soot coated the wooden panels and filled the cracks and grooves in the cement steps.

My throat ached with dryness as I panted quietly, seemingly unable to make my feet move any closer to the door. The fire leaching from my arms, making my fingers stiff from an all-consuming cold.

I peered over my shoulder as if I could will my Crows into appearing, soaring through the trees to my side. The only sound was the whisper of the wind . the redwoods, and I gulped, knowing that the longer I gave Carson to prepare for attack down there, the worse my chances would be.

My grip tightened on my blades, and I pushed through the ice, letting my darkness melt it all away. One step. Another.

I dipped a toe into the inky dark on the other side of the cellar doors and then kept going, letting it swallow me whole. I felt along the wall as I went, remembering the exact reverse of this moment. When I'd climbed, burned and broken up these same steps and found my freedom.

Found my way *home*.

I'd find my way home again. But this time, I wouldn't go empty handed.

Careful not to make a sound, I descended to the very bottom of the stairs and reached for the door handle, seeing a trace of light through the soot covered window down the long corridor. The acrid smell of burned things stung in my nose, making it wrinkle.

I lifted a blade to eye level and released the handle, deciding to slip through the slim crack in the door instead of opening it wider, not trusting the hinges.

My tits pressed into the doorframe, and I sucked my ass in tight, just fitting.

I buried myself in the shadows of the corner next to the door, peering up where there was a camera. It was still there, but it was covered in gray ash like much of the floor, and the red light was dead.

Hopefully that meant it was, too.

No risk, no reward.

I crept along the wall, wiping the back of my hand over my eyes to get rid of the ash clinging to my lashes.

The light was coming from the very end of the hall, where a steel door hung open.

I wasn't falling for another fucking trick.

I took my time, inspecting every room on my way down the corridor. Some of the doors were still shut tight, locked, dark around their edges. But others... they were filled with evidence of his abuse. Chains bolted to the floors and walls. Crimson stains on concrete floors. Fingernails embedded in concrete walls.

My stomach turned at those, and I moved slower, checking each space as thoroughly as I could. Giving my guys more time to find me.

A sinking dread grew in my belly the longer it took them.

They should've found me by now.

What if me and the other snipers didn't take out enough of the Kings to even the odds. What if...

I couldn't bring myself to think it.

They'll come.

"Fuck!" Carson bellowed at the end of the hall, and I covered my mouth with a palm to stifle the sound of my sharp intake of breath when an entire computer tower and monitor crashed across the opening to the room, cords snagging, keyboard keys clicking over the concrete.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck!”

Now or fucking never.

I ran on my toes, hopeful that the sounds of him trashing the room would conceal my advance.

I pressed my back flat against the wall outside the door, lifting a blade as something else crashed against the door and spilled into the corridor. A basket full of fucking burner phones. My skin itched with savage desire and it took everything in me not to rush in knives *hot*.

Maybe I should.

I clenched my teeth, sinking down to a crouch, remembering in vivid imagery the feeling of being powerless. Trapped in a cocoon of my own flesh as the drug he dosed me with took away all my fight. I couldn't go through that again.

Angling the blade in my right hand, I pushed it closer to the door, trying to see his reflection in its freshly polished silver surface. I couldn't see him. What I did see was a cot pushed against a cement wall. And another wall covered entirely in maps and images and notes and newspaper articles and a lot more I couldn't decipher from the reflection alone. All of it centered on *us*. Me. The Crows. Diesel and the Saints. Rebecca. All interconnected with lengths of red string.

It was a serial killer wall. Fitting, since that was exactly what this filth was.

I twisted my blade just slightly and found a pair of blue eyes staring back at me. Carson cocked his head and I jerked my blade back, rounding the corner.

He dove and I threw, catching him in the thigh.

I threw my other blade, but he jerked a chair in front of himself and it embedded in the worn seat.

I bent to draw another from my ankle, unwilling to get closer to him, when he fired.

The shot grazed my forehead and knocked me back onto my tailbone. Blood gushed down into my eye, blinding me,

but I couldn't feel it. I kicked off the wall, curling up behind a desk, narrowly avoiding his next shot.

“You bitch!”

I squeezed my blood-coated eye closed and spied his back around the edge of the desk. I hurtled my other blade from lying on my side, and it *thunked* into the meat of his side, burrowing deep.

He cried out, and three more shots fired in the room, finding homes in the concrete as he jumped to his feet and wildly fired after me as I sprinted back out into the corridor. My eye burned, and I hissed, gasping as I slipped on a phone, landing face first on the floor.

A heavy weight pressed into my back, and I screamed as his fist twisted into my hair, rearing my head back to smash my face back down into the concrete floor, dazing me.

I coughed, choking on the coppery tang of blood in my mouth, fighting through the pain and the black spots in my vision. Wondering if I could reach his gun where he'd dropped it a few feet away.

He reared my head back again, and I used the angle to my advantage, grabbing my last blade from its holster instead and sheering it through my hair like butter.

My head came free, and I used all my upper body strength, pushing up from the ground to knock him off me, coming at him with a feral cry, blade raised, short tendrils of dark hair stroking my cheeks.

Carson fell onto his back, catching my wrist before I could sink the blade into his chest. The tip of the blade pressed through his lips parted in fear, but it was met with a tough resistance I noticed the ridges of the vest beneath his clothes. *Damn.* This wasn't going to be easy. I bared my teeth, shouting my wrath into his face as I pressed down down *down* with everything I had.

“*You're no Angel,*” he spat in my face, the veins in his neck bulging like slithering eels.

“No,” I agreed. “*I'm your worst fucking nightmare.*”

With another feral cry, I locked the muscle in my back and shoved down, sinking the blade past the vest, seeing the moment it broke contact with skin from the widening of his eyes. He choked, his eyes rolling back, hands leaving my wrist to claw at his chest, gasping.

My darkness preened within and together, we shoved off him, reaching for the Wilson Combat strapped to my thigh to knock him the fuck out and drag him back to Rook's murder shed. But the fucker was faking the punctured lung and he was *fast*. Faster than me.

My gun came free of the holster at the same time he pushed his against my breastbone, grabbing me by my vest to haul me close.

I gasped as Carson pumped two rounds through the Kevlar, one chasing the other, helping push it through the woven fabric to meet its mark. The shock waves rolled through me and I felt hot wetness seep down my stomach. My Wilson slipped from my grasp, my world tipped up, and I fell hard into whatever waited on the other side.

CHAPTER

Thirty-Eight

CORVUS

I PRESSED my bloody fingertip to the boulder, coming away with rock dust from where my Sparrow had carved an X in its face. “This way!”

My gaze dragged to a bush, where fresh blood-splatter painted the leaves crimson. I heard my brothers crashing through the forest toward me and hollered. “Bring the vet! She’s hurt.”

Not knowing how badly was making it harder to breathe as I picked my way around the boulder, finding a trail concealed in the darkness. I dropped to one knee, feeling out the tracks.

Rook came up behind me. “Grey’s gone to bring the vet, which way?”

“She was fucking chasing him down,” I gritted out through clenched teeth, sizing the two distinctly different prints in the dirt.

“It’s okay, Bro. We’re right behind her.”

...except we weren’t.

There had been so many of them. So many more than we’d planned for. How they’d managed to conceal such high number for so long was beyond me, but I was willing to bet it was something to do with the bastard my Sparrow hunted. It took us forever to cross that stretch of pavement and get to the trees. We’d had to fight the whole way. Steamrolling Kings, cutting through muscle and bone.

I checked the gun I stole off a King a ways back. There was at least half a mag left. It would have to do. The sounds of the ongoing battle raged behind us, but Diesel and the others had it. There weren't many left out front, and I suspected even fewer still lingering inside the building. I'd pointed to the tree line and shouted *Carson* when he'd shouted over the gunfire to demand to know where the fuck we were going.

With any luck, he and the others wouldn't be far behind, and no matter what happened when we found Carson Bates, he wouldn't be leaving this forest in one piece. He'd either be dead, or preferably, a prisoner.

Rook and I raced down the trail, each of us pointing out the trees where our girl marked her path, telling us we were on the right track.

The unmistakable echo of a gunshot shook the forest and both of us cursed, breaking out into full sprints.

Rook growled next to me, keeping pace despite his leg.

Three more gunshots rang out, nearer than before, and I knew what we were about to find before we crashed through the trees. The cellar doors hung open, and Rook and I skidded to slow down as we soared over the edge and onto the staircase headed down.

Two more shots fired off in rapid succession and my blood sizzled, something in my chest snapping as we blew through a metal door into a long corridor... and watched Ava Jade's body slump to the ground.

"Sparrow!"

Carson pushed himself up, gun raised.

I fired first, and red exploded where the gun had been. The shot knocking it from his hand and taking two fingers.

"Ghost!" Rook was already halfway to her, but I couldn't seem to keep my burning eyes from Carson. He bared his teeth, hissing as he dragged his legs from beneath Ava Jade's limp ones, reaching for his weapon with his other hand.

Rook reached my Sparrow, and it was the panic in his voice that finally broke me. “*Ghost, wake up!*”

I charged forward, crushing Carson’s reaching hand under my boot until he screamed. I kicked him onto his back and emptied the entire clip into his chest, his body jerking and convulsing with each heavy hitting blow.

It took longer to register than it should’ve that the trigger was clicking uselessly. There were no more bullets to be used. I couldn’t see Carson through the haze of tears as I tossed the gun aside and turned to face my blackest moment.

Rook pressed his hands over Sparrow’s chest, but it was no use, blood welled between his fingers, streaming down. Her pale face rolled to one side, eyes lidded at half-mast. Lips rapidly turning blue.

I looked away, my stomach turning.

No.

No.

She didn’t get to die.

I wouldn’t let her.

“Move,” I growled, shoving Rook back. I unzipped her vest and yanked it open, exposing the wound to her chest. It was on the left side. Maybe a little too far to the left to have hit her heart?

Please.

Please.

“Put pressure on it,” I ordered and Rook tore his shirt clean off his chest, balled it and pushed it against the wound. I wasn’t going to sit here and do nothing like I did last time. If it weren’t for Rook, Becca would’ve died. But he saved her.

I could save my Sparrow.

We could.

Rook put his ear over her mouth as I positioned myself, starting compressions, crushing Rook’s fingers in the process.

“She isn’t breathing!” he screamed, and I could see he was losing it. Becca was one thing, but this was our girl.

He pressed two fingers to her throat and let out a relieved cry. “I think I feel a pulse!”

Then there was a chance. As long as we were here to fight for her.

“Don’t let up on that shirt.”

I lost count of my compressions and cursed, bending down to pinch her nose, tipping up her chin so I could blow into her mouth. Wishing I could push my own life down her throat.

Take it, I wanted to scream. I don’t want it without you.

“Come on,” I urged, re-starting compressions to the point where I was sure I was breaking fucking bones. “Come on, Sparrow!”

Heavy swift footsteps descended the stairs, and I heard Grey call, “Here! Down here!”

But his tone changed entirely a moment later. “AJ?”

His footfalls slowed in the corridor, and he vomited, the sound far-off, background noise for the incessant beating of my heart in my ears.

“Where’s the fucking vet?” Rook demanded in a lethal hiss.

As if on cue, the vet tripped down the last three steps and Rook grabbed Grey, dragging him down to the floor to place his hand on top of the cloth. “Keep pressure.”

Grey choked over our girl, his knuckles white as he pressed hard into her wound, tears spilling onto her chest as I continued compressions.

“Move your fucking ass,” Rook shouted and somewhere behind me the vet yelped, and I heard the scrape of something being dragged over the concrete before the thin man was unceremoniously deposited at my side. “Help them!”

“K-k-keep compressions,” the vet said, fumbling with the Velcro on his field medical kit.

“The fuck do you think I’m doing?”

“The wound. L-l-let me see it.”

Grey pulled the fabric back and on my next compression, a fresh well of blood gushed out, and I pulled my hands back.

“We need to stop the bleeding,” the vet said, sounding more sure of himself. He pulled out a green packet and tore the top off with his teeth. The quick clot gauze toppled onto her chest and he grabbed it with shaky fingers. “Remove the shirt.”

Grey grabbed it through the hole and tore it wide, giving the vet the clearance he needed to start packing the gauze into her. He stuffed it into her bullet wound like he was pushing magicians ribbon into a fucking hat.

She should’ve woken up.

There was no way you didn’t wake up when someone was packing foreign objects into your ..

No way.

Rook paced behind me, cursing, hitting the side of his Browning against his temple as he muttered to himself, a low whine in his throat.

“Rook? Rook!” Grey was calling to him, trying to get his attention.

The vet put his fingers to her throat and cursed.

“What?”

“We’re losing her. She’s lost too much blood.”

“Well, do something!”

He peeled her eyelid back and tugged on her blue lip. “She’s not getting enough oxygen.”

Heat sizzled up through the balls of my feet as I pushed to standing, reaching over the vet to snatch Rook’s Browning from his hands and put it to the vet’s temple.

“*Save her.*”

He stilled.

“Darryl, so help me god, if you don’t start doing something useful, I will blow your goddamned head off.”

The vet dug in his kit, coming up with a portable defibrillator and an ambu bag. They rattled against the concrete in his rush to get it all apart, wiping down her chest to place the pads where they needed to be. He shoved the bag at Grey. “Put that over her mouth, start slow compressions on the bag. Even if I can re-start her heart, she needs air.”

My vision blurred, doubling, and I had to bend over my knees to keep from passing out.

Re-start her heart. Did I hear that right?

No.

“Stand clear.”

Grey removed his hands from the bag, and the vet initiated the shock. Her torso lurched. He felt for a pulse and cursed.

I put the gun back to the vet’s head. “*Again.*”

CHAPTER

Thirty-Nine

ROOK

THE VET SHOCKED HER AGAIN.

“It’s running out of juice!” he cried as Corvus shoved the barrel of the gun harder against the back of his head.

“Again!”

“Clear!”

Ghost’s body jerked against the stained concrete for the third time. The vet put his fingers under her chin and stared wild-eyed up at Corvus. “*She’s gone*, there’s nothing else—”

He pistol whipped Darryl, making his eyes go unfocused as he keeled over, but Corvus wasn’t about to let him go. He jerked him back upright. “You’re done when I fucking say you’re done!”

Grey muttered pleas over her body, begging her to come back while the vet set up for another shock with blood gushing from his nose.

I felt rooted to the spot. Like I was watching from some omniscient point of view as I lost the best part of myself.

My Ghost...

Gone.

I’d been fighting the depressive feelings of my withdrawal for days now, and I was getting through it because *of her*. But now?

Now I let them crash into me, break me apart from the inside. My eyes burned so hot it took me a minute to remember that this was what it felt like to cry. My chest caved in on itself and I sank to my knees under the weight of the stones I'd built up around my heart suffocating me. My heart bleated out an uneven rhythm and I bent, putting a hand to the cold concrete as my head spun from the lack of air.

But, I didn't want to breathe.

Not when she'd never share the same air.

I choked out a hard sob that felt like throwing up part of my soul, the heave of my body knocking loose the grenade from my torn pocket. It rolled over the floor, coming to a stop directly beneath my face.

It was the solution.

I let out a broken breath and reached for it, its ribbed surface fitting into my hand as if it was made just for me. Like she was.

...was.

"*Again!*" Corvus screamed, his voice breaking.

I lifted my head to say my goodbye. "I'm sorry, Ghost. I told you... I can't do it without you anymore."

"Rook!"

I looked to my younger brother, all the blood drained from his face as his sights fixed what was in my hand. "Rook, don't!"

I stood, shaking my head. "It was always going to end like this for me, Brother. I should've died a long time ago."

Corvus realized what was happening and dropped my gun. "Keep trying!" he shouted at the vet, lifting his hands to me as he advanced on me. "Rook, put it down, man. Don't *fucking* do this right now."

"Tell me you don't want to join me, Brother."

His lips parted, and I saw the truth in his eyes. He was willing to die for her once. What happened when your reason

for living was no longer living herself?

I used his moment of inner reflection against him, taking the opportunity to pull the pin before I could lose my nerve.

“No!”

It dangled on my index finger, and I lifted the grenade high in my right hand, holding the lever down as I raced back down the corridor to the entrance twenty meters away. I was going down, but I would make damn sure I didn't take them with me. Their lives. Their choice.

“Tell Diesel this is what I wanted. No mourning. No fucking funeral. Bury me with her.”

I let go of the lever and closed my eyes.

“Fucking Christ!”

The grenade was wrenched from my fist and Diesel slammed into my back, knocking me to the ground. He landed on top of me, his body forming around mine as the grenade exploded somewhere outside the cellar, deafening in its volume, shaking the fucking walls.

Concrete dust rained down around us, and I shoved Diesel off me, gripping him by his shirt. “Why the fuck did you do that?”

“Rook—”

“I wanted to end it!”

“Rook—”

“*You don't get to take that from me.*”

“*Rook,*” Diesel screamed, spittle flying into my face as he backhanded me, making the taste of copper explode on my tongue. “Look!”

A wet cough burrowed into my ears, and I couldn't move fast enough, shoving Diesel away, racing back down the hall.

My Ghost blinked up at the ceiling through blood and tears, choking, her lips blue.

I fell at her side, taking her cold hand into mine. “Ghost! Ghost, look at me!”

Her unfocused eyes searched, but couldn’t see to latch onto anything.

“She’s suffocating,” Grey cried out, putting the ambu bag back over her mouth, squeezing it to try to get her air.

Her eyes started to roll back.

“Hey,” I growled at the vet. “What do we do?”

He dumped his bag onto the floor, searching for something he clearly wasn’t fucking finding. “I-I don’t have what I need. It must’ve fallen out.”

“*What?*”

“Her lung is full of blood. We need to drain it.”

“*Get out of the way,*” I growled, kicking Darryl to the side as I took his place. “It’s okay, Ghost. I’m going to make it okay.”

I drew my blade and grabbed a length of tubing connected to a blood pressure cuff, slicing off a length of it before leaning over her. He didn’t restart her heart only for us to lose her twice.

“Rook, what are you doing?” Corvus hissed.

“Saving her.”

I felt along her slippery ribs, still so bony from malnourishment. We’d fix that. We’d fix everything.

“Hold on, Ghost.”

I found what I prayed was a good spot and made a hundred promises to the almighty if he’d just let her stay as I stabbed my girl in the chest, deep. Deep enough that I knew I’d hit lung.

Thanks to my time spent taking apart men piece by piece, I had a good fucking idea of how far I needed to go.

She let out a pained gurgle, her eyes finding mine finally as her body writhed away from the pain.

“Hold her still!”

Blood spilled over her side as Corvus held her arms, and I fed the tube into the new wound I’d created, keeping my eyes on her. “*Stay with us, Ghost.*”

Blood funneled out of the tube, her filled lung draining onto the floor, puddling around my knees.

“Come on,” Grey begged, moving to pull her head up into his lap, getting it higher from her heart level. “*Breathe, baby.*”

She jerked her head to the side and coughed, blood splattering the floor.

“That’s it, Ghost, get it out.”

“Slow, small breaths,” the vet said somewhere to my side, sliding a stethoscope over her chest, his eyes on his watch. It was hard not to want to rip his arms off, but I needed to hold this tube in place as the blood continued to leave her lung.

The vet removed the stethoscope. “We need to get her to urgent care before she crashes again. She needs blood.”

“Take mine.”

“Are you the same blood type?”

“How the fuck should I know?”

“Do you know *her* blood type?”

My nostrils flared.

“If I give her the wrong blood, it could be fatal.”

So we needed to move her and fast. She hacked again, and some of the color returned to her lips as air was greedily sucked down her throat. I leaned down to push her short hair away from her face, bringing her eyes back to me. “I need you to keep fighting, Ghost. A little longer.”

“*Keep... fighting...*” she repeated in a wet voice, her chin dipping with a tiny nod.

“That’s my girl.”

Ghost’s hand found mine again, and she squeezed weakly, letting me know she wasn’t giving up.

A groan permeated the air to our left and my hackles instantly rose. Carson's booted foot moved as he woke.

Corvus was on him in an instant, wailing on his face until it was bloody.

"We need him alive," I roared.

"The others are bringing a stretcher," Diesel said, kneeling next to me, putting a hand on my shoulder, his expression grim. I shrunk into myself at his touch.

My father's gaze strayed to where Corvus was getting off Carson, staring down at him with a hatred so fierce I worried my brother may never regain his perfect control again. How could he?

Carson gurgled, his nose smashed and cheekbone already swelling to double its size. The bullets riddled in his vest probably cracked some bone beneath, but his injuries were nothing compared to what we'd do to him when our girl was ready.

It was her hand that would end him, but only after we got our pound of flesh.

"Father..." Carson slurred, trying to curl onto his side, his red eyes pleading.

Diesel's jaw tightened as he stood to look down at his son with disgust twisting his features. "He's yours to do with whatever you will," he said. "That filth is no son of mine."

"You hear that, Ghost? He's all ours."

The fire returned to her eyes, and I knew that no matter what, she was going to be there when we took him apart. Not even death himself could stop her.

CHAPTER

Forty

GREY

TEN DAYS LATER

“ARE you just going to keep pretending like it never happened?”

Rook stiffened on his way back from his morning shower, the muscle in his back going rigid as he turned and shook the water droplets from his hair, tossing it out of his face. “What’s with the ambush?”

“You tried to kill yourself, Rook.”

“Today, Bro? Really? It’s fucking Christmas.”

I set my jaw, not budging from his door.

“Fine.” He sighed, brushing past me into his dark bedroom, tossing the towel on the bed to throw on a pair of jeans. He zipped them over his junk commando and perched on the end of his bed. “Well, come in.”

I stepped into the room and shut the door behind me, flicking on the rarely used overhead light. He shied away from the assaulting brightness, his upper lip curling. “Ghost will be awake soon, I wanted to be there when—”

“This will only take a minute. I’m not going to ruin her Christmas morning.”

“You’re just going to ruin mine, then?”

“You got something to tell me?”

I cocked my head at him, waiting for him to fill in the blank so I didn't have to. I didn't make accusations like this one lightly, but I knew my brother well enough to know when he was on drugs. I should've seen it sooner, but that night in that fucking bunker cemented it.

Rook was a lot of things, but he wasn't suicidal. *Unless* he was coming down. Then we had to stop him from offing himself in a blaze of glory almost weekly. It was the ugly, bitter truth we never spoke of. Other people saw the violence and the bloodshed. They saw the *crazy* when he was high, but they didn't see him come down.

No, those precious fucking moments were reserved only for us. And we'd kept them only to *us* for his sake. But I wasn't going through that shit again. If he was using, he was going to get clean *now*, and I didn't care how much he fucking screamed for a fix this time.

How had we missed this?

I felt like a failure for letting it get this far.

I surveyed his eyes under the light, my hands itching to tear apart his entire room drawer by drawer, floorboard by floorboard. I'd find it. It was only a matter of time.

"*Rook*," I pushed when he didn't answer.

"You seem to have it all figured out, Brother. You don't need me to tell you."

My cheekbones flared, but I reined it in. It wouldn't help to get angry, it would only make him combative and we'd get nowhere. "You admit it, then? You're using?"

He leaned over his spread knees, pressing his face into his palms. "I was," he muttered.

"Was?"

"Yeah. When Ghost was gone."

"And what, you just stopped?"

He lifted his chin, narrowing his black eyes on me. "She knew," he said. "She knew right off. That first night at the

hospital she cornered me about it in a fucking janitors closet. The look in her eyes... *fuck*... I never wanted to see that shit again. I crushed what I had left under my boot and rode out the withdrawals. Didn't you wonder why she was in my room all those nights after the hospital?"

My face screwed up. I *had* wondered, but I thought that was just where she wanted to be. That she'd chosen Rook those nights, and I'd been doing my fucking best not to be jealous about it. Not to mention the fact that at the time I figured she'd never want to share my bed again, anyway.

"We weren't having a goddamned picnic," he admitted. "She took care of me. Made sure I was okay. I asked her to wait for me to tell you guys myself once we'd gotten through all the shit with the Kings. There was enough to worry about."

I studied him carefully once more, and found pupils dilated normally under the light. Color in his face. That lazy grace about him where he'd be on edge and constantly moving if he were high.

"You're really clean?"

"Yes."

I nodded to myself, letting that settle.

"Does Corv know?" Rook asked.

"He'd have skinned you alive already if he did, but I think he suspects. Not much gets past him."

"Spit it out," Rook said when I didn't continue, knowing there was more I was hesitating to say.

"Look, I know it wasn't really you..." I started, knowing I needed to get this out before I could go wake up my girl and enjoy the moment we'd all been waiting for. "But fuck you for thinking if she was gone that you wouldn't have anything else to live for. That's horseshit and you know it, and I fucking hate you for it, drugs or no drugs."

"I deserve that."

I crossed the floor to him and jerked him onto his feet and into a hug. Hating that I almost lost two of the most important

people in my life because of that motherfucker. “You’re lucky you’re clean or you’d be spending Christmas locked up tighter than Carson.”

Rook barked a laugh in my ear, slapping me on the back. No one would *ever* be locked up tighter than Carson.

“Are you going to tell her?” I asked as I pulled away, watching his eyes for the truth of his answer, but they’d already gone dead.

When AJ woke up after surgery with all of us surrounding her, all she wanted to know was where Carson was and if the Kings were all dead. There wasn’t a whole lot of opportunity for Rook to slip into casual conversation that he almost fucking offed himself in a manic depressive fit at seeing her dead on the floor.

“I should,” he replied, dropping his gaze. “I don’t want any secrets between us.”

I squeezed his shoulder. “It’s your call, man. I think she’d understand.”

“Yeah, after she ate me for breakfast.”

I laughed. “Well don’t worry about it today. It’s Christmas.”

“Speaking of…” Rook said with a wry smile, going to gather her things from the top of his dresser. “We told her we’d be there when she wakes up.”

“Then let’s go.”

I checked the surveillance app on my phone for the fifth time this morning as we made our way through to the loft.

On the live feed, I watched Carson shouting manically at whoever was currently stationed to watch him. There would be at least three Saints there, surrounding the cage in the underbelly of Sanctum. Having to listen to him squawk and scream for hours at a time without reprieve. Whatever switch he’d managed to keep off in his brain all this time had been flipped and the true Carson Bates was out to play in all his pathetic glory.

This feed was the only reason any of us could stand having her be alone without one of us there with her. Though she rarely was. One of us crawled into her bed in the loft with her almost every night. Taking turns. Last night Corv stayed with her so he'd already be there at her side.

It was harder than any of us wanted to admit not to take a little detour into town and carve off pieces of him to bring back and lay at AJ's feet. But he was *hers* to do with what she deemed fit. She would get the first taste of blood, and the last. Once she was ready. And today, with the all-clear from the doc for her to move around more than the twelve hundred square feet of the Nest allowed, it was time.

Her drains came out a few days ago and with the breathing exercises, her lung was expanding as it should be. The bullet wound was healing nicely. The scar almost a perfect match to the one Carson put in her best friend.

Marking them as sisters. Twins.

"Shit, did you do the decorations?" I whisper hissed before we reached the loft. I'd completely fucking forgotten. We were supposed to set them up after her sleep meds kicked in.

"Took care of it early this morning. Couldn't sleep," Rook whispered back. "You should see Corv when he sleeps with her, I've never seen the guy so relaxed. Had his fucking mouth open and everything."

"No shit?"

Rook nodded, waving an arm for me to hurry up and fuck if I wasn't excited. I couldn't remember the last time I'd looked forward to a Christmas this much. Diesel did his best for us, but we were already mostly grown when he adopted us and the season seemed to always remind him of Jacqueline. We'd do a big turkey dinner and he'd hand us a stack of bills and a beer and say not to spend it all in one place.

This one was going to be different.

The tiny box in my pocket felt like it was going to burn right through and my mouth went dry again, worrying about whether or not she would like it.

Rook flipped on a switch when we entered the loft on quiet feet and hundred tiny lights flickered on, illuminating the space in white and red light. They draped across the ceiling, wrapped around the columns, draped over the headboard. Fanned across one entire wall.

Corvus startled awake, reaching for the gun under his pillow before he saw us standing there amid the pinkish glow. He rubbed his eyes, looking around himself like he'd just woken up in fucking candyland.

He might as well have. "What the fuck did you do?" he hissed quietly, trying not to wake her, rubbing his eyes.

"You like? I think it's got *pizzazz*, don't you?"

AJ stirred, letting out a small groan as she turned from her back onto her side, pulling her knees in close as she squeezed her eyes tighter. "No," she moaned, her voice still raspy, but nothing could ruin the perfection of slightly grouchy, sleepy AJ. She held up a hand. "Five more minutes."

"It's Christmas," Rook argued, going to kneel at her bedside, trying to pull the covers down from her face.

She dropped three fingers. "Two minutes then."

"Come on, Ghost, open your eyes."

"You better have coffee."

I winced. We forgot that part. Probably my fault.

"On it," Rook said, jumping to his feet, giving me a look that fully confirmed it was in fact my fault before racing through the Nest to get our girl her cuppa.

Corvus cleared his throat, still eyeing the lights like he might try to shoot out each one individually as he pushed up to lean against the headboard. "How the hell did he manage to do this while we were sleeping?"

The question was clearly rhetorical, but AJ answered it anyway. "Admit it, you're a big softy for your Sparrow."

She poked him in the ribs and he growled, shooting her a glare.

I folded myself on the edge of the bed, and she reached for me blindly, the mound of covers sighing as her hand found mine. I gave her a squeeze and felt something lurch in my chest.

This felt so right. Her here. All of us together.

I ran my fingers over her knuckles, and she peered at me from beneath her covers, her brows lowered in concern. “Hey, Superman, you okay?”

“Just... happy.”

She grinned at that, blinking her big beautiful eyes open a little wider, letting the covers drop a little lower. She opened her mouth to say something, but the lights caught her attention, and she squinted, sitting up straighter to get a proper look around the room. “Did you do all this while I slept?”

“Rook did.”

She smirked at that and I knew she was imagining big scary dangerous Rook hanging a thousand Christmas lights because I was too and it was fucking hilarious.

AJ chuckled, and I joined her. “Did you sleep okay? How are you feeling?”

“Better. I feel good. Doesn’t hurt as much to breathe anymore, either.”

Corvus and I shared a look, and she wrinkled her nose. “What?”

She didn’t know it yet but that was the right answer.

Rook returned with her coffee and she gave him a warm smile. “You didn’t have to do all this.”

He passed her the mug and bent to kiss the top of her head. “Sure, I did. Like it?”

“It’s... a little harsh, but I love it.”

“Present time?” Rook asked, eagerly rubbing his hands together.

“I thought we said no presents?”

“They’re small ones,” I reassured her, but it didn’t erase the knot between her brows. She didn’t need to give us anything, anyway. Having her here, alive, was the best gift we would ever be given.

“Me first.” Rook bent to one knee next to her, fishing the items from his pocket.

AJ squealed as soon as she saw the ring and black diamond necklace, taking them from his hands with tears in her eyes. “I thought they were gone for good.”

She went to push her hair back but found only empty air behind her shoulders, laughing dryly. Becca had fixed the chop she’d made to her hair in the bunker, turned it into a sharp angled bob that only further accentuated her high cheekbones and severe features. She passed Corvus the necklace behind her. “Help me?”

“Dies and the others found them when they went back to get rid of all Carson’s shit,” Rook said, his dark eyes following the path of the finger now carrying his ring.

The slight downturn of her lips was the only indication that the reminder got to her before she fixed a smile in place of the frown. It was crazy to think that if we hadn’t chosen to attack right away like AJ suggested, we’d all be dead right now.

Carson had everything in place to annihilate us all without even lifting a gun, and it was all set to deploy less than twenty-four hours from when we attacked. We were right. He’d been busy.

We were just faster.

“Me next,” I said, lifting the tiny box from my pocket, turning it in my fingers before I set it on the plush covers in front of her.

She glanced between it and me curiously. I found the antique leather ring box online and thought it suited her, but it was the ring inside I hoped she’d like.

AJ popped the little pin and cracked the box open. I held my breath.

Her eyes lit up. “Grey, it’s gorgeous. I love it.”

She couldn’t tear it from the box fast enough, hesitating before she slid it onto a finger. The white gold ring had been crafted into a crow in flight, a diamond in place of its eye. “This isn’t...?”

An unsure laugh passed my lips. “No, not exactly but—”

Corvus plopped his ring box down in front of her, flipping back the lid to reveal the princess cut diamond with two emerald stones on either side that he picked out. “We all wanted to be represented.”

She gasped before pressing her lips together, the slight quiver in her chin giving her away. “This is too much,” she told Corvus, indicating his ring. That diamond is like a whole carat.”

“I called Max back yesterday. Agreed to the spring shows and took the record deal.” He poked her ribs. “So let me spoil you.”

At this, she perked up, whirling to tackle him in a tight embrace. She cried out at the contact with her injury, pulling back, but only enough to dull the pain. She clung to him, not letting him put any extra space between them. “I’m so happy for you.”

“For us,” he corrected her gruffly. “You said you’d go on tour with me, remember?”

“How could I forget?”

She put the two new rings on her fingers, holding her hands out to admire them. “A few more of these and Diesel and I will match.”

I snorted. “Don’t tell him that.”

She sniffed, elbowing Corvus. “Well, there is one more gift that needs to be given.”

Corv reached into the nightstand on his side of the bed, coming out with a clean black box, which he held out to me.

“What’s this?”

“It was all Sparrow’s idea, we just helped pay for it.”

AJ paled, looking edgy in her seat. “You don’t have to wear it. I just thought, *we* thought that you might want one and —”

I opened the lid and she fell quiet as I stared down at the glass eye swathed in dark navy silk. It looked so real that for a second I could’ve almost believed it was the one I was missing. Carved out, preserved, lovingly tucked in this box.

“Took a lot of back and forth to get the coloring just right and the sizing the vet gave us might’ve been off, so if it is we can get you a new one and—”

“AJ...”

“Yes?”

I couldn’t seem to draw up the words to express how much this meant to me, my lungs burning, throat scratched raw. “It’s...”

“Do you hate it?”

“What? No!”

I managed to pull myself together, clearing my throat as I slid the lid back on the box. “It’s perfect. I’m going to try it out after we get back.”

“Back?” Her head tilted to one side. “Where are we going? I thought Dies was coming here for dinner.”

I could tell she had an inkling of where we were going with this, the hunger for it clear in her eyes. In the way her hands twisted in the covers, ready to use up all the rage she’d been patiently waiting to set free. It was a condition of our forgiveness for almost getting herself killed that she allow herself time to heal before we took Carson apart piece by bloody piece.

“We’re not going to dinner, Ghost.”

“It’s time,” Corvus confirmed. “The doc gave the all-clear last night.”

“Merry fucking Christmas, babe.”

CHAPTER

Forty-One

AVA JADE

I TIPPED MY HEAD BACK, inhaling deeply as Carson's blood dripped down my neck. Sanctum smelled of whiskey and copper, and I filled my lungs with it, shivering even though it was far from cold.

We'd never get his blood out of the mat under our feet in the fighting ring. The whole thing would need to be replaced. The once gray-white color of it entirely stained with varying shades of crimson.

The splatter patterns from seven days ago when we started were the deepest color. A near black. While the freshest smears were still a raw red that looked almost pinkish by comparison. It was our canvas, and we'd painted it well.

I gripped the blade in my hand, flipping it edge over edge as I caught my breath and licked my lips.

At my feet, Carson let out a weak, wet moan from a toothless, tongueless mouth. He was fading fast.

Rook was right when he said we'd be here until New Year's Eve. I lifted my gaze to the clock on the wall across the space, finding it was already past nine in the evening and I promised Grey we'd watch the fireworks together. The four of us.

"Are you ready, Ghost?" Rook asked from behind me, and I instinctively leaned into him, resting my back against his solid chest, breathing him in as my panting subsided.

“Ghost?” he pressed when I didn’t reply, my nickname a rumble against my back. He dipped his head, nudging my neck with his nose, making me sigh.

Fuck, I was so tired.

We’d been sleeping upstairs, in one of the back rooms of the bar each night since we’d been here. Showering on the third floor. Surviving on pub fare, water, and whiskey. It would be nice to be finished, but something inside of me still thirsted for vengeance. I didn’t know if I *could* be finished. Not yet.

The things this piece of shit put us through.

What he almost took from us.

From me.

I didn’t think I’d ever be finished. There was no ending fitting enough, *brutal enough*, for him.

Rook wrapped a hand around my middle, kissing the nape of my neck.

I closed my eyes, my core tightening.

They hadn’t touched me, not like this, since I woke up in the hospital. A sweet kiss here and there. A warm body next to mine while I slept. But no more. At first, I thought they were afraid to break me while I was still healing. And this week? This week we spent every waking hour down here until we were all too tired to do anything but sit in a hot shower and fall into bed.

Carson let out another weak sound, ruining the moment. I drew my hand back to throw my blade and shut him up, but Rook caught my wrist. “Wait,” he said, his chin jerking to our prey.

He kissed me again, and something in Carson’s dying eyes betrayed discomfort. Anger.

The fucker still thought he had some claim on me? Even after everything I’d done to him. He’d never touch me, or anyone else again, and not just because he’d never leave this basement.

He didn't have fingers anymore.

And suddenly, I knew how I wanted to end it.

There was one more form of torture we hadn't explored.

Rook loosened his grip on my wrist, and I let my hand drop, spinning to face the others. Corvus and Grey lounged on the old black sofa we'd dragged down here a few days ago. Grey wiping down his hands and wrists, all the way up to his elbows.

He'd surprised me the most out of the three. I expected the ruthless thirst for blood from Rook, and even on some level, from Corvus. But Grey took his pound of flesh, too. This morning, with a sort of quiet resignation, he skinned Carson's back like a hunter might work to remove the pelt from a stag. In trained, precise movements as Carson screamed hoarsely.

When he was finished, he'd discarded the pieces and stood back to let someone else have a turn. Entirely unfazed.

"I'm ready," I finally told Rook, knowing this needed to end. We'd already taken everything from him that could be taken without killing him. Corvus, his balls and fingers. Rook, his cock, both nipples, and each one of his toes.

We'd taken our time, keeping him with us by cauterizing each wound with Rook's blowtorch. Sticking him with IV needles to replenish him with a steady supply of liquids.

But it was time.

"How do you want to do it?"

Grey finished washing up and pushed his blond hair away from his face with a sigh. "Together."

This had Corvus looking up from his phone, and Grey fixing me with a piercing stare.

"I want you to take me while he watches," I announced, discarding my blade on the floor. "All of you."

I wanted the last thing he saw to be his *Angel* getting absolutely destroyed by three Saints. Three *Crows*. I wanted him to watch as they made me come. As I enjoyed every

touch. Every stroke. As I cried out *for them*. As they erased everywhere *he* touched me, replacing every last memory of him with more of *them*. Until he was expunged from my skin. My bones. My soul.

And then when we were finished, I would end him for good.

“You’re still healing,” Corvus said, but I could already see the hunger in his watchful stare as it traversed my loose, blood-spattered Primal Ethos t-shirt and tight yoga pants.

“So are you.”

So were we all. But it’d been over two weeks since the bunker. I wouldn’t be running a marathon anytime soon thanks to this fucker. I kicked Carson hard in the stomach, and he choked, the misshapen mitts of his hands pulling in close to shield himself from another attack. My shoulders rolled back as anger sizzled down my spine at the reminder of yet another thing he took from me, whether permanently or not.

No running for me, but I’d be damned if I was going to give up fucking, too.

Grey rose from the couch, removing his shirt in one swift movement, discarding it on the floor. His toned abs rippled all the way down to his low hanging jeans and the ‘V’ of his Adonis belt.

He undid his belt and slid it through the loops, coming to stand in front of me, never taking his eyes off me. “Take your clothes off, AJ.”

My Superman.

I heard Corvus’ rough curse as he, too, gave in, standing up from the couch, discarding his phone behind him on the seat. Rook was already helping me with my shirt as Grey lifted his arms high, feeding his belt through the grates of the metal cage overhead. Carson had stopped trying to run—stopped being *able* to run—days ago, but we still lowered it over the ring every morning when we came in to start the workday.

Once he had it so both ends hung down on either side of a bar, he lifted his chin. “Can you reach?”

I lifted my arms as Rook unlatched my bra, and I felt my breasts drop free of the soft material. I wrapped my hands around both sides of the belt, able to loop the leather around my palms but only if I rose up on my tip toes.

Grey nodded. “Good.”

Corvus placed himself between me and Carson, lying half conscious on his side on the mat, his nostrils flaring. “I don’t want him looking at you.”

I released the belt, falling back to my feet to finish removing my bra, standing before him topless, my nipples already so hard they hurt. “This is *my* body, Bones. *My* choice. I want him to see. I want him to watch you take everything from me that he wanted for himself. And then I want to kill him.”

His brows lowered as he rolled a reply around in his mouth before finally nodding, his veins popping. “You don’t have to join us,” I offered. “You don’t have to be here.”

Hurt crossed his eyes and I grabbed his hand, holding it tight in mine. “But I want you to be.”

Corvus let out a shaky breath. “So do I, Sparrow. There’s no place else I’d rather be.”

I found Rook watching me, pawing his erection, and I smirked. “Sit him up. In the chair. I don’t want him to be able to look away.”

Rook righted the chair and reached down, hauling Carson up by the crook of his elbow like he weighed nothing. He shoved him into the wooden chair, strapping his head back. It wasn’t the same chair he used to restrain me, that one was gone for good, but it was a damn close copy, and we’d used it quite a bit in the time we’d spent down here.

Carson’s face pinched, the skin between his brows bunching as he tried to speak. I thought he was asking me to kill him. It was either that or he really wanted a cami. Hard to tell with the missing tongue and burned out throat.

Not for the first time, I felt a rush of skin tingling satisfaction at the sight of him broken. I promised him I would

end him, and I'd made *damn good* on that promise. He thought he could fuck with our lives, hurt us, twist us against one another. Now look at him...

"You're going to watch," I told him, slowly removing my yoga pants. "Close your eyes and I'll have your eyelids."

"*Sffuck ouu,*" he hissed, trying to pry his head away from the restraints, but it was no use.

"*You won't,*" Rook chided, his dark eyes sliding to me with a gleam of lust in their boundless depths. "But I sure as fuck will."

My core tightened as he slung off his jacket, chucking it toward the couch.

"*AJ,*" Grey whispered, the only warning before he took me by the neck, spinning me back around to face him, his plush lips colliding with mine, drawing a low moan from someplace deep. He pulled me close with a hand on my lower back, pressing me flat against him. His tongue slipped into my mouth, tasting me before he ran his teeth along my lower lip, sucking it into his mouth. He palmed my right breast, and I cried out into his mouth as he twisted the nipple.

"*Fuck, Grey,*" I panted, and he swallowed the words with another kiss. I could feel him hard against my belly through his boxers and eagerly reached between us to feel him. He groaned as I stroked him through the thin fabric, still claiming my mouth.

Carson let loose another slew of unintelligible curses and meaningless threats, only making me want *more*. He thought he could own me? That I could be twisted into some hollow version of myself that would do only as she was told?

No.

I felt Corvus crowd in behind me, his warmth radiating over my back. He swept my hair to one side and I gasped into Grey's mouth as he bit down on my neck, smoothing out the pain with the press of his lips.

I dipped my hand beneath Grey's boxers, but it wasn't enough. I wanted more of him. Of them. I'd been hungry for

this for far too long.

“On your knees, Sparrow.”

He pressed on my shoulders, guiding me down. I took Grey’s boxers with me, letting his proud length spring free. My mouth watered at the sight of it.

“Open,” Corvus said, and my belly flipped as he fisted his hand into my hair, taking control. I opened my mouth and Corvus guided it onto Grey’s cock.

I flicked my tongue against his tip, tasting the perfect bead of precum there before I let Corvus push me further, forcing me to take the entire length of him.

Grey groaned deliciously, flexing his thighs as he pressed into my throat, feeling it yawn open for him. I choked and Corvus let up only enough for me to catch a small breath before guiding me back, using my face to fuck Grey’s cock.

“*Holy shit,*” Rook rasped, and I heard the jangle of metal before his jeans hit the floor and Grey slid from between my lips. Corvus lifted me, guiding me more to my left. I opened for Rook, feeling his Jacob’s ladder rub over my tongue as he pressed into my mouth.

I felt his tremble as Corvus forced me to take Rook all the way to his base, until I couldn’t breathe. Until my head started to spin. Only then did he pull back, letting me fill my lungs. A curse fell from my lips and Rook knelt, rubbing his thumb over my bottom lip, looking at me, at my mouth, in wonder.

I sucked his thumb into my mouth, and his lips parted, eyes heavy-lidded, drunk off the high of this moment. He licked his own lips in response before spreading them into a devilish smirk. “My turn.”

A yelp escaped my lips as he hooked his fingers beneath my chin, dragging me up by my jaw as Corvus roughly grasped both my hands, raising them until my fingers brushed the leather hanging over my head. “Hold on, Sparrow.”

I curled my hands around the edges of the belt, uncaring that the buckle was biting into my pinkie finger because Rook was between my legs, wrenching them apart.

Another breathy cry left my lips as he dove into my pussy without restraint, sucking greedily at my folds, his warm tongue sliding across my wet slit until I was bucking against his mouth, my hands slipping. Thighs pressing against his head, unable to hold them wide for him as a riot of sensation swirled down through my core.

“Grey, hold her other leg.”

Strong hands came around my ankles, dragging my legs wide, prying my thighs from Rook’s head. I fought against their hold, but rough hands slid up my calves, up my thighs, holding me in place, kneading the skin there. It was all I could do to hold onto the belt as Rook savagely attacked my pussy while Grey and Corvus held me open to their brother’s whims.

“Fuck!” I howled as Rook bit my clit, the pain ricocheting through my body, shoving my head back from the force. He pulled me into his mouth once more, sucking away the pain before poking his tongue into the heat of my core as he pressed his upper lip to my clit, managing to hit all my marks with nothing but his wicked mouth.

The muscles in my legs contracted as I edged toward orgasm, my biceps burning from holding myself up as I began to rock against Rook’s mouth, riding the wave.

“That’s it, Sparrow,” Corvus hissed, his lips pressing a fiery path of hard kisses up my calf as his fingers trailed higher up the back of my thigh. He grabbed a fistful of my ass at the same time Grey sucked one of my nipples into his mouth and I came on Rook’s tongue, thrashing as my climax rolled through me. Rook lapped me up until I could barely stand it anymore, letting my head fall forward to watch him as his mouth came away from my cunt, lips glistening with my release.

I let go of the belt above me, and if it weren’t for Grey and Corvus on either side of me, I’d have folded like a cheap tent on wobbly posts. Rook licked his lips before running the back of his hand over his mouth.

“Tell us how you want us, baby,” Grey said, breathless with desire as he ran a knuckle down my spine.

I swallowed, ignoring the twinge in my ribs as I fought to catch my breath. “Like last time,” I panted, remembering the feeling of being full to bursting with them. How I didn’t think I could handle it. How I was so fucking glad I did once we were through.

Except, I was missing one vital part of our foursome. This time, I wanted them all.

“Except I want all of you.”

Grey’s brows furrowed. Rook’s lifted with a keen interest. Corvus looked like he was trying to figure out where all the puzzle pieces would fit. I honestly didn’t fucking care, as long as they did.

“Sparrow, I don’t think you can stretch that wide.”

“Try me.”

“Hold up,” Grey said, going back to the couch to gather the throw blanket haphazardly tossed over the back. He spread it neatly on the floor within Carson’s line of sight. His eyes were rolling back, I noticed. The three shallow stabs I’d given him to his stomach must’ve been deeper than I thought. There was too much blood on the floor. We would lose him soon if we didn’t cauterize them. But there was no sense in it now. Not while we were so close to his end.

I reeled my arm back and slapped him hard across the face, bringing him back around. “We’re not finished yet.”

He groaned, his eyes struggling to focus on me. I slapped him again and they focused. “There you are.”

Carson reached a mitt toward me but I batted him away. “Try to touch me again and I’ll take the whole fucking arm,” I hissed before leaving him to continue enjoying the show.

Grey finished straightening out the blanket.

“Lie down,” Corvus said, and I started to kneel, but he stopped me with a hand on my elbow. “Not you.”

Grey watched Carson as he lay down on the blanket, his erection hard and pulsing an inch away from his belly,

Corvus used his grip on my elbow to jerk me nearer, scooping me up by the waist. He carried me over to Grey. “Bend your knees, Sparrow.”

I did and he adjusted his grip, lowering me onto Grey, who gripped the base of his cock tight, holding it perfectly upright. My knees touched the blanket on either side of Grey’s hips as his tip breached my opening, making me contract around him with a groan.

Grey’s hands came to my hips as Corvus passed me over, finishing his brother’s job guiding me lower on his cock until I was settled all the way down to his base. I shuddered at the fullness of him inside me, leaning forward to rock a little, making his hands on my hips grip tighter.

“You feel so good,” I whisper moaned, leaning further down to press my lips to his as he rolled his hips against me, hitting all the right notes.

“You’re so wet for us,” he whispered between kisses, reaching down between us to rub slow circles into my clit, making me arch back into a seat, giving him more space, feeling him hit something even deeper inside me.

Rook caught my head as I tipped it back in ecstasy, shoving his tongue into my mouth, making me gasp in surprise as he inhaled me.

The rough pads of his fingers brushed my ribcage before sliding lower, taking over for Grey’s hands. Rook moved my hips against his brother, pushing and pulling me as his brother teased another orgasm from my clit and Rook swallowed the sounds of my release as stars burst over my eyelids, my legs shaking against the blanket.

Grey’s solid warm body pressed tight against my thighs.

“Grey, your legs. Make room,” Corvus said, and I felt Grey spread his legs wider, making me shift forward as Rook positioned himself between Grey’s legs.

“Ready to stretch for us, Sparrow?”

I nodded, still coming down from my climax with broken breaths. Corvus came to stand at Grey’s head, his blue eyes

boring into mine. “Lean forward, Sparrow.”

I did, and he eased me down with a burning palm pressed against my bare back until I was almost flush with Grey. My Superman nuzzled into my neck, nipping my ear as he tangled his fingers in my short hair.

“In her pussy,” Corvus said, and I startled, confused who he was talking to or what was happening until I felt the press of Rook’s pierced tip push hard at my already filled opening.

“*Oh fuck,*” I hissed out, hands reaching desperately for something to hold onto.

Rook wrapped one hand around my hip and pushed in a little more, his cock sliding against Grey’s as it made its way inside of me. Fire seared through my pussy as it clenched around them both.

“*Fuuuuck, Ghost,*” he managed to gasp out, and I dared a look behind me, watching him watch me stretch with a sort of dazed incredulity.

Grey groaned under me, tipping his head back to hiss as Rook settled inside, and I choked at the fullness, arching.

“*Fuck,*” Grey cursed in my ear.

“Is it okay?” I asked him, the words a breathy exhale.

I pulled back enough to see his face and watch his eye close. “*Better.*”

Corvus kneeled next to Grey’s head, throwing his jeans open, taking his mammoth cock out. “I need it nice and wet, Sparrow.”

I lifted slightly as Rook and Grey both fucked my pussy, one easing in while the other pulled back, stretching me to my limits. I opened for my Bones, and he lovingly caressed my cheek before catching me under the chin to pull my mouth onto him.

His salty taste slid over my tongue, and I moaned around him filling my mouth, making him let out a snarl, his grip on my face tightening.

“Rock between us,” he said, his voice strained, and I began to move my body, rolling my hips over the two cocks deep in my pussy, rocking back onto them: forward to take Corvus deeper into my throat, and back again. Loving how they were all a part of this. All of them using me, filling me, claiming me.

Corvus pushed his fat tip to the back of my throat, and his hand slid to wrap around my neck as he thrust into my mouth, fucking my throat. Rook slapped my ass, and the sting raced through me, making me cry out around Corvus’ cock. He pulled out.

“Ready for the third?”

I moaned in reply, no longer caring what they did to me as long as they didn’t fucking stop.

“I’m going to take your ass, Sparrow,” Corvus warned in a rasp. “It’s going to hurt.”

“I don’t care,” I found myself saying, even though my stomach fluttered with nerves as Corvus slid a hand down my spine to my ass, priming me while he continued to stroke himself with his other hand.

I rocked against his fingers and their cocks, planting kisses over Grey’s collarbone. He rested his forehead against the top of my head as he continued fucking me with his brother, grunting with each thrust like he was already so close to coming undone.

One of his hands left my hip to palm my breast instead, rubbing and teasing, tugging at the nipple, making me moan even more loudly than before.

Corvus added another finger in my ass, and I sucked in a breath as it settled there, opening me up wider. Then he withdrew.

My eyes flew open, wanting him to keep going, but when I saw him move... felt his warmth as he crouched over my bent back.

“Lean back, Rook.”

I felt the angle of Rook's pierced cock in me shift as he did what his brother bid, making room for Corvus to hover above me. I bared my teeth as Corvus fed the thick tip of himself into my ass, the pressure of adding the third cock threatening to split me apart.

Grey reached a hand over his head to find mine, twining his fingers with mine against the blanket covered floor, giving me something to hold on to. His eye fixed on me, pouty lips parted as he watched me take his brother's cock in my ass.

"You're so fucking beautiful, AJ."

My hand tightened on his as Corvus planted his palms against my lower back and pushed himself the rest of the way in, making me scream.

"Give her a minute," he hissed behind me and all movement stopped as I adjusted to the feel of them all, so wet and so turned on that the pain only registered as an afterthought.

"No," I gasped, letting up on Grey's hand. "I need you to move."

They all started up again, slow at first, but gaining speed as they pumped into me. Corvus shifted his grip, grabbing me around my elbows to pull me up, making my back bow as he railed me from behind.

Grey took the opportunity to pull my left breast into his mouth, suckling greedily on my hard nipple, making my pants come faster. My moans louder.

"This is so fucking hot," Rook said on a heavy breath, and I risked a look back to see him bent backwards, his fists pressed into the blanket as he thrust his hips up and into me, his tatted thighs flexing with each pump. His head tipped back.

"Choke me," I spluttered out, feeling my orgasm start.

Grey wrapped a fist around my throat, never ceasing the teasing pace of his tongue on my breast. I let the sensations overwhelm me, my muffled cries rising to the rafters, joining the grunts, groans, and soft cries of my guys.

I shut my eyes tight as my climax ripped through me, consuming my whole body like hot fire. They held me in place, fucking me through it as they all fell victim to their own releases. One by one like dominos. Grey jerked me close, crying out his release into my mouth as he kissed me. Corvus came next and Rook followed right behind him, shouting a violent curse, making one orgasm roll right into another as their euphoria turned me on to the point of insanity. I rocked my hips against Grey as Corvus popped free of my ass, riding the last wave of my bliss.

Rook exited next and without the weight of us all holding him down, Grey flipped me onto my back, fucking me stupid to prolong my orgasm until I was sure I wouldn't be able to walk right for a fucking month.

I clenched around him, still hard despite his release as my orgasm wore down and he slowed, stopping entirely only once the last of my jerking spasms stopped completely. He laid his cheek on my chest, and I wrapped both arms around him, feeling the ghost of them all still inside me, even as Grey slipped out, flopping onto his back beside me with a laugh.

“That was...” He started but didn't finish.

“Perfect,” I finished for him, peeling back my eyelids to find Corvus and Rook watching me.

Rook's lips tipped up at one side in a crooked grin. “I think I just found my new religion.”

I glanced from him to Corvus. If this was a church, he was our priest. Leading the sermon. Sweat beaded over his brow and something wicked flashed in his eyes. I knew, somehow, that he was thinking the same thing.

He removed his shirt, bending to press it against my pussy. I winced, realizing just how sore I was, but I opened wider for him, letting him help clean me. “You did so good, Sparrow. Next time it won't hurt so much.”

Next time?

An exquisite ache formed in my lower belly at the promise, and I reached down to grab his wrist, hauling him

closer to plant a kiss on his lips. He pulled back, his light eyes flashing as he glanced between my eyes and my lips before leaning down to kiss me again. Softly.

When he pulled back, he was smiling, ditching the soiled t-shirt to hold out a hand to help me up. “Want to finish this for good?”

The reminder clawed through me like fingers of ice, waking the darkness that’d retreated into its cave to give me my moment in the sun. I nodded, taking his hand, getting shakily to my feet.

I took Rook’s offer of his shirt, lifting my arms to help him pull it over me. It hung past my mid thigh, his scent clinging to it.

Carson attempted to speak again from where he still sat strapped to the chair. I didn’t know if he was still making useless threats or begging now. It sounded like a mixture of both. But I was beyond caring. Ready to be done with him for good.

I went to the couch, reaching for my thigh strap to remove my new baby from his holster, feeling the weight of him in my palm. Time for his christening.

The guys split for me to pass before crowding behind me, forming a semi-circle as I closed the gap between myself and Carson, his eyes trained on the Wilson Combat hanging from my grip.

“*Thhdiry whore,*” he spat, but the darkness was gone from his eyes, leaving only a brittle shield that I knew couldn’t stand a chance against me anymore.

“Better than a dead one,” I replied in a lethal whisper.

He finally shut up, his lips sealed tight as I crouched to his eye level.

“Everything we’ve done to you was for *them,*” I told him, feeling my skin bristle with heat, goose flesh rolling down my back as I tipped my head to the side, indicating my Crows.

“But this?”

I lifted the gun, turning it this way and that in the harsh overhead lights.

“This is for Becca.”

I cocked my weapon, pressing the gun to his chest. I fired and the shot rang through the underground space.

His eyes went wide.

“And this one’s for me.”

I fired again, letting the second bullet chase the first until blood spurted from the back of the chair, blowing through skin, bone, and wood.

I lowered my smoking weapon, my hands shaking as we all watched the light leave his eyes. Unlike him, my shots were true. I didn’t fucking miss.

My shoulders fell as his life’s blood pooled in his lap and his last breath pushed past his lips.

I sighed, hanging my head, feeling something almost tranquil settle in my bones, feeling more calm now than I ever had before.

“It’s finally over.”

CHAPTER

Forty-Two

AVA JADE

I PULLED the blanket tighter around my shoulders, cozying up against Rook on the roof of Sanctum. He tugged the blanket corner, and I opened it for him to slide in next to me, shivering against the chill in the midnight air.

Corvus sat in front of the couch I'd asked them to drag up all three flights of stairs, pulling my calf over his shoulder to run his fingers over the skin there in lazy strokes.

The door behind us opened and I felt Corv jerk forward, his hand reaching behind him for his gun, but it was only Grey returning from the kitchens downstairs. Two black trays piled high with golden-fried goodness, sticky wings, and Corvus' cobb salad balanced precariously in his hands.

My stomach rumbled loudly as he came to sit next to me on the other end of the couch, setting one of the trays down in my lap. My mouth watered at the feast, and I shivered as the warmth of the bottom of the tray soaked into my legs.

"This is all for me, right?" I joked, popping a fry in my mouth with a little moan.

"You fucking earned it, Ghost," Rook said with a laugh, fingering his bottle of whiskey from the floor to take a swig before setting it back down, scooping up two fries between his fingers to feed me them one by one.

"Fuck, it's cold up here. How long till the fireworks?" Corvus said in a low growl, and I dragged the other blanket

from the arm of the couch beside Rook and dropped it on his head.

He pulled it off, turning to give me an unimpressed scowl that couldn't touch the diamonds still shining in his eyes. "I said I'd watch the fireworks so we're all watching the damn fireworks."

Grey chuckled. "If Thorn Valley does one thing right, it's the new years fireworks. I watch them every year."

"Yeah, and you drag our asses out with you every damn time, too," Corvus said, throwing the blanket over his lap.

I passed him his salad. "Here, eat something before your hangry ass gets you sent to the doghouse."

He raised a brow like he'd love to see me try to put him there, and I let out a laugh, something crumpling in my gut. I didn't know if I'd ever get used to this. Especially now that there was no immediate danger. Nothing to have to do. At least not for a while.

We could just *be*.

I didn't know if I knew how to do that, but I was looking forward to giving it a try.

Two taps on the inside of the roof access door had Grey pausing before stuffing an entire cheeseburger into his face.

Diesel poked his head onto the roof. "Everyone decent?"

Decent? He was joking, right? Rook and I shared a conspiratorial look, and I grinned. We were about as far from decent as it got, clothed or not.

He cleared his throat as he came out onto the roof, checking a watch I rarely saw him wear. "Almost time."

"You joining us?" Rook asked, but Diesel shook his head, and I noticed he was carrying a familiar box in his hands. A thick envelope lay atop it.

"Nah. Just came up to give these to Ava Jade."

I cocked my head at him, and Rook moved the tray of food as Diesel came around to place the box and envelope in my

lap.

“What is this?”

“A gift.”

“Christmas was a week ago.”

I peered at the guys. He hadn't given them anything, but they did mention he usually just did a big family meal and handed them each a wad of cash. I wondered if he'd slipped them a little something on Christmas when we came down to Sanctum to start our work.

He'd been away since then. Combing Lennox for any rogue Kings. Spreading the word that the Saints wouldn't take kindly to anyone breaching their territory, which now stretched to encompass not just Thorn Valley, but Edgewood, and Lennox, too. It was all Saint land now, and Diesel had to work double time to keep it all in check, hunting for new blood worthy of joining his ranks.

“Just open it,” he chided. “The box first. The envelope is... something else.”

I passed the thick envelope to Grey, trying to get a look at the seal on the front, but he tucked it away under the blanket, giving me a sly wink that told me he might know what was inside of it.

My stomach fluttered as I remembered where I recognized the box from. It was the one I'd put Diesel's leather jacket in when I'd gifted it to him. But, he was wearing that now, so he wasn't returning it in some *fuck you* move. Stupid to even think it.

The guys watched, just as curious as me as I pulled off the lid, which meant they had no idea what their father was giving me, either. I remembered the last gift I'd gotten from my dad. My blades. I only had one left now, another lost in the battle at the factory. The last one stayed at the Nest where it was safe. The last piece of him I had. At least there was a comfort in knowing now that no matter which King killed him, that person was long dead. Who knew? Maybe I was the one that ended him.

A ball formed in my throat as I squinted down what looked like a pile of well worn, supple black leather. “What is this?”

I pulled it from the box and watched Diesel’s jaw clench and his eyes harden, betraying some emotion I didn’t understand. It was an old leather jacket. A woman’s. With a shining silver zipper and the Saint emblem over the right breast. “It’s been collecting dust for too long.”

Realization hit me like a sucker punch to the gut and my eyes stung. “Was this...”

“It was Jacqueline’s.”

My throat burned.

“It’s yours now,” he told me, and I made myself look him in the eyes even though mine were welling. He reached out and put a hand on my shoulder like he often did his sons, squeezing gently. “Welcome to the family, Ava Jade. I’m so glad my sons found you.”

I coughed to cover a sob, swallowing hard as Diesel retracted his hand.

“Help me up?” I croaked and stuck out my hand. Diesel took it, lifting me from the warmth of the couch onto my feet. I sniffed, no longer feeling the cold in the air as I pushed my arms through the sleeves of the jacket.

“Fits you like a glove,” Diesel said, his voice tight. “I thought it might.”

“I can’t accept this,” I said, even though I was already hugging it, feeling a warmth bloom in my belly where not so long ago there had only been ice.

“You can and you will,” Diesel said with a note of finality, holding a hand out to Grey. “Hand me that envelope, Son.”

Grey passed it over, and Diesel lifted the top, tugging out three identical form-like sheets. He passed one to each of the boys.

I looked over Rook’s shoulder, and my lips parted on a silent intake of my breath as the paper crumpled in his hard grasp. They were name change forms.

“If you boys still want the St. Crow name, it’s yours. I’ve already signed the forms.”

Grey dropped his head, pinching the bridge of his nose. I settled back on the couch next to him, feeling him shudder as I wrapped my arms around his shoulders, tears pricking my eyes anew.

He pushed to his feet, slipping out of my grasp to give Diesel a rough embrace. “Thanks, Dad.”

“Of course, Son. Of course.”

“What happened to waiting until graduation?” Corvus asked, unable to conceal the traces of emotion leaking through in his voice.

Grey pulled away, falling back into his seat next to me, staring down at the piece of paper between his hands.

“Well, I still expect you to,” Diesel replied.

I barked a laugh. “I seriously doubt that’ll be happening this year.”

A smug smile spread on Diesel’s mouth. “I’ve taken care of it. You’ll all pass your classes from last term with whatever grade you had when shit hit the fan. So I’d get some *sleep* over the next couple days,” he said pointedly. “Classes start again Tuesday. Bright and fucking early.”

Diesel turned to leave, but Corvus stopped him, grabbing his good leg from where he sat on the floor, an elbow propped up on his knee as he looked over the form. “Thank you.”

Diesel nodded at his son, pausing to fix me with a cheeky smirk. “Ava Jade, there’s a little something else in that envelope that might interest you.”

He left without another word, and Grey set the still heavy envelope in my lap. Corvus turned around and Rook and Grey folded away their forms, tucking them into their jacket pockets.

“Should I be worried?” I asked, trying to figure out why they were looking at me like they were.

Corvus shook his head. “Just open it, Sparrow.”

I did, finding a hefty stack of pages with a legal seal glinting gold in the low lighting on the roof.

“What is this?”

I flipped through a few pages, finding my aunt’s name typed in several places along with mine... and some very large numbers.

“No,” I said to myself, shaking my head. “She wouldn’t have left me anything.”

“She didn’t have to,” Rook crooned, flipping the page for me, pointing to a line that said something about her estate passing to her last remaining blood relative. Her niece. A Miss Ava Jade Mason. “Under state law, you get everything.”

A tingle ran down my legs, and I inhaled a rickety breath.

“So I’m...” I trailed off, my mouth going dry.

“Rich as fuck,” Grey finished for me, smiling wide.

No. Fucking. Way.

My gut reaction was to refuse it. I didn’t want her fucking money. But we could use it. The gang could use it. To rebuild. To become even stronger than they ever were before. So nothing could ever hurt them—hurt *us*—again.

I found myself smiling.

“Happy New Year,” Corvus said, leaning in to press a kiss to my stunned lips. Rook roped me in with an arm, crushing me to him as he planted a kiss in my hair and Grey took my hand under the covers.

“Happy New Year,” they echoed.

“Oh shit!” I cursed, stuffing the papers back into the envelope to dig around the cushions for my phone. “I was supposed to call Becks when it was done.”

“Here,” Grey said, passing me my phone.

I pecked him on the cheek and got up off the couch, wandering to the edge of the roof as I tapped the new phone

number she'd texted me sometime in the last week while we were busy in the basement.

I stared out over Thorn Valley as it rang, hugging the leather jacket tiger around me as the wind whipped my short hair away from my face.

"Aves?" she answered, her tone apprehensive. "Fuck, girl, it's been a week. I thought—"

"It's done," I told her. "He's gone."

I heard her reedy exhale blow down the line.

"Did you make it hurt?" she asked after a second, surprising me.

I nodded as though she could see me. "I don't think anyone's suffered more."

She hesitated a second before saying, "Good."

Vaguely, I heard music playing in the background of the call and remembered where she was. "How was dinner? Did he take it okay?"

Even though I'd been more than a little preoccupied this week, I did read the message she sent me this morning. About how she'd decided to go against her father's wishes and take the space at CalArts. I was so fucking proud of her. Life was too damned short. I just wished she didn't have to learn that the hard way.

"Let's just say I won't be wearing Louboutin anytime in the immediate future." She tried to laugh it off, but I could hear the stress in her voice, and I immediately wanted to go climb into the Rover, drive my ass down there, knock some sense into her father.

"What do you mean?"

"He freaked out," she said. "We had a huge fight. He told me if I go to CalArts instead of MIT I'm cut off."

"So, you aren't going?"

"Fuck yes, I'm going. I told him to shove it. I'm actually packing my shit right now. Going back to Briar Hall. I figure I

have until spring to figure my shit out. *Get a job.*”

I could practically hear the distaste in her tone.

“I can help you with money—”

“Nope. I’m going to do this myself, Aves. I just... I feel like I have to, you know? And I can do it. I know I can.”

I smiled.

“Damn right, babe. I’m so happy for you.”

“You’re coming back to the academy tomorrow, right? Say you’ll be my roomie until I have to leave? And that we’ll stay in touch even while I’m all the way down in SoCal? You’ll visit, right?”

I could hear the note of panic in her voice and laughed. “I’ll be there, I’ll be there,” I assured her. “Whenever you need me.”

A pop and fizzle sounded behind me, and I whirled to watch a firework splatter the night sky in shades of pink and green.

“They’re starting!” Grey hollered.

“I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow,” Becca echoed. “Love you, girl.”

“Love you, too.”

I hung up and raced back to the couch, knocking into Rook and Grey, making them snort and whine as I made a space between them, Corvus reaching his arm up to rest it on my thigh as the show started in earnest.

The sky burned bright above, painting colored light over their faces. I watched them watch the fireworks, letting their warmth sink into me. Letting it chase all the ice away until there was none left, and I knew this was it.

Rook was right. Family really was who you chose, not who you were born to. And this? This was mine.

THANK YOU

Thank you for coming on this wild ride with me! I don't know about you, but I am going to miss Ava Jade and her Crows so damn much. Which is probably a small part of the reason why I decided Kings of Kilborn University *needed* to be written next!

Want to know more? Join my [FB reader group](#) or [my newsletter](#) to be the first to see the cover and read teasers for this new series! KoKU will follow Becca's story as she starts Uni and runs into some trouble with the SoCal chapter of the Saints. Maybe the guys shouldn't have asked their cousins to keep an eye on her ;)

Loved this series? [Leave me a review](#) to let me know!

PLAYLIST

Spotify:

[https://open.spotify.com/playlist/4deEthajD1LszxJBDAofqV?
si=J9rMIKIRTVOT8gt5XMPpEw&dl_branch=1](https://open.spotify.com/playlist/4deEthajD1LszxJBDAofqV?si=J9rMIKIRTVOT8gt5XMPpEw&dl_branch=1)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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A huge shoutout to my fans on this one. You have all been so incredibly patient with me and this series, even when the release of this fourth and final book needed to be slightly postponed.

I didn't get a single angry email or see even one overly negative comment in regard to the wait and that means the world to me. I feel so lucky to have all of you at my back, always eager for the next book. Your support is priceless, and I hope to keep writing stories that make you squirm and swoon for many years to come.

This entire series wouldn't have been possible without my fans, but it also wouldn't have been possible without the unwavering support of my husband! Ga! We're finally married now! Look at me all old and shit. Thank you, husband, for talking me through the writer's block and making dinner every night while I binge wrote the last ten chapters. Thank you also for all the...inspiration.

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Xx

STALK THE AUTHOR

...she doesn't mind 😊

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