



WHISPERS OF  
SALVATION

N.E STEVENSON



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# Whispers of Salvation: A Journey to Reclaim Hope

Book 1

N.E. Stevenson

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Whispers of Salvation: A Journey to Reclaim Hope – Book 1

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

While the author may use their own experiences with certain instances, the book is entirely fictional.

To my daughter, I may not be your biological mother, but you will always be the best thing to ever happen to me.

And to my supportive partner, I love you more than words could ever describe. Thank you for saving me and for letting me have a zoo. I don't know what I'd do without you.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

PLEASE look after yourself, as much as I would like you to read my book, please look at trigger warnings first and decide if this is safe for your mindset to read.

This is a reverse harem book. Containing spicy scenes.

MMFMMM+

### **Trigger Warnings!**

Autumn has had a rough life so far, so warnings are for what is to come in this series.

Self-harm, depression, suicide ideation, suicide attempts, anxiety, PTSD, grief, Death of a family member, Sexual assault and Rape, abuse (verbal, physical and sexual), kidnapping, on page murders, alcoholism, grooming. Most of these situations will be on screen.

But with the dark stuff also comes the super-duper fun stuff like

Sub/Dom scenarios, choking, DP, bondage, group scenes, sensory play, and all the other fun kinky shit that comes with slightly psycho but cinnamon roll men with touch her and die vibes.

If any of my family/friends have supported me by buying this book, *please* stop reading, I beg you.

If you know me and you read this book. No, you don't.

And if you don't know me, and have downloaded or even bought this book, hello new best friend.

# Spotify Playlist

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/5Mb7241pIXwsYbxWfK3EUQ?si=d4f43beaea3a4815>



For 8 years, all I have known is trying to survive one day to the next.

One night causes me to lose everything, nearly including my life.

Waking up in a hospital bed, surrounded by the people I never thought I would see again, after they abandoned me 8 years ago instead of saving me, is not what I expected, either is the four new men who are insisting they want to be there for me while I heal.

Will it be enough to make me want to live again? Or is it too late for me?

Conas is féidir leat éirí, mura bhfuil tú dóite. –  
How can you rise, if you have not been burned.

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# Chapter 1

## Autumn

I could hear the heavy footsteps coming up the creaky stairs. My heart rate picking up knowing what was coming next, the footsteps were heavier than what my mom's ones were, which meant this was another one because mom wanted a drink. The child support money didn't go far anymore, not with the way she drank nowadays.

"Please, not again." I whimpered while my bedroom knob turned, hearing his breathing heavy, and already able to smell the beer on his breath even from across the room, like a rancid hazy cloud around him. I squeezed my eyes shut, pretending to be asleep hoping that he would leave instead of coming closer.

"Shh, don't make too much noise, bitch." he slurred, while stumbling over to my bed, tripping over a doll that Chloe left in my room earlier that day. He flops onto the edge of my bed, scooting closer while saying shh, like he's trying to calm a spooked animal. I can barely see him because of how dark my room is but I know why he's here, I know there's no hiding from what's about to come next, so I close my eyes as tight as I can while trying to move away from him.

"LOOK AT ME!"

My eyes spring open, while a tear slides down my face. I know better than to let weakness show, but I'm just so tired. Tired of fighting, tired of this, tired of being a parent to Chloe instead of a sister, but I must be strong for her, always for her.

I know the tears make them more excited, they like me broken, but I can't help it, I hurt all over, after the beating mom gave me earlier, for asking for money for food, so I could cook dinner for me and Chloe while mom went out to the bar, looking for her next customer. I knew she wouldn't be back until late, and there was nothing in the house, I could wait but Chloe was only four, so innocent and pure. I didn't want her to know what hunger pains felt like, where you physically

clawed at your stomach to try relieving the cramps that would inevitably disappear until you just felt hollow.

I must have zoned out for longer than I thought, because the sound of his zipper being pulled down, was like a shotgun going off in my small box room. The heavy grunts as he shucks his trousers off, and stumbles as he kicks them off, then proceeds to climb on to the bed to tower over me.

His breath smells like he has been having a weekend long binge at the bar, cigarettes, and stale beer, making me want to lean over the edge of the bed and vomit. Why did they always smell like that?

“Take it off, now.” He demands, while tugging on my nipple, through my shirt, making me cry out in pain, he gives a self-satisfied smirk as if that shit felt good, when I just want to grab his and do it right back to see how he would like it, but I know what would happen if I don’t just go along with it, like mom has made me do over the last 7 years of my life, since we left dad. Not like he’s been around since we left, he has a new family with Brenn, I don’t matter to him, I don’t think I ever did.

The man on top of me has obviously gotten sick of me not paying him any attention, because I’m brought out of my thoughts, by him back handing me across the face.

My face jerks to the side, letting out a pained cry then biting my lip to try stop myself from crying out, so I don’t wake Chloe in the next room to me. He rips my shirt open and shoves my shorts down. Taking what he wants, like they all have. Not like I have a choice, mom lets it happen, she sets it up and gets paid for it, and as long as I let it happen, it means Chloe is safe from the abuse.

His grunts fill the room, and I stare at the damp spot on my ceiling, trying to think of happier memories to try get through this. Thoughts of a little boy, who had hair as dark as the nights in wintertime, bright green eyes and a smile that was the best part of my day, while mom and dad argued every day.

*“Come on Atty, you need to help me catch the frog!” I squealed as we chased the little green frog, across the grass*

*towards the lake in my back garden.*

*“Slow down Pumpkin! I’m coming, but you’re going to scare it away, if you keep squealing like that! We need to be sneaky.” Atty whispers to me. I never understood why he called me Pumpkin, instead of Autumn like mom and dad do, but he said it was because the first time he seen me, I was carrying the biggest pumpkin into my house, and I had the biggest smile on my face because it was the first one, I was getting to carve myself.*

*Atty has been my best friend since we were five, he introduced himself to me, and declared himself my best friend and that was it. I didn’t have any other friends, but that was ok because I had my Atty. He was always by my side, making sure the bullies never hurt me. He got into trouble a lot at school, because he would hit the ones that would say mean things about me, but I secretly loved it, because it made me feel safe, like nothing in the world could ever hurt me, as-long as I had him.*

My head is jerked to the side again with another slap, and I can feel my lip reopen from an earlier cut. My eyes snap to the man above me again, as he finishes on my stomach, with a long-pained grunt. Thank fuck he pulled out, because I don’t think he used anything. I watch him pull himself off me, and stumble around for his trousers, more grunts fill the room as he tries to get them on without falling over. He finally leaves, and I sag in relief that it’s over for tonight. I let the tears fall then, feeling violated, while feeling his release starting to dry on my skin, I’m desperate to get it off of me, but I know my mom is still downstairs and he is still here, so I lay there for another 30 minutes, trying to choke back the sobs so Chloe doesn’t hear me, until I hear the front door open and then slam closed.

I get up to go to the bathroom downstairs, to wipe the dried cum from me, I grab another pair of shorts and a black shirt, that has holes in it from years of wear and tear, I make my way downstairs as quietly as possible, knowing mom is still awake, and probably drunk off her ass, looking for an argument. I’m a few feet away from the bathroom door when mom walks out

of the living room, her brown and grey hair hanging limp around her face, her chapped lips curling up into a sneer, showing her rotten teeth from years of neglect. Her eyes flick to my lips, where I know the blood still is.

“I’m going to bed, don’t let that useless brat make any noise in the morning” mom grits out.

“Yes mom.” I sigh, there’s no point arguing with her that Chloe is only four, that she’s just excited to get to school, to see all her friends and my body really can’t take anymore abuse today, I need to still be able to move, so I can look after Chloe and go to school. Only a few more months until I can leave and hopefully, try take Chloe with me.

I’m hoping if I tell mom she can keep getting the child maintenance money and the benefits for us, she’ll let me leave with her, but I know it’s a long shot. Mom gets too much money from selling my unwilling body to the men from the bar. I’m younger than her, so they are more than happy to spend extra for the ‘tighter pussy’ as mom likes to say.

I’m too focused on trying to get away from mom and all the things I need to do in the morning, that I don’t see the way her face contorts into the usual rage before a hit, until I’m feeling the slam of her fist into my ribs.

“Don’t fucking have an attitude with me, you ungrateful whore. Be thankful I kept you after the shit with Charlie. At least this way you have a use to me.” She screams.

Bile rises in my throat at the mention of Charlie, Chloe’s biological dad. He’s not around, and he only pays mom child support, but he’s my biggest monster, bigger than the men who have snuck into my room at night, for the last 7 years.

I lunge for the bathroom while my mom laughs, walking away up the stairs to her bed. I just make it to the rim of the toilet, when I empty my stomach, retching until nothing but bile is coming up. My hands are shaking, and I can feel a cold sweat starting to break out on my forehead and the back of my neck, while I try push old memories down of my stepfather.

Finally, after sitting on the chipped bathroom floor, I get up to the sink and look into the mirror. My dyed blonde hair is a mess, my hazel eyes look empty and lifeless, my lip has dried blood on it, from the reopened cut and the scar on my neck stands out with how pale I am.

I soak a cloth with warm water and hand soap and wipe my face, stomach, and then brush my teeth, I still feel dirty, but I can't chance a shower, when I feel like death warmed over. I'm dizzy and I know the extra hit mom gave me, aggravated one of my broken ribs earlier because it's hard to breathe. I make my way back to bed, checking in on Chloe on the way to make sure she hasn't woken at any point. I've tried to protect her as much as possible over the last 4 years since she was born. I took one look at her, the day she came into this world and said she was mine to protect, since I knew mom wouldn't. I finally get back into bed and check the time. 3 am. Shit. I'm up in 3 hours to get Chloe up and ready for school. I'm going to need coffee, to even get halfway through the day.

Finally, I fall asleep. Praying I don't have nightmares, because I'm already so exhausted.



## Chapter 2

### Autumn

I'm awoken by the ultimate trauma sound. The iPhone alarm. Granted it's a super old iPhone that barely works, but that sound gives me heart palpitations, every single day. Groaning and grumbling under my breath, knowing that moving and getting out of bed is going to hurt like a bitch, I mentally prepare myself.

"One, two, three." I whisper to myself but before I could even make a move Chloe comes barrelling into my bedroom screaming my name, her red hair sticking up in all directions, and her bright blue eyes trained right on me.

"AUTUMNNNNN!!!! THERE'S A HUMOONGOOSE SPIDER ON THE ROOF!" she screams and launches herself at me. I let out an oomph, but I can't help chuckle at how she pronounces humongous, still I feel like my ears are bleeding and mom's warning from last night pops up, so I know I need to get her to quiet down, before she wakes up mom.

"Shhh Chloe, we don't want to wake mom up, remember? I'll get the spider later, after I make you breakfast, now how about we get you ready for school huh?" Which seems to do the trick because she goes from hyperventilating about the spider, to chatting happily about what she's going to be doing at school today. I get her downstairs and start by brushing out her hair and French braiding it in two sections with little pink bows on the bottom to match her pink dress, that she's chose for today. I manage to get her to sit quietly with cartoons on the old box tv while I make her toast for breakfast since the milk spoiled a few days ago, and the last of the orange juice, while making myself a black coffee to try wake myself up a bit more. Looking in the fridge looking for ingredients for Chloe's lunch, I know I'm going to have to ask mom for money again today, and hope like hell she gives me it this time.

I got lucky last night with finding some old pasta in the cupboard and managing to use the last tomatoes and cheese, to make some sort of a sauce for Chloe to have, because that girl

hates plain pasta. She might be four, but she has the personality of a diva, and the attitude of a mean girl high schooler. She says whatever comes into her head, even when it shouldn't, and I've had to apologise because of her multiple times over the last year, while she's found her voice after starting school.

Finally, she finishes her breakfast, since she was so engrossed in her cartoons and I've chucked on an old band shirt with my jeans, that have definitely seen better days, with my white trainers. Quickly putting on some makeup to cover the dark circles under my eyes, and the bruises, that can't be covered up by clothes and I brush my teeth. I put Chloe's plate in the sink, realising I don't have enough time to do the dishes before we leave, knowing mom is going to kick off later when I'm home. I just sigh and grab my phone and Chloe's lunch from the counter, knowing the argument is a later Autumn's problem and grab Chloe's shoes, we get them on her, then try to leave the house as quietly as possible.

"Are you sleepy Autumn? Did you have bad dreams again?" Chloe whispers to me, as I lock up the house. My eyes shoot to hers, this damn kid is too perceptive, I quickly look away, turn around while I shove my keys in my pocket and take her hand.

"No bad dreams Chlo, I just stayed up a bit too late y'know?" Trying my best to sound convincing, because I know damn well, I woke up twice after my nightly visit, having to hold in my screams from nightmares about the monster.

"It's ok Autumn, I'll give you Bun tonight, he'll scare the bad dreams away. Like he does for me. Then you won't be sad, I don't like it when you're sad." Chloe says in her chipper tone, like everything truly will be ok.

"When did you get so wise huh?" I say, while tickling her, to try lift the mood more and take my mind off the fact that my baby sister is growing up way too fast and is seeing more than she ever did. I don't want to ruin any of her innocence, but there's only so much I can do to protect her from mom.

We spend the rest of the walk to her school, playing I Spy and me guessing everything incorrectly even when they are the

most obvious answers, just to keep the smile on her face for a bit longer. The walk was a bit slower than usual today, because of my ribs and other bruises but we finally got there and just in time. The moment we get to her school, she sees one of her friends and she takes off running, shouting a hasty “Bye!” over her shoulder to me. Laughing under my breath I shout, “Love you too Chloe.” back at her, earning a few dirty looks from the parents dropping off their children. I’ve seen the way they look at me, some thinking I’m some sort of teen mom, others with pity because they know my mom from the bar or have heard stories about her and assume I’m the same as her. When all I want is to get my high school diploma and do online college classes, while working so I can provide a semi-normal childhood for Chloe. That little girl is my reason for still being alive, and I will not allow her to ever experience anything I ever have, I need her to always be happy and smiling, otherwise I don’t know what I’ll do.

Shaking away the thoughts, I make my way to school, trying not to let the pain from my ribs show on my face. These people are like vultures, one sign of weakness and they zone right in on it. I don’t speak to anyone here; not like I’d want too anyway. The number of times I’ve been propositioned because of the work my mom does, is ridiculous. Mostly from the football team, who can’t take no for an answer, so I just try keep my head down, do my work and leave, so I can pick up Chloe from school and get her home, before mom leaves for the bar again. I know I’m going to have to dip into my money stash, so I can feed me and Chloe tonight, because I can’t ask mom for money again, not after the beating she gave me last night just for asking for ten dollars.

Finally making it to school, I can feel the sweat on my forehead, and hope like hell, I don’t pass out from the pain. I think mom broke more than one rib this time, so I know I’m in for a hellish few months and I can just hope like hell that mom doesn’t go on another rampage, at least not for another few days. Steeling myself for the walk into school, I look up at the building, as I make my way up the stairs to the main doors. The school is really run down, after years of no public funding, the grey building that is just as gloomy as the

weather, telling me exactly what kind of day this is going to be. I hate it here, but I'm determined to get my diploma, so I'm not a high school dropout like mom.

I go to my locker to grab my books, making sure I have the essay that's due for English, because Mr. Lorimer does not allow any excuses for late or missing work, I make my way to my first class. I go to hand in my essay to Mr. Lorimer before I sit down, but luck is not on my side today and it ends up slipping out of my fingers and on to the floor. Knowing this is going to hurt like a bitch, I take a deep breath and bend down to pick it up, hoping that Mr Lorimer, doesn't notice the whimper of pain that slips past my lips.

"Can I talk to you outside, Autumn?" He asks as he looks me over, stopping on my split lip, and the way I'm holding myself to one side, to try take the pressure from some of my injuries. Fuck fuck fuck a duck. I do not need anyone asking questions right now. I am so close to finally getting out, we don't need CPS coming around. Stepping out of the class, holding my dropped essay in my hand in a death grip, I take a deep breath as I turn around to face him as he closes the classroom door, to stop the rest of my classmates listening to closely. Not like it'll stop them from speculating what this is about.

"Are you ok, Autumn? You know you can come to any of your teachers, if you are having issues at home."

"I'm aware Mr Lorimer, thank you but there's no issues at home, I promise." I reply in my sweetest tone I can offer right now. Hoping he buys the lie, we've had CPS before, and the beating I got from mom, because I told my maths teacher Mrs McKenna, a few years ago that she had broken my arm, ended with me wishing I were dead after mom took her anger out on me for hours, after she had drunk a bottle of vodka.

"Hmmm, ok but if you do need someone to talk to, you know where my door is." He reminds me. Mr Lorimer is a sweet old man, grey hair, smile lines around his eyes where you can tell he's had a good life, always cracking jokes in the class and wears the cringiest ties to school every day, because he thinks they make him cool.

Today he's wearing one with black cats wearing bow ties on it, and it's probably his best one so far. Giving him my nod of understanding, we walk back into the classroom, making my way to my desk after finally handing my essay over. I can hear the sniggering and whispers from my classmates.

"Probably being bought, just like her whore of a mother."

"He was definitely asking for her rates."

"Psst, whore. Were you offering him a blowjob after class, for a better grade?"

Tuning them out and ignoring the names, I pull out my notebook and pen and focus on the board, just hoping to get through the rest of today without anything else happening.

"Ok class, we're learning about anthropomorphism today and how to apply it to our work." Mr Lorimer drones on for the rest of class, and I try to focus as hard as I can, taking down everything he writes on the whiteboard. Finally, the bell rings signalling the end of class. I rush out, hoping the teacher doesn't try pull me aside again. And rush to my next class. The rest of the day continues the same. And at lunch I sit in an empty seat, eat, and try drone out everyone around me with my music and then finish the rest of my day.

Finally, it's the end of the day, and I rush out of school to get to Chloe's, before we get in trouble again for being late to collect her, but I know if I don't pick her up, mom certainly won't, and I never want her to be sat around waiting for mom like I used to. So, I try to jog there to get there quicker, ignoring my protesting ribs and shortness of breath.

Chloe sees me before her teacher does. Mrs Fraser is Chloe's class support teacher and is probably one of the kindest women I have ever met. She doesn't judge us like everyone else does, and she always asks Chloe how her weekends were even if it's the same answer every time. Films and spending time with me, but she just replies with how it must be lovely to have such a nice big sister and doesn't comment on the fact that Chloe's answers never include our mom.

“AUTUMNNNNN!!!! I had the best day ever! I drew a picture of us, look it even has Bun in it, and I got to swap half of my sandwich for lunch with Lucy, so I had some tuna and she had some of my peanut butter. Oh, and I played with dolls. And we played dress up, and oh my god we did this...” her voice getting higher the more she says, because she’s not breathing in between sentences.

Chuckling, I crouch down. “Breathe Chlo, you have the whole walk home to tell me all about your day with Lucy and Mrs Fraser. Remember to breathe while we talk, so you don’t pass out.”

I can’t help but smile at her while I try to get her to calm down, otherwise she’s going to be a bouncing ball of hyper 5-year-old the whole way home. Maybe we’ll stop by the park, to try get rid of the energy on the way home from the shop, after we go get food once mom leaves.

Standing up, I wipe my hands on my jeans and turn to Mrs Fraser, who’s smiling at Chloe fondly.

“Thank you for waiting with her, I’m so sorry I’m a bit late, but mom’s working again today and I couldn’t get out of school early.”

“Don’t worry about that Autumn, I totally understand. Plus, I love spending time with this adorable girl.”

Thanking her again, I take Chloe’s hand and make our way home. Discussing what she’d like for dinner tonight, which of course sets off another squeal of “CHUCKEN NUGGIES!” at the top of her lungs. Obviously, I can’t say no to this girl, so I promise her chicken nuggets after mom leaves and that we can watch *The Lion King* on DVD in my bed, because even though *The Lion King* is Top 10 saddest movies, this girl is obsessed with Mufasa, no idea why, because Simba is basically her in a character with the sass and always getting into trouble, but the girl likes who she likes and who am I to take away another Mufasa fan.

We get home and mom isn’t here, so I get Chloe her after school outfit, that she can get dirty at the park to change into, while I go freshen up and make sure none of my makeup has

rubbed off my bruises throughout the day. The last thing we need is neighbours and the parents at the park speculating about anything else. They already do that enough because of what mom does. I fix some of the makeup, shove my hair up into a messy bun and grab the hoodie that was my dad's, don't know how it ended up here after mom grabbed me and ran in the middle of the night, and even though I've been told he has never fought to try see me, I take some comfort that this item was his and I try to remember the happy memories I had when we stayed with Dad and Brenn. I don't know what I ever did to make them not want me anymore, but it doesn't matter because I have Chloe, and she is all I'll need once we get out of this house and away from mom.

I leave the bathroom and can hear mom screaming at Chloe. Shit. I didn't even hear her come home. I run to the living room and throw myself in front of Chloe just as mom strikes, hitting my arm instead. I try to stop the wince, but mom sees it and meets my eyes, seething that I've once again come between her and Chloe. It's always like this, she knows I won't allow it to happen when I'm here and she hates it.

"That ungrateful brat deserves it! Look at her shoes, she's tore them apart already and I only just got her them! She's just like you, a spoiled horrible child. I wish I never had either of you!" she screams in my face. My anger rises the more she says, I don't allow her to speak to Chloe like this and I know if I don't get Chloe out of here, she's going to see something that I've tried my hardest to protect her from.

I grab Chloe and pick her up, take her into my bedroom, and hand her my phone with the headphones and tell her not to take them off, until I come back. I make sure the music is playing loud enough before I leave the room. My anger is simmering but I keep calm enough, until I leave the room and shut the door behind me. Leaning back on to the door, I take a deep breath and prepare myself about what's going to happen, making my way back downstairs, throwing open the door to the living room and seeing mom sat on the disgusting red crushed velvet sofa, with a smirk on her face, daring me to start this argument off. Knowing I won't let what she said to Chloe slide.

“HOW DARE YOU SPEAK TO HER LIKE THAT, YOU HORRIBLE HAG!!” I bellow at her. “She is 4 fucking years old, and those shoes are months old and the only ones she has, because you spend all the money on fucking drink rather than food and necessities for your fucking children.” Unleashing all my pent-up frustrations on her, because she is the cause of all of this, why couldn’t she have just been a semi-normal mom? But no, I get the mom who pimps my unwilling body out for more drink money, because she decides to pour all of Chloe’s maintenance money down the drain for drink, cigarettes and buying her new flavour of the month gifts so they stick around so she doesn’t feel lonely.

If only she gave a shit about us, because me and Chloe could be enough, we would shower her in love, because that’s all we want from her. I should hate her, but I can’t bring myself to sometimes, because she gave me Chloe. I don’t know why she changed so much after she fled with me, but the week we left she started to hurt me, and then came Charlie, my biggest monster, who took my innocence when I was just 10 years old. He acted like a hero for the first few months, but he got mom drinking more, and the more she passed out from drinking at night, the touchier he got with me until it wasn’t just ‘innocent’ touches anymore.

I look at my mom’s face, and I swear I could see a flash of regret there, but it’s gone before I can even know for sure. Then the fist is flying towards my face, I try to block it but I’m too slow, my already broken ribs protesting the movement. She grabs her belt from the sofa, and I know what’s coming, so I grit my teeth when the first lash comes down on my wrist, cradling it against my stomach I turn, to try take the worst of it on my back because I can hide it better there. She keeps striking me and I finally go down, unable to hold myself up any longer, trying my hardest not to scream, just in case Chloe does end up hearing me. I know if she were to walk in at this moment, mom would turn on her and I can’t let that happen, so I just keep my mouth shut and let her tire herself out.

Finally, I hear the belt drop to the floor and then mom is grabbing my hair, getting right into my face. Her breath smells like a brewery, the smell of her rotten teeth, beer, cigarettes,



and oddly garlic makes me try to turn my head even if she is holding my hair in a death grip. Jerking my face back to her, she starts to scream at me while her spit is landing on my face and all I can think about is wiping it off.

“Who the fuck do you think you are speaking to me like that! I provide everything for you, and you do fucking nothing! I’ll fucking kill you next time you even try raising your voice at me again, then Chloe can take your place. She’d get lots of attention, I probably wouldn’t even need to work again.” She’s goading me, I know she is but still I give her the satisfaction of baring my teeth at her and gritting out. “You could try MOM but just know, I don’t care what you do to me, beat me, allow men to rape me, blame me for your shitty fucking life if you have to, but you will not touch one hair on that little girls head, do you hear me?” Taking a deep breath, I continue my rant at her. “If I ever find out you have, I will slit your throat in your sleep and gladly go to prison for it. No hesitation. Remember that when you want to act like you are untouchable, Chloe is the only reason you are still alive, because if she wasn’t here. I’d take us both out.”

I see a fear on my mom’s face, before she wipes it away and smacks my face off the floor, repeatedly, my head splits open and I know, I’m not going to be able to hide this, but she keeps going until I pass out. My last thought before I slip into the darkness is I really hope she’s got enough of her anger out, that she leaves me and Chloe alone for the rest of the night. It wouldn’t be the first time she keeps raining blows down on me while I’m unconscious.

## Chapter 3

### Autumn

My head is pounding, and I feel like I'm going to throw up, what on earth woke me up? Slowly sitting up, I realise I'm still on the floor in the living room, looking down at the dingy carpet, that has questionable stains on it, knowing I need to vacuum at some point this week, so the house is still somewhat liveable for Chloe. Getting my bearings, I stand up using the sofa to support me and then flop down on to it as a wave of dizziness washes over me. Groaning I place my head in my hands, then wince when the gash on my head throbs from the pressure. Knowing I need to check on Chloe, I push myself up and gingerly make my way upstairs to my room, listening for any sounds of mom moving around, so I can try avoiding her. Shit, I promised Chloe that we'd go to the shop for chicken nuggets for her dinner and then to the park. Stopping just outside my bedroom door, I instantly regret not going to the bathroom first to clean myself up first, I don't want Chloe to ask more questions.

"Ok, I'll get changed then take Chloe to the park to distract her, then the nuggets, then home to The Lion King, and hopefully I can sleep off this migraine." I mutter to myself trying to come up with some semblance of a plan and to distract myself from passing out.

Opening the door, I sag with relief seeing Chloe still sat on my bed, listening to music, and playing Cube Craft, blissfully unaware of anything that has happened. Making my way over to her, I sit down carefully on the bed and touch her knee to get her attention. She finally looks up from my phone and lets out a gasp, looking all over my face, I can see the tears welling up in her eyes and her bottom lip starts to quiver.

"Hey, hey, none of that, I'm ok I promise, just a little sore that's all. I had a fight with the door, but I won I promise." I try to reassure her but she's having none of it when I see her brow furrow, I know she's debating what she wants to say.

“I know that mom h-hits you Autumn, I don’t l-like it, it makes me so s-scared. She b-b-banged the door when she left, and I don’t want her to c-come b-back. You, you said hitting is b-bad, so why does mom do it?” she stutters out while tears slide down her face and I hate it.

My heart is pounding, because I never wanted her to know, I feel shame because I don’t ever stand-up to my mom, and I don’t want Chloe to think I’m weak, what must she think of me for letting our mom treat us like this? I feel anger because we don’t deserve this life, and knowing we won’t ever be enough for mom to stop her lifestyle, that is not just slowly killing her but us right alongside her. And I just feel sad, that we must live like this, that our house has mould, that we live in such a rough area that Chloe’s friends can never come round here, that she’s never had a sleepover, never got to experience the absolute happiness of staying up past her bedtime with her best friend, whispering and giggling with the thrill of getting caught, like I did with Atty.

Looking down so I can try put back on my brave face for her, I take a deep breath, then look into her blue eyes and give her a soft smile.

“I know Chlo, but I really am ok, and you don’t need to worry about any of this, alright?”

Determined, to get the smile back on her face, I lean forward and clasp her face in-between my hands, scrunch her face up and start kissing her face until she’s smiling again. Letting go of her face, I clap my hands and push myself up from the bed.

“Right, I remember you were promised a trip to the park and some chicken nuggets. Now I won’t be able to play with you like I normally do, but I will be sat watching the whole time, and hopefully Lucy might be there. I just need to get cleaned up a little bit, so I don’t scare everyone with my face and then we’ll get going, ok?”

She looks up at me and gives me a small nod while worrying her bottom lip, but I just keep the smile on my face even if it hurts, reminding her we’ll be leaving in 10 minutes, quickly grabbing the money from under my mattress for food, I make

my way out of the bed room and limp my way back down to the bathroom, holding on to the wall for support as I go, knowing I need to toughen up for the rest of the night to make sure Chloe is fine, I can't be passing out on her and leaving her on her own, for the whole night with mom, no doubt drunk. Eventually making it to the bathroom, I look in the mirror and recoil from what I can see, god no wonder Chloe was so worried when I went upstairs, my face is covered in blood, I have a deep cut on the top of my forehead, and I just know it's going to scar. I'm just glad it's not bleeding anymore. My nose has blood crusted around it, and I have the beginnings of a black eye. Sighing I clean the blood from my face and decide to leave it make up free, so I don't agitate my wound. If anyone asks, I'll just say I got into a fight and hopefully they leave it alone, not like it's unusual for people my age to get into fights around this area.

We have some small-time wannabe gangs here in Roswell, New Mexico who like to try start shit for the sake of starting shit, but they are nothing like the ones we hear about in Arizona, which is just a state over from us, they have two large crime families over there. Their rivalry is decades old and apparently the Wedgewood family killed the the others wife and child a few years back which is devastating, and I really can't blame them from hitting back at them, if anything ever happened to Chloe and someone ripped her from me, I'd be the same. Nothing would stop me from getting revenge for her.

Shaking my head from my inner ramblings, because I'm one of those weirdos that make up all sorts of scenarios in my head, including arguments. Do you know how annoying it is to think of a good response hours later? Cause it is, it's not like I can just go back and start another one, certainly not in this house.

Shouting on Chloe to come downstairs so we can get going before it starts to get dark, I grab my dad's hoodie again, patting my jeans pockets to make sure my headphones are there and grab Chloe her pink and purple tie-dye jumper, with a unicorn on the front that says 'I AM FABULOUS' with an over done amount of sequins on the horn in case it gets chilly,

Roswell is always warm but in October when the sky gets a dark early, the temperature likes to dip and it's better to be safe rather than sorry.

Making our way to the park, I get my phone back from Chloe, even though she gives me an adorable little pout as she does. Me and Chloe talk about everything she's going to be doing at school tomorrow, I mean it's not much since it's kindergarten, but she loves it, and she has loads of friends there. Her teachers love her too, she's always kind and if a new student joins the class, she is the first one there to say hi to them and always encourages them to go play with the others, making sure they get to sit next to her for the first few days so they always have a buddy for anything they might need to do. I know I can't provide Chloe with a lot right now, but I've done my best to teach her how to be kind and considerate of others, refusing to allow us to turn bitter, just because we get treated like trash because of our mom.

Chloe runs off to play the moment we get there, so I sit down on a bench near the climbing frame and just watch her play. Putting in my one of my earbuds to listen to some music while also having an ear free so I can still listen out for Chloe, I try to relax, the weather is still quite warm, and I still feel dizzy from the beating mom gave me earlier. Giving Chloe an hour to play, so we don't leave it too late to get food and head home to watch the movie I promised her we would watch.

I try my hardest to never break a promise to Chloe, even going as far as to do Pinky Promises for the ones she deems as super-duper important. Her words not mine.

We eventually get home, after she swindles me to play for an extra 20 minutes at the park, and a massive bag of Swedish fish from the shop, since it's Halloween tomorrow, even though we don't celebrate it, while we picked up her chicken nuggets and my pepperoni pizza. Changing into our pj's for the night, I grab my green pyjama bottoms, a black camisole and my dad's hoodie. I also make sure to pick up Chloe's pink seahorse pyjama set, while the food cooks in the oven.

"Autumnnn, can I pwetty pweese sleep in your room tonight?" begging with her puppy dog eyes that work EVERY. SINGLE.

TIME. She knows I'm not going to say no, and she has the mischievous smile on her face before I even answer. Trying to hold in a laugh and muffling out an "mmhmm sure." She giggles, grabs her pj's and takes off up the stairs, no doubt grabbing Bun, her adorable blue bunny plush and her blue and white with silver stars blanket, that she says she doesn't need to sleep but can't sleep without. I can hear her putting the movie on, so I hurry myself up with plating up her nuggets and chips, with a bowls worth of ketchup on the side. Absolutely disgusting if you ask me, but again the girl likes what she likes. Getting on to the bed with the food, she starts the film before I even fully sit down, singing along with a mouth full of chicken nugget and ketchup.

"NAAAAANNNSSTAAAA BINYAAAAA!!!" she screams along with the intro and Jesus' fucking Christ my ears hurt.

"No need to scream it Chlo, also no need to spray it, how about we swallow before we start singing along, huh?" I laugh out, smiling so much it hurts.

This little girl is the light of my life, I don't know how I'd get through a day without her. Hopefully when we move out, we can have more moments like this, just pure happiness. It won't be perfect, but we'll be safe, and we'll have each other and that will be enough.

Halfway through the film Chloe gets quiet instead of singing along, looking over at her I can see her twisting her fingers and looking at her lap like it can solve everything. Instead of making a big deal out of it, because sometimes you just need to think things through, I place our plates on the floor beside the bed and put my arm around her and pull her into my side for a cuddle. Eventually her voice pipes up super quiet.

"Hey Autumn, C-can I a-ask you s-something?" she says softly, but the nerves in her voice makes me look down at her, instead of focusing on the film, giving her my full attention, I keep my arm around her but make sure to look down at her with a smile.

"Of course, you can Chlo, always. You don't even need to ask."

“W-well can I call you mommy?”

“You have a mom, Chlo; I know she’s not the best, but she is your mom.”

“She isn’t my mommy Autumn, s-she’s mean to me. You are n-nice and always look after me, like a m-mommy does. I’ll keep calling her mom, but I want you to be my mommy. I love you like you are my mommy.” Her bottom lip wobbles and tears gather in her eyes. “I d-don’t have to c-call you mommy if you don’t want me to.”

“Oh no Chlo, of course I want you too. You are my baby, always. I just don’t want you to feel like you have to. We’d have to be careful if you were going to though, because mom might get really mad if she hears you calling me that, so it would have to be our little secret, ok?”

She nods her head, as I give her a kiss on the forehead, while wiping her tears away with my thumb, pulling her in tighter to the hug. Feeling like my heart is going to burst from how much I love her. Hearing her want to call me mommy makes me want to cry from happiness, but I’ll settle for having her close tonight. 20 minutes later I can feel Chloe drifting off to sleep, so I cover us up and cuddle in with her, while the film continues to run. Still not feeling great from earlier, I can feel myself falling asleep too when I hear Chloe mumble.

“I love you, mommy.”

“I love you too Chlo, always.” I tell her, while my body gives into how exhausted its feeling, so I drift off into unconsciousness, while Chloe cuddles into me more.

# Chapter 4

## Autumn

'Hold on – Chord Overstreet'

*"Mommy!!!"*

*"M-mommy, w-wake up p-please!"*

What the hell?

What woke me up?

Struggling to open my eyes, I can feel my lungs burning. Coughing and spluttering, I try to call for Chloe, but my throat feels like it's filled with something.

Trying to look around for Chloe, I can barely see in front of me, realising my room is filled with smoke, I panic. Jumping out of bed, knowing I need to find Chloe and get her out of here. I know she wasn't next to me in bed, maybe she went back to her bedroom in the middle of the night, I grab my phone so I can phone 911 after we get out of here. Racing for my bedroom door, I wrap my hand around the handle and let out a cry of pain as I yank it open, greeted by flames licking up my door and door frame, the hallway resembling the entrance to hell. I scream out Chloe's name, trying to see if she'll answer me back, hoping that she got out.

*"CHLOEEEEEE!!!!"*

Slamming my door shut again, I drop to the floor and fumble for my phone, with my good hand and pull it out of my pocket and call 911.

*"9-1-1, where's your emergency?"*

*"18 peach street, please help..."* I wheezed *"my house is on fire."*

*"Okay, we have the fire department on their way, can you get yourself and anyone else out of the house?"*

*"N-n-no, I'm trapped..."* Feeling like my throats closing more, I cough more, trying to make it work, even for a few moments



more. I need to let them know about Chloe. I need them to make sure that she gets out. “I c-can’t f-find my sister C-Chloe, she’s four. She’ll be s-s-so scared, please make sure she’s ok.”

*“Alright honey, is there another exit that you can maybe try? What about the window?”*

“C-can’t...” coughing again “n-need t-to f-find C-Chlo.”

I can hear the dispatcher notifying the fire department that we’re trapped. God I really hope Chlo isn’t in the house. I’m not religious, but I can feel myself begging God that she needs to be ok. I’ll do anything. He can take my life. He can have anything he damn well wants, as long as she gets out of here.

Hanging up the phone, because I know they’ll be here soon. I shove it back into my pocket and refocus on my mission to find Chloe, pulling my hoodie over my nose and mouth, then getting up on my hands and knees, I start to crawl back towards my bed, so I can try pull myself up and look out the window to see if Chloe got out. Hoping she’s stood outside, I put all of my effort into moving forward, my hand aches, my ribs are still protesting at every movement I do, my head is spinning, and my vision keeps blacking out. But I refuse to give up. So, I keep moving, even when I can hear the door crackling as the fire breaks its way through, my deodorant cans exploding, as the flames curl further into my room now that there’s no barricade in its way, barely able to see in front of me, I use my hands to feel in front of me, and that’s when I feel Bun, grabbing him because Chlo would be devastated if she lost him forever, I shove him in my pyjama bottom pocket, next to my phone.

I slowly creep forward, feeling my energy waning, I push the last of my energy into moving. Then my hand hits something solid, wrapping my hand around it, I realise it’s a foot. No no no no no no. Shaking my head, I squeeze the foot, trying to convince myself, that it’s not her. Crawling further up the body, covering it, hoping to protect it from the flames, that I can feel licking at my feet and back. I’ll take all of the heat and pain, because the tiny body that’s on the floor is Chlo, my Chlo.

Tears streaking down my face, I shake her shoulders.

“C’mon Chlo, wake up.” I rasp out. My shoulders shaking with my sobs, I keep shaking her shoulders, begging, and pleading with her to wake up, to move, to even squeeze my hand, anything to just know that she’s alive. Pressing my ear to her chest, I can hear her heartbeat, crying out with relief, I curl my arm around her body and pull her into my arms and chest. I drag our bodies, my arm with the burnt hand around Chlo, using my uninjured hand to pull us across the carpet into the furthest corner of the room, I grab one of my t-shirts from the floor tying it around Chloe’s face, to try reduce the amount of smoke she’s inhaling while I pull my hoodie back over my face.

I stroke her smoke-stained face, begging her over and over again to just open her blue eyes so I can see that she’s ok. Both of our breathing is laboured, and I know I need to get her out of here before the smoke inhalation kills us both, but the flames are too much, and the drop from the window would kill us anyway. I can only hope that the fire department gets here in time, because if she dies here, then they may as well leave my body in the flames to go along side with her. I won’t survive without her, how can I?

How did this even happen? She was just asking to call me mommy, not even a few hours ago. How did it go from the happiest moment of my life to my biggest nightmare?

“We’re going to get out of here Chlo, and we’re going to be ok. I know this is super scary right now, but I’m right here and I’m not going anywhere. Not until 9-1-1 get here and carry you out of here and I’ll be right behind you, ok?” I whisper to her, wheezing out my words but needing to reassure her, even if she can’t hear me. I can hear the fire crackling and spitting, burning our house from the inside out, I’m watching it close in on us. And I know, I just know that we aren’t making it out. I can accept my fate, but Chlo is just a kid. Cursing any sort of God who is listening, I break down, the tears streaking down my face, soaking into dad’s hoodie, the sobs rack my body, knowing that Chlo isn’t going to get to grow up, no

graduating, no boyfriends, no sneaking out at night to have fun with her friends.

Windows breaking in other rooms, I watch the flames burn my bed, the tv screen shattering, Chlo's blue, and white star blanket igniting, from where it must have fell on the floor as we slept because she always kicks it off after she's fell asleep. All our pictures that I printed off in the library and pinned to the wall are turning to ash, disappearing right before my eyes.

Laying Chlo on the floor, I take Bun out of my pocket and curl her hand around him, situating Bun over her heart and placing my hand over hers, so I can feel her chest rise and fall. I cover her body with my own, my tears dripping into her hair, whispering to her over and over again "Mommy loves you." I don't want her to get hurt from the flames, so I stay where I am, even when I can feel them getting closer.

"M-mommy?"

Jerking back, I look down at Chlo, who is staring up at me with glazed eyes, like she's not really here.

"H-hey baby, I'm right here, it's going to be ok, I p-promise. I'm right here. I love you so so much." Rasping out. Kissing her forehead, I try to shield her from seeing the glow from the flames in the room. I press my forehead to hers. Squeezing her hand that's holding Bun. "See, we have bun right here and so am I. We're going to get out and we'll do anything you want, ok? Anything at all. You want to go to Disneyland, I'll make it happen, I just need you to hang on a little longer baby. Just a little longer, until the people come get us."

She coughs, her breathing becoming choppy. She takes a few deep breaths then lets out another wheezy cough, her lungs making a rattling sound.

"I love you mommy."

Then her chest stops.

She goes limp in my arms.

"No." "No. You can't leave me Chlo; I can't live without you."

My throat closes, causing me to violently cough, my lungs feeling heavy.

“Please, please, please don’t go. I love you. Do you hear me? Mommy loves you. You have to come back; I promise I’ll be the best mommy ever. We’ll leave mom. We’ll go far away, and we’ll be so happy. Just please come back.” I stroke her hair, frantically clutching her hand back around bun every time her small hand slides from on top of him. I can hear myself screaming, my throat threatening to close up again and then I give up, because I know now that she’s gone, there’s no point. So, I clutch her tighter to my chest, ensuring that when the flames reach me, none will touch her. Bun tightly secured between us, because even though I lost her blanket, I know as long as she has Bun, she’ll have good dreams while she sleeps.

I can feel the flames around us now, catching onto my bottoms. Crying out in pain, I stay. Squeezing my eyes shut and locking my body into place, so I don’t move from my position, I keep her safe, because she doesn’t deserve to feel pain like this. I can feel my lungs struggling, and I know if I just give in to the exhaustion, I can be with Chlo.

So, I do.

With one last whispered “I love you.” I give up. I give into the black abyss hoping to see my Chlo on the other side, happy and healthy.

# Chapter 5

## Kelvin

*October 17<sup>th</sup>*

Flopping into my leatherback chair at my mahogany desk, I steeple my fingers on the side of temples while resting my elbows on my desk. I can feel my usual migraine coming on, always caused by stress. Taking a deep breath, I sit up straight, take an Advil and down my bottled water. The temperature is hotter than it should be for October, but it is Phoenix after all.

I continue my emails for my businesses in Las Vegas, having casinos and hotels out that way make it hard to check in whenever I want, but I have plenty of my men down there keeping an eye on them and reporting back about anything shady.

As always, my eyes stray to the photo on my desk of my children playing in the garden when they were younger, we were so happy 8 years ago. My chest aches from looking at her face. Brown hair, hazel eyes just like mine, the most radiant smile that always made my day when I got home from work. Rubbing my chest where her handprint sits over my heart from when she was 4 years old, my eyes burn with unshed tears. It's been 8 years since I last seen her, my ex-wife snatched her away in the middle of the night after I found out that Jane had been telling my rival from the Wedgewood family about my shipments, she knew she signed her death warrant, not like I would have killed her, since she was the mother of my child, but she would have been made to sign Autumn fully over to me and made to run far away. She knew this and I've never been able to find either of them since, I'm convinced she got help from the Wedgewood's, but they have always denied it.

Blowing out a breath, I tear my eyes away from the photo that causes nothing but pain and get back to my work, trying to finish as much as possible, so I can make it home in time for Brenn's birthday meal. I've never missed it, and I don't plan on starting now.

Getting home at around 6pm, I grab the present from the passenger seat and walk into the house. Making my way into the dining room where I can hear the laughter from Brenn and his friends. Unbuttoning my suit jacket with one hand, I walk into the room and clap my son on the back, handing him his present.

“Happy 23<sup>rd</sup> Birthday son!”

“Thanks Dad, I really appreciate it.”

“Go on, open it.”

He rips open the envelope, shooting his eyes to me as they read all expenses paid holiday to Norway for snowboarding at a lodge on the slopes for a week.

“It’s too much dad, these losers could have easily paid for themselves.” He laughs as he gives me a one-armed hug.

“You and the boys leave on the twenty-eighth, so get packing and you should be home on November fourth, so you can celebrate Sebastian’s birthday while you are all there.”

“Seriously dad, this is too much but thank you.” Whooping, he jogs back over to the boys and informs them all, that they are heading out in less than two weeks for the snowboarding trip.

Heading out of the room after all the boys say their thanks, I go to the kitchens to see how the birthday meal is coming along, risking the wrath of Ms McKay our cook, mean old bat but that woman can cook, so I keep her around and deal with her attitude.

We spend the night celebrating my son, with tasty food and company, even Ms McKay joins us. The only thing that could make this is any better, is if my Autumn were here.

*2<sup>nd</sup> November*

Taking my vibrating cell from my pocket, I see that I have five missed calls from a New Mexico area code. What on earth could be so important? I don’t have any men out there currently, so it’s nothing to do with any businesses. Maybe the wrong number?

While I'm pacing in front of my sofa in my office debating to call it back, it starts to ring again in my hand, swiping the answer icon.

"Hello?"

*"Hello, is this a Mr Carraher?"*

"Yes? May I ask what this is about?"

*"Of course, sir, I am calling from UNM hospital, we have been trying to reach you about an Autumn Stephens, that was brought in a few days ago."*

"Impossible." I whisper as I stagger back and fall into the couch. Leaning forward, I can feel the tears welling in my eyes, the lump in my throat, not daring to hope that my daughter could be so close to being back in my life after all these years. Her last name may have not been Stephens when she went missing, but I'm sure my ex got false identities to keep her from me.

*"Sir? Are you there?"*

"Yes..." clearing my throat "sorry yes, I'm here. Are you sure?"

*"Yes sir, when we checked the database for next of kin when she was brought in, she was listed as she had none, apart from her mother Jane. When we checked her over, we found a birthmark on the back of her neck that matched the missing person's report filed 8 years ago by you. So, we ran a quick DNA test, and she came back as Autumn Carraher."*

Feeling like I can't breathe, I close my eyes and feel the tears I was holding back fall, hanging my head forward, I keep the phone pressed against my ear.

"How soon until she's discharged? I'll fly right over to collect her." Rubbing the tattoo under my shirt on my chest, my heart pounding against my chest. After all these years, she'll be home within a week. I can see it now, Brenn coming home from his holiday and his sister waiting there for the reunion they both deserve. He was destroyed when she went missing. He has covered his body in her old drawings and writing, that she made for him as a child, because it's the only thing he has

to feel close to her. Her bedroom is left untouched, of course we'll update it, but we wanted her to know, that if she ever came home that she was always loved, always wanted and that we never gave up on trying to find her.

*"I'm sorry Mr Carraher but Autumn won't be getting discharged. She is currently in critical condition; she was rushed in 4 days ago and has been touch and go ever since. I'm sorry but I'm calling to inform you that you may want to come here as quickly as possible, while we are trying as hard as we can. There is a high chance that Autumn won't make it."*

Just like that, my entire world comes crumbling down around me.

"Of course, thank you so much for informing me, expect me as soon as possible, I'll be sending over my own doctor to check over everything, as I'm sure you are aware, I will want the best of the best for my daughter, to ensure she has the highest chance of survival." I demand. I harden my emotions, knowing I need to send out a team of my men ahead of me to New Mexico, to get as much information about Autumn's life so far as they can, call Doc and fly him out to New Mexico, to ensure she gets the best care and then call Brenn to ruin his birthday holiday, so he can come say goodbye to Autumn, in case she doesn't make it. God he's going to have to tell Atlas too, that boy was my daughter's shadow when she was here, he's been looking for her ever since he turned 16, demanding I initiate him into my family, telling me that even if I don't, he won't stop until she's home, he's devoted to her even after all these years, claims she's the love of his life and no-one else will ever come close.

*"I understand sir, I will inform Doctor Reed to give all notes to your doctor. I'm sorry I wasn't calling with good news sir. We'll see you soon."*

She hangs up and I sit there with my head hanging, working up the will power to get everything sorted, without breaking down.

After calling my teams and doctor, I phone Brenn, but there's no answer. Realising he must be out on the slopes; I leave him



a voicemail, which I never do unless it's an emergency.

*“Son, I need you to call me as soon as you get this. It's important. I-I love you.”*

Making my way up to my room, I grab a suitcase and pack a weekend bag, barely paying attention to what I'm packing. Walking along the hallway, I make a quick stop at Autumn's room, looking around realising she might never step foot in here again, I grab her childhood bear Lois. He's a dark brown chubby bear from Build a bear, with a missing ear but he went everywhere with her. When she went missing, I found Lois in the driveway, like he had been dropped in the rush to get out of there, and my heart broke further, knowing that she had weeks of sleepless nights ahead of her, because he is the only thing that could calm her. Well Lois or Atlas, I was never hurt that it was never me, the girl had her comforts, but she always came for a cuddle at night for thirty minutes, while I worked before her bedtime. That was our time, where she would tell me about what she did at school, what she wanted to be when she got older, or what her and Atlas had been up to that day.

I try to call Brenn a further five times before I board the jet. It's only an hour and thirty-minute flight, but Autumn is going to need my full attention when I get there. I was hoping to fill him in before I got there, but I'll just wait until he calls me back and answer when I can.

“I'm coming Autumn, just hold out for a little while longer.” I mutter to myself, then give my men the order to take off.

# Chapter 6

## Atlas

Me and the boys make our way back into the cabin after a day of snowboarding for Brenn's birthday. All of us buzzing for celebrating Sebastians eighteenth tomorrow, laughing and joking around about what we are going to do. Maybe try get him laid from one of the instructors, that was giving him fuck me eyes all day.

"Hey guys!" Brenn shouts.

We continue to fuck around, until he lets out a whistle that pierces through the air.

"Guys!" he shouts louder.

"What's up man?" Zander inquires.

"I have 5 missed calls from my dad, and a voicemail."

"Shiiiiitttt" I mutter. Brenn's dad never leaves voicemails unless it's an emergency, says they make him feel too awkward. Don't understand what the head of a crime family has to feel awkward about, but we just leave him to it, plus we know it's serious when we get the voicemail notification from him.

"What's the voicemail?" Tobias asks.

"I don't know." He drags his hand down his face, places his phone on the table we are all standing around and presses play.

*"Son, I need you to call me as soon as you get this. It's important. I-I love you."* then it ends.

We all look at each other, hearing the same tremor in his voice that I did. Looking at Brenn, we can see that has turned pale.

"He never says I love you on the phone guys, what happens if he's in danger. Or hurt. These phone calls were hours ago! And we are 13 hours away!" He mutters to himself, but still loud enough that we can hear him.

I make my way over to him and clasp my hand on his shoulder to get him to look at me.

“Why don’t you go call him in the other room? Find out what’s going on and we can go from there?”

Nodding to himself, he grabs his phone from the table and has it at his ear, before he’s even left the room.

“Well shit, looks like we aren’t celebrating your birthday here Seb. Its ok though, we’ll do something when we are back in Phoenix, I’ll take you to Open Sky to make you a real man, might even buy you a lap dance.” Dominic winks at him.

Sebastian just shrugs huffing out a laugh, he never wants to celebrate his birthday anyway, so I know it won’t bother him. Sebastian nods his head towards the hallway Brenn disappeared down asking “What do you think is going on anyway?”

“God knows, nothing the boss can’t take care of. Probably just wants to keep Brenn updated.” I reply, going over to the fridge and grabbing a beer for everyone, I pass them around and take them into the sitting room, placing Brenn’s on the coffee table for when he comes back. We all sit down and put the Arizona Cardinals game on, volume on low, so we can listen out for Brenn.

Thirty minutes later Brenn comes walking back through, tears in his eyes, shaking and looking like he’s seen a ghost. He flops on to the couch and puts his head into his hands, staring at the floor, sniffing. He eventually looks up, looks around at all of us, stopping on me.

“What the hell is going on man? You’re scaring us. Is your dad alright?” I fire out. The look in his eye is terrifying me, I feel like he’s about to tell me someone’s died.

Still looking directly at me. He mutters out “Yes, no. I don’t know. I had to phone him six times until he answered. I don’t know how to process this, never mind tell you all...” “Fuck.”

“Will you just fucking tell us. I can’t keep imaging all the bad shit right now.” I demand.

“Fuck, ok.” he clears his throat, looks around at all of us and then says, “He’s found Autumn.” The guys all start to shout how good news that is, even though they never knew her, they have heard enough about her over the years, from both me and Brenn that they know how special she is.

But my heart fucking seizes in my chest. No fucking way. My girls been found. She’ll be home, and back in my arms after 8 years. I feel like I can finally breathe, after being away from her for so long. The girl I followed around like a shadow, beat up anyone who said something bad about her. Kicked Tommy Parish’s ass when he said he had a crush on her, when we were nine. I’ve waited 8 years to hear those words and all I can think about is her running into my arms like she always did when she would see me with that million-dollar smile that would make me blush like hell.

Looking back at Brenn, I look closer, and he doesn’t look happy about this news at all.

“That’s good news, so why do you look so fucking devastated?” narrowing my eyes at him.

“It’s not good news...”

I don’t let him get any further.

“The fuck, do you mean it’s not good news. She’s been found. She’ll be back home soon, right where she belongs. Why aren’t you fucking happy!” I growl out shooting out of my seat, ready to lunge for him.

“Because Atlas, because she might not make it home...” his voice cracks, the tears flowing down his face again. “she’s in the hospital at UNM, dad says she’s in critical condition. He got the phone call a few hours ago, telling him to rush down to potentially say his goodbyes. It’s not looking good for her. She might not come home Atlas because the doctors don’t think she’ll make it to the end of the week.” He sobs out.

Jumping up I walk outside and roar out my anguish at potentially losing the love of my life, before we are ever reunited again. Punching the tree over and over again, until I can’t feel my knuckles anymore, I let my arm fall limp against

my side then crash to my knees and just lose it. My whole body shakes with how hard I'm crying, my heart feels like it's being torn apart, and I don't want to imagine a world without her, she has been my lifeline since I first laid eyes on her. I can't lose her, I refuse. I'd follow her into the depths of hell and drag her back, because how dare this world take her from me, before we've all had our happily ever after. Opening my eyes I look down at the snow and see my blood littering it with droplets from my busted knuckles, getting up I wipe them off on my jeans, that are soaked through from kneeling in the snow, but I can barely register the cold of it, all I can focus on is the pain in my chest at the idea of losing Autumn but I know I need to pull it together, at least until I'm by her side in the hospital, where I'm going to beg like hell to her to pull through, to come back to me. My girl was always a fighter and I know that wouldn't have changed, so I'm going to be there for when she wakes up and she's never leaving my sight again.

Breathing in deeply I make my way back into the cabin, all the guys giving me concerned looks, but I ignore that and head straight to my room to start packing my shit to get the first flight out of here and back home to my Pumpkin. The others probably got the gist of what I was doing since I can hear them all moving around, the shuffling around of clothes and weekend bags. Zipping my bag closed, I grab my phone and decide to call my ma to let her know what's going on. Unlocking my phone my breath stutters at the photo on my lock screen, the last photo ever taken of me and Autumn, our smiles so wide while we look at each other, my arm wrapped around her waist. We might have only been ten, but I declared when I first saw her that I was going to marry her one day, and I will never break my promises to her. I quickly dial ma's number before I lose it again, needing to hear her voice. She always managed to calm me down, after I would go on my rampages after Autumn went missing and I need that right now. Sitting on the corner of the bed I listen to the rings,' hoping ma isn't busy because I feel like I'm going to lose it again, I need someone to talk me down from my spiralling.

*“Hey baby, why are you calling me when you should be enjoying your boys’ holiday?”*

“Hey ma.”

*“What’s wrong baby? You sound upset. What’s happened?”*

“I can’t do it again ma, I can’t lose her again.” I can feel the emotion clogging my throat, I can’t talk anymore but I know ma needs an explanation because I’m talking nonsense.

*“What on earth are you talking about Atlas? Lose who?”*

“Autumn ma, Brenn’s dad called him, they’ve found her but it’s not good. And I just can’t lose her again.”

I can hear her gasp on the other line, and I know her eyes will be filling with tears, she loved Autumn just as much as I did and never did quite like her mom, so this is going to be a shock to her just as much as us.

*“They’ve found her, truly? Where is she? What’s wrong with her that makes you think you are going to lose her? Surely, she’s coming home, does she not want to?”*

Firing question after question at me, I wait her out letting out a small chuckle while she keeps going, ranting about how they better bring her home or else they will be dealing with her and my da.

“Yeah, they found her ma, but she’s in New Mexico. We haven’t been told much just that she’s in hospital at UNM, in critical condition. We don’t know anything more yet, but we are about to leave here and fly straight there to be there for her. I need her to pull through ma, I can’t have just found her just to lose her again, I just can’t.”

*“I know baby, go to your girl, and keep me updated; you hear me? And when you get there, you don’t let go of that precious girl’s hand and you beg her from me, your da and especially you for her to stick around because she promised me lots of grandbabies and that she’d be my daughter and I don’t allow broken promises even if they were made when she was just a little girl. So, you remind her, even if you don’t think she’s listening, and you make that girl fight.”*

“Of course, ma, I won’t stop fighting for her. I’m going to go now ma, tell da I love him, and I’ll update you as soon as I know anything else. I love you.”

*“I love you too baby.”*

Hanging up, I stand and grab my bag making my way to the living room where everyone is sat waiting with their bags at their feet, ready to go. They know how important Autumn is. Hell, all they've heard from me and Brenn since we all became friends is about her, how I've never even entertained another girl because I never wanted her to feel betrayed if she ever came home. I know the guys will love her just like I do, once they got to know her, and I really hope that's a possibility because they are my brothers and Autumn is so special, she really does deserve every bit of happiness in life and so many people behind her to make her safe, healthy, and happy. I know my friends well enough by now that they will become just as obsessed with her. Dominic being the worst one because when he latches onto something, he doesn't let go, the man has his favourite knife tattooed on him for god's sake, but I knew I wouldn't be mad about it, they never treated woman terribly and I had a horrible feeling that Autumn, was going to need an army behind her to get through all of this and I wouldn't be enough.

All the guys are looking grim, including Dominic who is normally upbeat about everything, but I know if he was to make jokes right now, he wouldn't just be getting a right hook from me. Brenn probably wouldn't stop. We all make our way out to our rental cars, load up and drive to the airport in silence, Brenn sat in the passenger seat arranging everything with the crew for the private jet. We finally arrive and head through check in and security. Looking around while we wait for the jet to finish fuelling, I spot a duty-free shop that sells teddy's and make my way over to it, the guys all following me because they are nosey bastards. They all click onto my plan, and we end up separating in the shop to choose our own teddies for her.

Walking out to the jet we all must look crazy. I was carrying an orange pumpkin plush, Zander an arctic fox, Tobias a purple octopus, Dominic snuggling the Oogie Boogie one from *Nightmare before Christmas*, saying something about rubbing his cologne over it to help her recognise him, like she was a dog or something, Sebastian a husky plush and Brenn with a

brown bear that looked like her childhood one called Lois. All of us carrying the plushies in our arms, like they were something precious, like a child. I couldn't help but imagine how Autumn looks now, how our children might look like if she makes it through this and heals. Then and only then if she would want to try dating me... us, she could be anyone now, but I know I would love her no matter what.

Serial killer? Don't care, we'll bury the body.

Puts the milk in before the cereal? Ehhh, questionable but I would do it that way in the morning for her, if it made her happy.

We get on the luxurious jet and take our seats after storing our bags, every single one of us clutch the plushies in our hands, not daring to put them down like it's our only link to her. Catching Brenn's eye, "How are you holding up man?"

"Not good, just trying to hold onto some hope that she'll pull through. We don't even know the full story yet, just that she's critical and I can't bear the idea of losing her before I even got to see her again." Blowing out a breath. "I mean, does she think we just abandoned her? Has she hated us the whole time we've been apart? I have all these questions in my head. Playing what if at every moment. I'm her big brother, she was my little bear and then I lost her. I lost my person and I've been broken for eight fucking years."

"I doubt she could ever hate you; she adored you when she was a kid. I doubt that's changed even with time and distance between you both. Don't torture yourself until we get there and know everything and then we can go from there, ok?"

"Yeah, I hear you, just hard you know? I know you get it but losing her will destroy us all. We have been looking for so long and we all held out that hope, but to lose that? I don't think dad would come back from that and that scares me just as much."

Nodding my understanding, we lapse into silence for the rest of the journey. There's no happiness right now, we are all just deep in thought about what we will be landing into in New



Mexico and if we will leave with our heart whole or destroyed  
by the end of it.

# Chapter 7

## Atlas

*'Broken – Isak Danielson'*

We finally land in New Mexico after a gruelling 13-hour fight, grabbing our bags we exit the jet and make our way to the black SUV's waiting to take us to the hospital. Approaching the drivers, we all throw our bags into the trunk and give them a nod to let them know we are ready to go, jumping into the back seat, Brenn sits in the passenger seat contacting his dad to find out what ward we need to head to, Zander in the back with me and Sebastian, Tobias, and Dominic in the other. We make our way to the hospital, the moment we pull up outside the hospital doors, we all spill out of the cars and rush inside keeping hold of the plushies the whole time.

I can feel all of us strung tight waiting to see what we are walking out of the elevator too, and I feel like my nerves can't take it. Suddenly there's a heavy weight of a hand on my shoulder, turning my head I see its Zander offering me comfort. "Deep breath Atlas, we don't know what we are walking out too but whatever it is, we'll face it together. Everything you've told us about her, tells me she's a fighter and this will be no different. So, stop making yourself sick with worry and lets all be there for her because that's what she needs." He gives my shoulder a squeeze to let me know he's there, then drops it back down to his side, just as the doors open to the ward.

Walking up to the reception desk, Brenn approaches the receptionist to ask about Autumn while we hang back.

"Excuse me? Can you tell me where I can find Autumn Carraher, please?"

"I'm sorry sir, but we don't have anyone here with that surname." Shaking her head sadly like we are lost, but I know she's here, I can feel it.

"Can you please just check? I'm sure she has a different surname, but we were told to come here to potentially say

goodbye. Please she's my sister I can't waste time here when she needs me!"

"Please calm down sir, but we don't have someone here under that name."

Just as I see Brenn about to lose his absolute shit, Kelvin comes walking around the corner and making a beeline straight for his son, pulling him into a hug.

"Sorry son, we had to hide her identity completely while she's here since we don't know what has fully happened yet. Come with me and we'll head to the waiting room while we wait for Doc to come update us."

Following him into the private waiting room, I take in the fading ugly yellow walls and the super uncomfortable chairs, with the information posters littering the walls. Slumping into one of the plastic chairs, the others follow and then we're looking at Kelvin for any information he can give us.

"I don't have all the information yet, Doc got here about 6 hours ago and has been examining her ever since, going over all her files. Her heart stopped about 3 hours ago from a blood clot which caused her to have a heart attack, but they managed to resuscitate her and then rushed her into surgery for a surgical thrombectomy, which is where remove the clot and try repair the vessel." He informs us.

Fucking hell. Dragging my hand down my face, I want to flip out. Her heart fucking stopped while we were on the flight back and I would never have known until we got here, to her being announced as dead. She's alive though and I need to focus on that right now before I go feral and smash the room apart, she's the main priority, nothing else.

"Have you seen her?" asks Brenn.

"No, they won't let anyone near her right now apart from the doctors and nurses. She's been alone since she got brought in a few days ago and then she got worse, while she was in her coma, she was having seizures something about lack of oxygen to the brain, and then her heart kept trying to give up. They refuse to give up on her though and now Doc is here, I

know he'll do everything he can. All I know so far is that she was in a house fire and couldn't get out."

"Alone? What about Jane? Has she even shown her face yet or was she in the fire too?" I ask.

"I don't know, they've not said much else about what's happened. But Doc will be in soon with the update so I'm trying to be calm. They already threatened to have security drag me out when I trashed the other waiting room."

So, we wait. Another agonising 3 hours where I'm wishing the whole time, I was by her side holding her hand before Doc finally walks into the room but judging by the set line of his lips, it's not good and I don't know if I want to hear it. "I'm sorry, it's not looking good. She went into cardiac arrest twice on the table. She's stable right now but this girl..." shaking his head he looks at Kelvin, blows out a breath before continuing to break our hearts "Kelvin this girl, she's been abused, badly. I don't know how much fight she has in her anymore. The fire was gruesome, but it was on top of other injuries. I really don't know how she's alive right now but she's fighting, but I also think she's trying to give up."

"H-how bad is s-she?" Kelvin stutters out, unable to hide the emotion in his voice at hearing his little girl being abused.

"Bad. I don't have a full report yet since I need to do scans and talk to her if she wakes up, but you need to prepare yourself because that girl won't be the same one you knew. She's going to be traumatised, she'll have PTSD and she's going to need all the support she can get if she has any chance of pulling through this as a functioning human being."

My heart is pounding in my chest, all I can hear is the word abused over and over again in my head. Abused.

For how long?

By whom?

Because they are a fucking dead man walking. She's not even eighteen, what has she endured since she's been away.

Abused. Abused. Abused.

Autumn has been abused.

Someone grabs my shoulder and I spin around baring my teeth like a wild animal, chest heaving, ready to take a swing at whoever has touched me. I feel out of control. She was abused. I can't focus on anything else; my eyes can't focus. I want to lash out, I want to destroy something but that won't help. The weight on my shoulder helps to ground me, finally lowering my fists to my side, I can see that I've busted my knuckles again, wincing I realise I've put a pretty big hole in the wall next to the door, and broken the table, trashy magazines scattered around the room. Unable to meet anyone's eyes from shame, I stand there with my chest heaving, my heart and mind demanding blood from whoever hurt her.

"It's ok Atlas, I get it. I want to tear apart the world and watch it burn because of what's happened to her. But we need to try calm down so we can get in and see her because she needs us. I need you to push all this to the side, until we get more answers and then we'll hunt them all down, ok?" Kelvin reassures me, pulling me into a tight hug, I can feel the matching tremble in his limbs, containing the beast that could destroy anything and everything, just to keep her safe from further harm. Pulling apart we both turn to look at Doc.

Doc stands, nodding his head as he walks towards the waiting room door. "I'll take you to go see her Kelvin, then I'm going to head back to check on her results from the surgery."

"Can we go?" Brenn asks him with hope in his voice. I know he needs to see her, just as badly as I do, and I don't know how much longer I can sit out here waiting to be let in. I have this urgent need to be by her side, to try coax her back, to try to convince her to fight.

"I don't see why not. Let me see if she's been moved back to her room first, then I'll come back and get you all. She's been moved up to the bigger suite that you requested Kelvin, and we have the guards set out at different points in the hospital for maximum security. I'll be back for you all soon." He says as he exits the room with a head nod.

Cleaning up the magazines and the table, I take a seat in one of the chairs, waiting for Doc to come back so I can finally set eyes on my girl again. Not at all prepared for what we are about to see. He eventually reappears, his face filled with pity and sadness, and I just know what we're about to see is going to break our hearts.

Picking her plushie up from the floor and dusting it off, we all stand and make our way out of the waiting room, towards the suite she was placed in. Kelvin enters the room first, then Brenn who lets out a gasp as he sees her. I step in behind him with the guys at my back. My lip's part, eyes widening at what I'm looking at. My girl is laid in a hospital bed, eyes closed, her once brown hair now dyed blonde, hanging limp and greasy around her face. Her face mottled with bruises. An intubation tube down her throat to help her breathe, numerous wires leading from her body to different machines, the monitor beeping steadily next to her the only signs of life at her eerily still form. She has an IV running to her arm, most likely filled with a multitude of drugs to keep her pain free.

Doc approaches her bed, picking up her clipboard at the base of her bed, reading over everything that doesn't make sense to us. I drag my feet to the right side of her bed, tears welling in my eyes letting them fall, as my gaze roams over my beautiful girl. She's changed so much but also not at all. She's skinny, too skinny but we will change that once she's home. I gingerly take her right hand, since it's not bandaged.

"Oh Pumpkin, who did this to you?" I whisper into her skin, as I bend my head and softly press my lips to her hand. I lay my forehead on her hand, finally feeling home after all these years without her, but also never feeling as lost as I have in this moment. I can hear the other guys moving around the room, shuffling their chairs closer to the bed to support us all. Brenn and Kelvin sitting near me on her right side, her left hand bandaged up. I roam my eyes over her face now I'm closer and stop when I see an angry red scar across her neck, eyes hardening I can feel my breathing pick up knowing exactly what causes that type of scarring. The guys all follow my line of sight and I feel Brenn tensing beside me.

“WHAT.THE.FUCK. Someone tried to slit her fucking throat!” He bellows.

“Calm down son, we’ll get them just like I told Atlas, but she needs a calm environment right now. I don’t know if she can hear us, but I refuse to stress her out further. If you can’t calm down, then go take a walk, then come back once you are.” Kelvin tells him. Brenn nods his head but stays where he is, taking deep breaths, clenching, and unclenching his fists. I stay in my seat, gripping Autumn’s hand like it’s my lifeline, and maybe it is because my heart is broken seeing her look so fragile, I can’t take my eyes off her, still not believing that after all these years, I’m by her side again even if it’s in the most horrible way.

Kelvin asks Doc to tell us everything he knows, making his way over to her monitor, he fills us in on her injuries. “She’s been placed into an induced coma to help her heal, but to make sure her brain swelling went down since it wasn’t getting enough oxygen and we believe she received a concussion before the fire. She has an intubation tube placed, because she was struggling to breathe independently, due to the damage to her lungs from smoke inhalation. She has third degree burns on her legs and feet, and second degree burns on her lower back and left hand.” Pausing he looks at us all, probably making sure we are all keeping our shit together, before he continues. I don’t know how it can get worse, but I know it’s going to. “We found lacerations on her back, not sure what caused it, but some are old, and some are newer, I would say no older than a few days. We couldn’t be fully sure because of the burns, blood and bruising that covers her body. She also has broken ribs, no older than 7 days old. She’s less than 100lbs, 5% under her ideal weight. She has bruises, littering her whole body but distinctly fingerprints on her arms, and her inner thighs. We haven’t conducted a rape kit yet, due to her being unconscious and in and out of surgery, but we will as soon as she’s coherent and willing. And as you can see, she has a slightly broken nose, bruising around her eyes, a broken cheekbone, stitches to treat a bad gash on her forehead, the scar along her neck and a poorly set previous broken bone.”

The scraping of a chair being slid back, has my head lifting to see Tobias leaving the room. Refocusing on Autumn because I can't deal with anything other than her right now, I let my tears fall. Grieving for her life before we found her again, for everything my girl has been through, and knowing she's going to have a hell of a fight, if she decides to wake up.

Kelvin strides over to the head of the bed, gently stroking back her hair and laying a soft kiss on her forehead, being mindful of her injuries. "I love you Little Monster, please come back to us." He whispers to her so softly, a tear leaking from his eye, down his face following the curve of his nose. He doesn't wipe it away, but he does harden his emotions, closing himself off, ready to face his men to get more answers. He strides from the room, barking orders the minute the door closes behind him, ordering his men to find Jane, his ex-wife and Autumn's mom.

Brenn lays his hand over her blanket covered thigh; he lays his brown bear plush in the crook of her arm.

Turning to look back at Doc. "How is the outcome looking, Doc?" I ask. Needing to know so I can brace myself for the worst.

"Honestly? Better than what she was when she first came in, but she's weak right now. Her body and her mind. She needs to want to live, to come back to us all and that's all we can pray for."



# Chapter 8

## Autumn

I feel weightless, suspended in the abyss. Feeling nothing. Just drifting. Did I die? Giggling has my head whipping to the side and there's my Chlo, surrounded by a soft glow, her red hair, healthier than I have ever seen it, her bright blue eyes somehow brighter, looking so healthy and happy.

*"No silly, you didn't die." She giggles again, running at me.*

*I wrap my arms around her as she reaches me and I squeeze her tight, happy just to have her in my arms again. Kissing her forehead, she's so warm, making the abyss fill with her natural light and warmth, that I would bask in since she was a baby. She was my happy place and I desperately need that right now. I can feel the grief cracking my heart into splinters, remembering the fire, remembering her body going limp in my arms, giving up the fight so I can join her in the afterlife, if there was one because there was no point in carrying on without her.*

*"What do you mean I didn't die Chlo? I felt you die. I followed you." My heart breaking at the idea of losing her again. I just want to be with her, why can't I just be with her.*

*"It's not your time mommy. You have so many people waiting for you when you wake up. I love you so much mommy, but you have to go back, please. I don't want you to die too. Bun will keep you safe, he'll keep the bad dreams away and he'll be there for you to cuddle, now I can't. Please don't lose him."*

*"No Chlo, I'm not going back. I want to stay with you. Why can't I stay with you? I CHOSE YOU! There's nothing back there for me. Please." Holding her tighter to me, I breathe in her scent, that's uniquely hers refusing to let go, because I refuse to lose her again.*

*"I love you mommy, so much. And I will always be by your side. But you need to go back. I'll be here when you come back, I promise. But you have to go back please. Please for me*

*mommy. I love you.” She places her hands on my cheeks, looking me in the eyes, pleading with me to listen to her.*

*I can feel her slipping away. I’m not ready, I’ll never be ready. Screaming her name, reaching for her again, I slip back into the numbness the abyss gives to me. Refusing to go back. I’ll stay here until I can join her, because I won’t go on without her. I refuse.*

## Chapter 9

### Autumn

I'm still in the numb abyss. Still refusing to move, determined to join Chloe wherever she is. Voices filtering through the haze but I push them away. I don't want anyone to try to convince me to go back. I want my Chlo.

*"Please come back Little Monster. I-I've missed you so God damn much, I need you to open those pretty hazel eyes. I've looked for you for 8 years, I can't lose you now... we can't lose you now. Atlas is here. You remember him, right? Your Atty. So is Brenn, and a few new stragglers, that I'm sure you'll have wrapped around your little finger before you even know it. I never stopped loving you Little Monster. Never. We still have your bedroom the same, we celebrate your birthday every year, even if you aren't there for it, just so we could feel closer to you. We never gave up on looking for you, I promise you. But I need you to fight now, we need you to come back to us, so we can show you how loved you still are..."*

The voice filters out, but the nickname little monster seems so familiar, but from where? Deciding it didn't matter, I try to go back to my numbness, when another voice sneaks in, thick with emotion.

*"Hey, Mon Petit Ours, I don't know if you can hear me or not. They say you can so I'm going to talk, and you're going to listen, ok? You need to come back Autumn, you need to fight like hell to get through this, just like you did when you were a kid. You were my partner in crime, and I need you back, life was never the same after you went missing, do you know that? Was it like you were missing a part of yourself too? Being separated from me? Us? I promise you if you come back to us, I'll sneak you all the chocolate that I can, and I'll let you choose all the shows and I'll never complain, because I need you more than any of that. I have your drawings tattooed onto me, I couldn't bear to be away from you, so I got your silly drawings permanently on my skin and I love them, even if I*

*have like five variations of Lois the bear on me. I love you my Little Bear, please come back. Please...*”

This voice filters out just like the last one, and I keep trying to ignore them. Why don't they understand. I can't come back. I won't. Then the next one comes, this one I do recognise. My Atty. Why is he here?

*“Pumpkin please. I can feel my heart breaking here. You need to fight; you need to come back. You need to come back to us, because we can't survive losing you baby. We always had hope that we'd find you, but never like this... God never like this...”*

His voice trembles, I can hear the cracks in it, the emotion.

*“You remember when you promised you'd marry me one day? You even told Ma you would. Told her you would be her daughter, that you would give her plenty of grandbabies too. Well, you can't break that promise Mon Coeur, Ma will kick my ass and yours if you do. So, you wake that butt of yours up and we'll all be right here to help you through it all, ok? Because if I lose you, I'll follow, and I don't want to break Ma and Da's heart like that, but I can't live in this world without you. It was different before with the hope. But without it, I wouldn't have a heart because you would take it with you. You are the love of my life, you are the only woman I have ever loved, and death will not separate us, you hear me?”*

I feel a soft kiss being pressed to my forehead, like the life and warmth is slowly being pushed back into me, through sheer will power alone from these people, my limbs are regaining feeling, I can feel soft touches on my hand and someone stroking my hair, but I still can't. I can't just abandon Chlo like these people abandoned me.

*“Hey Princess, my names Zander, you don't know me but I'm one of Brenn and Atlas's best friends, you need to fight princess, for them. They are devastated that you are here like this, instead of at home with them. I know you don't know me, but I know you, I've heard about you for years now, all the stories, the photos, I feel like I grew up right alongside you. If you don't make it, they won't be the only ones to be devastated, we all will be. You have a whole family waiting for you here,*

*and we won't ever leave your side. Please just try and we'll wait here for as long as you need, all I'm asking is that you try and if you can't, that's ok too."*

Why are these people so determined to get me back? Don't they understand that I don't want to be fucking here. Unless Chloe's waiting for me. Maybe she didn't die, maybe she's sat waiting for me to wake up, is mom with her? Is she being hurt like I was? I've lost all sense of time in the abyss, and I feel selfish if she's been waiting, but I'm so sure that she didn't make it, and if she isn't there when I finally pull myself out of this, then I'll just join her again because I know if she isn't there, nothing is going to keep me there.

# Chapter 10

## Zander

### *Two weeks later*

Everyone has cleared out from the hospital room to grab food, showers, and extra clothing. I promised to stay behind so she has someone there with her, just in case she wakes up, looking at her, her hair is messy since the nurse here can't run a brush through her hair apparently, so I asked one of the guys to grab a brush while they are out, so I can do it for her. Her form is practically skeletal from how underweight she is, she's lost more weight since being here, since she is just laid up in the hospital bed, her face is in a permanent frown like she's in pain, but I know they've got her on the good pain meds so it's not physical. She's still beautiful, obviously we heard about her when she was a kid but sitting by her side for the last two weeks, has made me feel fiercely protective of her, watching the nurses change her burn bandages, making sure the lacerations from the abuse on her back aren't getting infected, doing more scans to see the extent of the previous abuse that she suffered.

She doesn't even know who I am, but I'm already all in with her, anyone who could survive what she did is a fighter and I'm going to do whatever I can to get her back to her full self, it could take years, but I refuse to leave her side for any of it. I haven't said anything to her the last two weeks, not knowing what to say, feeling stupid talking out loud to someone who can't reply back to me, but I know I need to try and hopefully if she does wake up, she'll recognise me by my voice.

I take her cold hand in mine, stroking my thumb across her knuckles, feeling how soft her skin is. Bringing it up to my cheek, I hold it there trying to infuse some of my body warmth into it as I look at her, trying to find the words to say to her.

“Hey Princess, my names Zander, you don't know me but I'm one of Brenn and Atlas's best friends, you need to fight princess, for them. They are devastated that you are here like this, instead of at home with them. I know you don't know me,

but I know you, I've heard about you for years now, all the stories, the photos, I feel like I grew up right alongside you. If you don't make it, they won't be the only ones to be devastated, we all will be. You have a whole family waiting for you here, and we won't ever leave your side. Please just try and we'll wait here for as long as you need, all I'm asking is that you try and if you can't, that's ok too."

That's how I spend the next two hours, me by her side, holding her hand, stroking my thumb against hers, trying to coax her back to us. Desperate for her to open her eyes, not wanting my family to fall apart, but also not wanting to lose the girl, I spent years listening about before we can even try get to know her. Everyone eventually makes their way back to the room, freshly showered, clean clothes and Kelvin brought us all food so we can all eat here, that way none of us have to leave her for longer than necessary. I stay in the seat by her side while everyone spreads out in the room, Kelvin on her opposite side with Brenn sat next to him. Atlas and Tobias sat on the sofa at the wall near the door, as if they can protect her from further harm if someone comes in, Dominic laid on the floor next to my seat muttering away to himself about glow in the dark stars and Sebastian who is sat at a table on his laptop, researching everything he can about Jane Stephens, Autumn's mom. While we might be freshly showered and fed, we all look like we can do with 50 hours sleep, we all have some sort of scruff on our face, I don't think I've even reached for a razor since we got the call she was here, my long shoulder length brown hair thrown into a bun on the top of my head to keep it out of my face.

I keep my hand in hers while everyone around us talks about what we are going to do when she comes home, upgrading her furniture, redecorating her room. Kelvin wants to keep it the same so she can see he never changed it, so he's considering decorating the spare room for her instead. He's also upgraded security, while his home is probably one of the safest in Arizona, he's refusing to take any chances and none of us have disagreed with him about it. Atlas wanted to add a personal security team, but we all agreed that it would be us, not like

she's going to get rid of us anytime soon, we'll be her own personal shadows.

"Do you have any information on Jane yet?" I ask Kelvin.

"None, the bitch has fully disappeared. The men I sent here did a search of her house and she was never in it. It's looking like she's the one who set it. There were also signs of a child living there, but I've not looked into that yet, since Jane probably ran with the kid."

"We can ask Autumn more when she wakes up, slowly of course but hopefully she can tell us where her mom has potentially disappeared to."

"I say we just hunt the bitch down and kill her" Dominic seethes from where he's still lay on the floor, twirling his favourite knife between his fingers.

"We can't kill her Dominic..." Atlas sighs. "As much as I want to, for what Autumn has been through, it has to be Autumn's choice. We can't take that from her."

"Fineee, but I get to help if she says we can." he whines, pouting like a child making us all chuckle at his expression.

The sound of someone whimpering has my head snapping to Autumn's face, her brows are scrunched up and she's letting out these whining noises that are breaking my heart, then I feel her hand tightening around mine. Lurching out of my chair, I keep her hand in mine, squeezing it back to let her know I'm there.

"Guys! She's waking up!" I tell them.

Everyone shoots up, crowding round the bed. Kelvin rushes to her head and strokes her hair. Whispering softly to her, trying to keep her calm since she still has to get her intubation tube removed, she's not fully aware yet but hopefully our voices and words are enough right now.

Tobias runs out to let the nurses know, coming back with her main nurse, a lovely plump woman with grey hair and kind brown eyes. She has been great with Autumn this whole time, making sure she's treated with dignity, and speaking to her



when she's had to wash her down even if she's not awake to respond.

“Oh, lookie here, she's finally waking up. I'm so glad. Let me go grab Doc and the anaesthesiologist and we'll remove the intubation tube. Hopefully, she'll open those pretty eyes soon, right boys?” giving us a little wink, she finishes looking over her stats and bustles out of the room to go get Doc. Who's been her main attendant the last two weeks, not trusting anyone else with her care. The man has been rigorous with scans and tests to make sure we miss nothing, just in case it impacts Autumn's health.

I also think that he's grown attached to her, just as much as we have, I can almost guarantee he's going to become her pseudo grandfather as soon as he stops being her doctor and we get her home.

We are all escorted from the room while they remove the tube and placed back in the god forsaken waiting room, that's become our second home when we aren't allowed in with her. Atlas starts to pace backwards and forwards, while Brenn sits with his leg bouncing. We are all stuck in a weird state of anticipation for her waking up, the last two weeks Atlas and Brenn have kept us entertained with stories we haven't really heard before, she always sounded like a firecracker with a crazy amount of sass, I can't wait to see it once she's home.

Kelvin stayed in the room with her, holding her hand. I don't think they could have separated him from her when she's so close to waking up, she still has a long journey ahead of her for healing, but she's already come so far. The bruising on her face has faded to a sickly green/yellow colour, her stitches came out of her forehead and her burnt hand is healing great, compared to her feet and legs. They performed skin grafts on her feet because the burns were so bad, but thankfully the fire department managed to get there before it got any further.

30 minutes later, Kelvin walks into the room with a small smile on his face.

“She's not fully awake yet, but she's getting there. She should be awake in a few hours according to Doc, but she's going to

be groggy and in and out of it for a while longer.”

“Oh, thank god.” Sobs out Atlas.

Brenn lets out a choked cry and Sebastian goes to his side, so he has someone to lean on. We all express our happiness about her getting through this, we still have a long way to go but considering we were told to come say our goodbyes, and instead we will be potentially leaving with her in a few weeks is mind blowing. This girl is a fighter, through and through and I couldn't be prouder of her than I am right now. We all are. Brenn gets up and pulls Atlas into a man hug, slapping each other on the back, with the biggest smiles I've ever seen on their faces. We all have tears in our eyes from sheer relief and happiness.

“I'm soooo going to be her favourite, you know that right?” Dominic says. Shaking my head at him, holding in my chuckle, it turns into full blown debate about who she's going to like the best. The tension lifting from the room and being replaced with happiness and hope again.

# Chapter 11

## Autumn

*Beep. Beep. Beep.*

What in the ever-loving fuck is that sound.

God has Chlo left her alarm on again?

My head feels like it's going to burst, like thousands of angry little elves are dancing on my brain. Did mom give me another concussion that knocked me out because I feel like I'm dying here.

*Beep. Beep. Beep.*

God seriously someone needs to turn that off before I throw it at them.

Groaning, my throat decides to close up from the action and let me know it's as dry as the Sahara Desert, so of course that leads me into a coughing fit that makes my injuries, make themselves known. Leaning to the side so I don't vomit from coughing so hard, my injuries on my back tighten.

"Hey hey, it's alright. Try not to move too much. You need to lay back and we'll get the nurse to sit you up, so you are more comfortable." an unknown male voice says. Male. Why on earth is there a male here. Realising that mom must have sold my body again, I let out a whimper and try to scramble away from the voice, my eyes are still shut, I don't want to open them, I don't want to see what's about to happen to me, but I end up getting tangled in wires and a horrible pain comes from my left hand. Fuck, I can feel a panic attack coming on. Why the fuck am I so sore, why is there a man trying to calm me down, what the fuck is going on?

*Beep. Beep. Beep. The sound getting faster.*

My chest is heaving, I know I need to open my eyes, but I don't want to.

"Please..." I rasp out. "Please... don't." My throat is aching.

Slowly I open my eyes, blinking a few times, trying to get the grittiness out from my eyelids, I finally open them, then immediately slam them shut again.

Why the hell is my room so bright?

Opening them again, I look around. I'm in a hospital. I finally look at who the owner of the voice was. 6'3, wide shoulders, chestnut brown hair with slightly greying edges, and hazel eyes just like mine.

"Dad?" I croak out.

"Little monster." He chokes out, falling into the seat next to me, he tries to grab my hand, but I snatch it away and hold it to my chest, shuffling as far away from him as possible. Why is he here? It's been 8 years since I last seen him, what on earth could he be here for?

A flash of hurt in his eyes, before he gives me an understanding look, he hands me a Styrofoam cup containing water, but he goes right back to where he was. "Slow slips you don't want to throw it back up. Do you know where you are?" he asks me.

I nod. Taking a small sip of water.

"H-hospital."

"Yeah sweetheart, you're in the hospital. Do you know how you got here?"

I shake my head. Everything is fuzzy. I know I need to remember something, but I'm just really confused right now.

"You were in a fire sweetheart, the fire department managed to get you out in time."

"F-fire? Where's mom?"

"We don't know, no-one has been able to get in touch with her, since you were brought in. We were hoping you would know where she might have gone off to. We think she might have run away with the kid that was living with you."

Kid?

Then it hits me.

Waking up. Not being able to find Chloe. Then finding Chloe on the floor, trying to protect her body from the flames. Her chest stopping and her going in limp in my arms. It replays in my mind like my own horror show.

“NO!” I cry out. “No. no. no. no. Where is Chloe?!” I scream, my throat making it come out raspy.

“Shh Little Monster it’s ok, who is Chloe?”

I can’t speak. My sobs wracking my body, I can’t breathe, why can’t I get air into my lungs. I need to find her.

Throwing my covers off of me, I rip my IV out of me and start to pull the wires, that are stuck to me off.

Dad starts to try pry my hands off of the wires.

“Sweetheart you need to stop. You can’t leave.” He pleads with me.

“NO! You don’t understand, I need to find Chloe, she’ll be so scared. Please let me find her, I need her.”

I refuse to believe she’s dead. I know if I can just get up, I’ll find her. She’ll be in the hospital somewhere and she’ll be so scared. I don’t know how long I was out for, but she’ll have been alone if mom hasn’t shown her face here. Does she even have Bun? I’ll find him for her, but I just need to know if she’s ok. She has to be ok.

Dad’s hands frame my face making me look at him, I know I have tears streaming down my face, but I need to find her, why can’t he realise I need to find her.

“I need you to tell me who Chloe is, Little Monster, and then I’ll get the boys to find her for you ok? You can’t leave here yet; you were hurt too badly. So, tell me who she is, and I’ll find her, I promise.”

“She is my sister. H-her name is Chloe Stephens. 4 years old. Red hair, blue eyes. Date of birth December 13<sup>th</sup>, 2017. Please find her, she needs me. I’ll d-do anything.”

“Ok sweetheart, I’m going to get someone to find her, but I’m going to get Doc back in here to clean you up and to put your

IV back in. You need to be at full strength for when we find her.”

I just nod. There's nothing, I can do right now until he tells me where she is, so I zone out. I can't keep thinking about if she's really dead because I made it, and she has so much will power in her, how could she not have.

I'm barely aware of the man called Doc, readmitting my IV and all the wires for my heart monitor. Staring at the wall in front of me, I detach myself from reality, because I can feel my heart breaking the longer it takes for Dad to come back with news on Chloe. Doc talks to me while he attends to me, while he talks me through what he's doing thoroughly so I don't panic at every touch from him, he also speaks to me about how he became a doctor for dad. Apparently, he was a guy called Zander's doctor, in an underground fighting ring and Dad apparently loved his no nonsense approach to treatments and knew he needed to hire him. He now has his own practice in Phoenix but has a whole team of doctors and nurses there, so if Dad or anyone else needs him he can be easily available for them. Apparently meeting Dad was the best thing to ever happen to him, because he was also brought into their little family. Something I can't help but feel angry about, since neither him or Brenn ever bothered about me after we left, it's like I never mattered but they had no hesitation building a happy life for themselves, while I was gone and going through hell.

“Autumn honey, can I speak to you for a moment while we are alone?” Doc asks me. Giving him a non-committal grunt he carries on. “We obviously know about your other injuries and even some older ones, which I'll go over with you later. The nurses found fingerprint marks on your upper thighs, when they were cleaning you up, and I need to know if we need to perform a rape kit. I know we are over the time limit for DNA evidence, but we need to check for any everlasting damage and possible STD's.”

My eyes widen, I don't want anyone to know about the abuse. I shuffle further back, wishing I could bring my knees to my chest to protect myself more, but the damage from the fire is

preventing me from even moving them much, without causing myself extreme pain.

“I-I...”

“Shh its ok honey, I understand. Theres no judgement here but I need to know, so I can care for you the best I can and so we can try to understand some potential triggers for you. Brenn and Atlas have befriended four other boys over the years, they are lovely boys, but they can be a lot, but if you let me know what’s happened to you. I can advise everyone how to avoid triggering and upsetting you. We want you happy and healthy honey, that’s all.” Doc looks at me with his kind eyes, imploring me to understand, that he really does just want what’s best for me,

Taking a deep breath, I look him over; can I really trust him?

“Um, I-I probably should get the kit done...” Sniffling, I wipe my tears with my bandaged hand. “Will it hurt? I-I really don’t want it to hurt.”

“No honey, it can feel intrusive and maybe uncomfortable at some points, but it doesn’t hurt. Sometimes it does after a new assault, but you’ve been healing for about two weeks now, so you should be ok.”

Two weeks?!

“O-ok, I’ll do it.”

“Would you want to do it now? It’s a female nurse who performs the exam, and you can have someone in here if you want to, for support.”

“No!” I shout. Wincing because the poor man’s just trying to do his job, I apologise. “Sorry, no its ok. I don’t want anyone here for it. Can we just do it now and get it over with? Dad’s going to be back with news on Chloe soon and I’m going to want to see her as soon as possible.”

“Of course, let me go get all that arranged, I’ll make sure no-one comes in until after, ok?”

“Mmhmm.”

Doc leaves the room, and a lovely plump woman with grey hair bustles in with a tray.

“Well, hello there pretty, it’s so good to see you awake. I’ve been your main nurse the last two weeks and it is a pleasure to finally introduce myself to you. I’m Bertha and I’m going to do your exam, ok?”

When all I do is nod my confirmation, she continues on.

“If you start to feel uncomfortable, at any point then we can stop and take a break, I know you don’t want anyone to be in here while we do this, and I’ve found having something to hold on to helps and you have so many lovely plushies to choose from.”

Confused, I look at her like she’s bat shit crazy.

“Umm...”

Reading the confusion on my face, she places her tray down on a metal table at the bottom of my hospital bed and then walks over to the window, on the windowsill is seven plushies. A laugh bursts out of my mouth, because they are absolutely ridiculous, looking closer I see that Lois my old childhood teddy is there too. Feeling too raw to consider that one, I ask Bertha to bring me the Fox plush and hold it to my chest while she prepares the exam.

“I’m going to start the exam now sweetie, I’m going to move your legs into the stirrups since you are still bandaged up and I’ll move slow, then I’ll cover you and I’ll talk to you through every part, so you don’t get a fright at any point.”

“Thankyou.”

She talks me through the whole process after gently moving my legs to where they needed to be, I feel so exposed, so I zone out again, using my disassociation tactics that I used when I was being raped before to get through this, so I don’t have flashbacks and freak out. I know this needs to be done, they need to know how much damage has been caused and the sooner this is over, the sooner Dad can let me know where Chloe is and then I can go see her, pretend that none of this is happening and get both of us out of mom’s grasp.



I can ask Dad to get me a lawyer so I can gain custody of her, and I'll get a job as soon as I'm better, get us a little apartment and we can be safe and happy there just the two of us. I'll watch *The Lion King* over and over again, if it makes her happy. God, I can't imagine how scary the fire would have been for her, but I'll get us both therapy for it, so I can be the best mommy to her.

I'm brought out of my bubble from Bertha gently placing my legs back down. I feel a little uncomfortable down there from the intrusion, but otherwise I'm fine.

"That's me done now sweetie, I'm going to talk to Doc about the results and we'll rush the STD results. You did so well."

"Thank you, Bertha."

Getting comfortable against the pillows, I keep the fox with me. I feel so exhausted, but it feels like barely any time has passed since I woke up. I end up drifting off though, clutching the fox tighter to my chest hoping that when I wake up Dad will be telling me I can go see Chloe.

# Chapter 12

## Atlas

We've been sat in this waiting room for hours. Kelvin has been looking for a little girl called Chloe, but no-ones been admitted with her description. Kelvin's getting desperate to find her, apparently Autumn lost it when she woke up, trying to look for her. Sebastian has changed his searching for Jane to Chloe, but we still haven't found out anything.

We all have theories about what happened, the most likely being Jane grabbed the kid and ran, like she did with Autumn years ago.

"Um guys, I have a hit on the kid." Sebastian informs us.

"Do you know where she is?" Kelvin demands.

"Unfortunately." He grimaces "Um, she's deceased, cremated November 14<sup>th</sup>, nobody claimed the body, so they cremated her a few days ago, since they don't hold bodies for longer than two weeks."

"Jesus fucking Christ, this is going to destroy her. She was begging for her when she woke up, nearly took herself out just trying to get out of bed, trying to go look for her."

"I've already sent them an email to keep the ashes there for Autumn to claim them."

"Thank you, Sebastian, do you know anything about Jane yet?"

"Not yet, but I'll keep looking."

Kelvin just nods, his shoulders are slumped like he's got the weight of the world on them. He looks exhausted.

"Kelvin" I say.

"Huh?"

"Why don't you and Brenn go get yourselves some food and a coffee, I'll go sit with Autumn for a bit and then we can all

discuss her test results when you are back. Then we can figure out how to tell her about Chloe.”

“Yeah, maybe that’s a good idea.” Rubbing his hand over his new beard, he stands up and walks out the room barely registering any of us, as he throws up a hand as he leaves in a sort of wave goodbye, Brenn trailing behind him, giving us a nod to let us know he’s got him.

“I’m going to go find her nurse, to see if I can go in and see her, do you guys’ mind if I have some time alone with her?”

“Of course not, go ahead. We’ll be here, just let us know if you need us.” Tobias says.

“Thanks guys, I’m shitting myself right now. What if she doesn’t remember me?”

“How could she forget you; you were both stuck at the hip. I’m sure she does, just don’t put too much pressure on this reunion, she’s still banged up.”

“Yeah, I hear you.”

Stood outside her room door, I wipe my sweaty hands on my sweatpants. Comfort has been key while we’ve been here the last two weeks and was I hell sitting around in jeans. Trying to work up the courage to knock, I feel like I’m going to be sick. Deciding just to get it over with, I lightly knock on the door, after what feels like a lifetime, I hear a soft raspy “Come in.”

Pushing open the door, I peek my head around first and get my first look at her since she woke up. Fuck she’s beautiful, her wide hazel eyes are staring at me, like she’s seen a ghost and she’s slim but she’s still the most beautiful woman I’ve ever laid eyes on. She’s clutching the fox Zander got for her to her chest, he’ll love that when he finds out, Dominic will definitely be pissed though, he was convinced she was going to choose his first.

Fully walking in, I close the door behind me and approach the seat next to her bed. She shuffles away a little bit and I try not to show my hurt at the action, because I have no clue what she’s been through the years we’ve been apart. Standing behind the seat, I look her in the eyes, trying to figure out what

I should say to her after all these years. She really could have no idea who I am anymore. Her shoulders are hunched up, and she's got herself wound tight like she's waiting for me to strike at any moment.

"Hey Pumpkin, I've missed you."

"A-Atty?" she rasps out.

"Yeah Pumpkin, it's me. God, I am glad to see you again. Can I sit here?"

Giving me the smallest nod, I slowly walk around and take a seat. She doesn't say anything else, so I continue talking until she feels more comfortable.

"I'm so glad you're awake, we all are. We've been here since we found out, none of us have wanted to leave you in case you wanted to open those pretty hazel eyes for us all."

"You've been here all along?"

"Mmhmm. We flew right back from Brenn's birthday holiday the moment we were told, and we've never left."

"If you've been here the whole time, have you heard about a little girl called Chloe being here?" she asks me with so much hope in her voice.

"I'm sorry Pumpkin but I haven't. We have Sebastian looking into it though, ok?"

Her shoulders slump again, hanging her head, a tear trickles down her face. Unable to keep my distance anymore, I scoot closer and lay my hand over hers, she jumps a little at the contact, but I just start rubbing soothing circles on the top of her hand, just like I used to when we were younger. Deciding I need to distract her from her sadness, even if it's for a little while longer, I begin to tell her about the guys and how they've been here the whole time too. Trying to get her to realise that she's not alone.

"Really, the whole time?" she asks, "Don't they have lives to get back to?"

"Nahh, you are so much more important..." giving her a little wink. "All I've done is talk about you the last 8 years,

honestly they know everything about you at this point.”

“I...” clearing her throat “I thought you would have forgotten all about me by now.”

“Never!” I adamantly disagree. “I could *never* forget you, ever. I’ve never stopped looking for you Pumpkin. None of us have. You have to believe me.”

She shakes her head side to side violently. “No, you did. That’s what mom said, it’s why dad and Brenn never came for me.” She cries.

“No-one came to save me.” she whispers out the last part so quietly, I’m sure it wasn’t for me to hear.

“Baby please...” I get as close to the bed as I can, keeping hold of her hand. “I *swear* to you, if we knew where you were, we would have come for you straight away. I would have come for you, no matter what. I thought my world was ending, when we were told you were here and in critical condition and now that I have you back, you are never getting rid of me.”

Keeping my eyes trained on hers, I watch her look away, like she can’t bear to believe my words. I know she’s been hurt in the years since we were separated, I can see it in her eyes, she has shadows in them, a darkness that my Autumn should never have gotten.

Years of abuse has made her cynical, too scared to hope that we won’t abandon her again, but I’ll make her believe my words over time, I’d never hurt her or abandon her willingly.

I plan to make her the happiest woman in the world, if she’ll give me the chance when she’s healed physically and mentally. I can’t take my eyes off of her, scared that if I look away, she’ll disappear again, she’s also extremely beautiful, even when her face was riddled with bruises and the deep gash on her forehead. While she lay in her hospital bed in the coma, she looked like a goddess in a deep sleep, like that Disney princess that she used to make me watch but now, with her face clearer and her hazel eyes looking into mine for the first time in 8 years, I’m captivated by her beauty.

The love I had for her as a child is nothing compared to this deep ache in my chest, clamouring to own her, to love her and to protect her. My girl. *Mine*. Maybe ours but that all depends on her, but I will never give her up, they'd have to kill me first. Autumn has been mine since I claimed her when we were children, and she will always be mine just as I am hers.

“What’s happened since I’ve been gone?” she asks.

“Well, I met the guys a few years after you disappeared. One by one we became a little group. Brenn too, of course, we became brothers. I don’t think I would have survived all these years of not being able to find you without them. They all made sure me, and Brenn were ok. They would listen to our stories about you and would even celebrate your birthday with us, when you weren’t around to do it yourself. I’m pretty sure there’s presents at your dad’s house from all the years we’ve done it. You weren’t there baby, but we wanted you to know, that we never stopped hoping you’d come back to us.”

“You celebrated my birthday?” another tear escapes and slides down her face, her watery eyes look down before she hastily wipes them away. I capture her chin and make her look at me.

“Every. Single. Year.” I tell her “We got a small cake; got you presents so that when you came back you could open them, so you knew we still loved you. We didn’t celebrate as such, but we sat around, ate the cake, and told stories about you to the others.”

“Who are the others?”

“Well, we have Zander first. Big guy but a little shorter than I am. He was a fighter but stopped. He loves to cook too, better than any of us can, but Mrs McKay hates sharing the kitchen with him, they bicker like an old married couple when he’s in there, because he’s always trying to ‘improve’ her recipes.”

She lets out a watery chuckle but appears to have slightly calmed down.

“I remember her, she made the best mac n cheese in the world.”

“You should try Zander’s, even Mrs McKay agrees his is better. I’m sure if you use your pretty girl charm on him, he’ll make a whole batch just for you, probably throw in some garlic bread too.” Winking at her, I continue knowing it won’t be long until the others come in again. “Then we have Tobias, he was an army brat for the first 8 years of his life, he’s a great friend, super protective of the people he classifies as family to him. He loves hunting too, he’s a great tracker when we go camping.”

“I remember our first camping trip together; my dad took all of us. You and Brenn chased me with worms until I cried.”

“Yeah, but I helped you get revenge on him, so you forgave me. Back to my friends, we have Sebastian. I would say he’s nerdier than the rest of us, we love to wind down playing games, but Sebastian has a whole set up, he’s skilled with technology. I don’t understand any of it, but he takes to it like a fish to water. He also loves films; you name a film he’s definitely watched it.”

“I can’t wait to meet them all, they all sound great.”

“Not done yet Pumpkin” I laugh. “We have the last little tag along to our group. Dominic...” I don’t even get to finish my sentence, Autumn’s door bursts open and I’m launching to my feet and standing in front of her, putting myself between her and whatever threat is coming through the door. Then I hear the maniacal laughter, that could only belong to our psychopathic best friend.

“Saving the best until last I see brother!” Dominic laughs. The others following in behind him, shaking their heads at him.

“Always Dominic.”

Looking back at Autumn I can see she’s regarding them warily, she’s still clutching the damn fox to her chest but she’s not shrinking away this time, which is good. Sitting back down, I reach for Autumn’s hand again, needing to touch her in some way to keep my anxiety about her disappearing again at bay.

“Well, hello Cupcake, super nice to finally...” he stops abruptly, frowning at her. Looking between them both, I can see she’s just as confused as the rest of us.

“Umm...” she mutters looking at me “Is he ok?”

“No. I’m not ok” he pouts.

“Why not?”

“Because...” he sniffs “You chose the fox.”

“The fox?” she looks down at it “What’s wrong with the fox?” clutching it tighter to her, she stares him down defying him to argue with her.

“Well, nothing, but it’s not mine. Mine was clearly better than that and you didn’t choose mine. I’m supposed to be your favourite.”

She gapes at him, mouth hanging slightly open. “Umm...”

“He’s playing around Princess. Just ignore him, we all do.” Zander steps forward, looking smug as hell that she chose his out of all of ours.

“It’s ok. There’s an easy fix.” Dominic sing songs, before he practically skips over to the window and picks all the plushies up at once, then drops them all into Autumn’s lap. A surprised laugh slips out of her mouth, the first genuine one I’ve heard since I came in here. All eyes snap to her. God I’ve missed her laugh.

I can see a blush rising up her neck and over her cheeks from all the attention. So, I decide to try help her out by asking the guys if they know when Doc will be coming in. Apparently not for a while longer but they just couldn’t wait to finally come meet her, knowing she was awake.

Tobias steps closer to the bed, gaining her attention.

“Hey Autumn, I’m Tobias. I’m so glad to finally meet you after all these years.”

“Nice to meet you too, Atty was just telling me about you all.”

“Only good things I hope, I’m Zander by the way. The quiet one in the corner on his laptop is Sebastian, he’s normally



more social, I promise but he's researching some important stuff for your dad." Sebastian's head snaps up at the mention of his name, he rubs the back of his neck and gives her a small wave of acknowledgement.

"And again, the best for last. I'm Dominic. Nice to meet you, Cupcake. I'm going to be your favourite out of all these losers." He smiles at her, but she eyes him warily. She mumbles back a nice to meet you too, while shuffling slightly closer to me. Staring him down, I tell him silently to back off a bit, she'll have time to warm up to him, but right now she's still wary of everyone.

We spend the next hour just chatting away about how we all met, but I can see that Autumn's getting tired again. The doctors did say that her body is still exhausted from her injuries, and I want her to rest as much as possible, before we get her results and then her dad is going to have to tell her about her sister, because if he keeps it from her, he'll lose any fragile trust she has for him.

Her eyelids start to droop, so I suggest she lie down and sleep, reassuring her that we'll all stay right here the whole time. We clear all the plushies off the bed, apart from the fox and that damn Oogie Boogie bear. Dominic refused to let her sleep without it, giving her the puppy eyes until she relented. Now she's laid on her side, holding the fox to her chest still and the other one tucked in beside her.

"I like her." Dominic chirps from where he's sat on the floor.

"You barely know her." I roll my eyes at him.

"Don't care, she's going to love me by the time she's leaving this place."

Dominic may be delusional but he's persistent. I have no doubt, that he will try his hardest to get Autumn to like him before we leave here. A whimper has me turning to Autumn again, her face is screwed up like she's in pain. "Please... don't. Please." She whimpers again. I squeeze her hand and lean over to stroke her hair, whispering to her that she's safe, but nothing seems to be working. It's like she's trapped in her nightmare, and I feel so fucking helpless. Zander's chair

scraping back has me watching him warily as he approaches her. He bends down and places his hand on her forehead, rubbing his thumb up and down her nose.

“Shhh Princess, it’s just a nightmare. We’ve got you; I promise.” He repeats this a few more times, her face relaxes, and her breathing evens out again.

“You think she’s going to be, ok?” Sebastian pipes up.

“Not for a while, but we’ll be there for her.” Tobias says.

All of us nod our heads in agreement. Looking at the girl, who is already the centre of my universe and no doubt slowly becoming the centre of my friends, I can’t help but feel gratitude that she’s here.

# Chapter 13

## Autumn

Waking up slowly, I can hear Atlas and his friends talking around me. Slowly opening my eyes because every time I open them in this room I feel like Dracula, the fluorescent lights making me want to hiss at them. Talking to Atlas and the others really helped take my mind off of things for a while, but I'm really hoping that dad comes in with news soon about Chloe. Fully opening my eyes, I look around at all the men surrounding my bed, instantly feeling safe. Allowing my gaze to roam over them, I take in everything I missed earlier, when my panic was really high from them coming into my room with no warning, I only had some short descriptions from Atlas before the one called Dominic came practically prancing into the room.

Dominic is about 6'0, looks like the boy next door with his blonde shaggy hair, blue eyes, pouty lips, and dimples that would make any girl swoon. He has an athletic body, muscles that are on display and his smile is just slightly unhinged. Insert swooning from all the dark romance lovers, because same. His boy next door look is completely tarnished by his tattoos and piercings, he's covered in tattoos apart from his face and he has a black nose ring, a dark contrast compared to his white skin, he has a stretcher in his right ear and his lip piercing. Maybe he'll let me look closer at his tattoos when I feel more comfortable.

I've always loved tattoos, something about colouring in the blank canvas that is my skin, soothes me in a way that I don't fully understand but I can't wait to get my first one.

My gaze slides over to Tobias, he seems like the quieter of the bunch, not in a shy way but in a way that he doesn't say a lot unless he needs to, preferring to observe. He's 6'3, has short brown hair, shaved at the sides and back, a little longer on top. Deep chocolate brown eyes with lashes, that would make any woman envious. Full kissable lips, don't judge, I'm traumatised, not broken. He has a scar going through his left

eyebrow, defined lean muscles but boy does he look like he gives good hugs. I can see a tattoo peeking out from his t-shirt collar, but no others are visible. I can feel his gaze on my face, but I avoid looking at him and continue my perusal of the others.

Sebastian sits on the floor with his reddish-brown hair looking like he's ran his hands through it repeatedly, his eyes are shut but I remember them being the colour of clouds when it's storming outside, the kind of grey that tells you the sunshine will be back soon but that you need the storm, to not feel so suffocated anymore by the humidity. He has thick eyebrows that I am itching to tidy up, a slim build, maybe 6'0 I can't fully remember how tall he is, because the slightly unhinged puppy had all my attention.

Tearing my eyes away from him, I focus on the only other man I don't know in the room. Zander. Something stirred in me when he called me princess, his voice familiar and calming unlike anything I've ever experienced. His voice has a deep timber to it that makes me want to shiver, you know like those really good audiobooks make you do. The man would make a fortune if he ever decided to become a voice actor. He's also beautiful, the others are handsome as hell, but this man is ruggedly beautiful. He's 6'4, broad shoulders, all muscles like he works out every single day. Tan skin, which highlights his light blue eyes, and a white scar that runs across his nose and down his cheek. He's wearing his mahogany brown hair in a bun that I'm envious of, but I got a glimpse of it being shoulder length earlier. A beard that looks like it needs a trim. He has a dragon tattoo covering his left arm completely, some of it is still unfinished, so it's obviously a work in progress still, but my fingers twitch with the need to run them over the glorious linework.

Knowing I could stare at this man all day, I land my gaze on Atlas. My Atty. Someone I never thought I'd see again. He's still as handsome as I remember, but it's no longer boyish charm, now he's 6'5 with wide shoulders, heavily muscled with scruff on his face. His hair is midnight black but is a little shorter than how he wore it as a child, his green eyes are still my favourite shade of emerald green. His plump lips have a

permanent scowl to them, unlike when we were kids, he used to always be smiling. A part of me can't help but feel envious that he moved on with his life so easily, finding others to lean on while I had no-one, but I know that's the dark thoughts, he never deserves to be alone like that, I'm happy he found good people that he made part of his life, to be there for him when I couldn't. People who will be there for him if I find out Chloe is really dead and decide to join her again, I know I should've just stopped fighting but I'm really hoping I was wrong, that I was hallucinating from smoke inhalation. I've tried to put on a brave face the last few hours, but I can feel my heart breaking with each hour I don't hear anything. My hope diminishing because I know deep down, I'm right. God I really don't want to be right. Knowing there's nothing I can do right now; I wipe my tears away that must have started when I began to think about Chlo. Opening my eyes again after taking a deep breath, my eyes lock with Tobias's knowing ones, instead of bringing attention to it, he moves silently around to my side and links his pinkie with mine. Enough to let me know he's there, but not enough that its suffocating.

There's a knock at the door about 30 minutes later, and another face I never thought I'd see again walks in. Messy brown hair, blue eyes, stubble, freckles scattered over his nose and cheeks. A slightly crooked nose, that wasn't like that when we left. Still skinny but looks more athletic, like a swimmer. I can see he has tattoo's but from here they just look like squiggles on his arms. He sees that I'm awake and gives me the most blinding smile. He comes right up to the bed, takes in how all the others are surrounding the bed and just shakes his head at them, he pushes Tobias out of the way, dislodging our pinkies and gathers me up in his arms, holding my head into his chest, I can hear him sniffing into my hair, wetness dripping onto my neck. I wince but I let him hold me, there's a slight tremor in his frame.

"I have missed you so fucking much, Little Bear."

"I've missed you too, Brother Bear." I cling to him just a little tighter, not wanting to let go of him just yet. With one last squeeze, he lets me go but takes the seat next to me.

“Dad and Doc are going to be on their way up with your test results soon, I wanted to get here and see you first though. You have no idea how much I’ve missed you, I’m so glad to be looking at your face again.”

“Me too, Brenn” I tell him, with tears welling in my eyes. I swear all I’ve done is cry.

“Where have you been all this time Autumn? We couldn’t fucking find you, no matter how hard we tried.”

“Roswell, New Mexico. Mom told me, you and dad didn’t want anything to do with us. That we were made to leave by dad in the middle of the night. I just remember everything happening so quickly and then that was it. She started her new life there and I was dragged along.”

“And what happened in those years you were gone? Because by the looks of you, it hasn’t been good.”

“I...” I choke out. “*Please*, don’t make me talk about it, *I can’t*.”

“Ok Little Bear, I won’t make you talk about it right now. But you will eventually, we need to know what’s happened. We need to know who did that to you.” He nods toward the scar on my neck. I cover it with my hand instinctively, hating that it’s on show and the questioning looks the guys are giving me. All I can do is nod in response, the tears that gathered in my eyes now trickling down my face, hanging my head in shame, not wanting them to see how weak I am. A strong grip holds onto my chin, making me lift my head, keeping my eyes down not wanting to make eye contact with him, he gives my chin a squeeze making my eyes snap up, looking into his determined green ones.

“Don’t. Don’t hide from us. It doesn’t make you weak Pumpkin, I see someone strong, and we’re here for you, so if you want to break, go ahead and break baby, because we’ll all be here to piece you back together.” Atlas declares.

And so, I do, I break apart right there in the arms of my childhood best friend, surrounded by my brother and his newfound family. I grieve for the life I lost, the little girl who

was so happy surrounded by her dad, brother and friend, my innocence that was ripped from me, and for Chlo, who I can only hope is still alive in this hospital somewhere.

Atlas sits on the side of my bed and just holds me while I cry into his chest, gently stroking my hair and murmuring to me how loved I am, that I'm not alone and that I'll be ok.

Eventually my tears slow, but I have a pounding migraine now after crying so hard. I keep my eyes closed and just lay with my head still on Atlas, not wanting to come back to the real world just yet. My breathing has evened out, but Atlas makes no move to move me, just lets me rest my head on him, in our own little bubble.

Dad and Doc join us a little while later, dad narrowing his eyes at my red and blotchy face, but I give him a small smile to let him know I'm ok. Nodding he takes a seat, Doc moving to the clipboard at the bottom of the bed.

"We have your results back, Autumn." says Doc. I sit up, but grip onto Atlas's hand to ground me. "Do you want me to get everyone to leave so I can tell you? Or are they ok to stay?" He asks.

"I mean they will all find out eventually, since I know you'll tell dad. So, they may as well stay for it, so it's not a game of Chinese whispers."

Dad lets out a small chuckle. "I wouldn't tell them, if you didn't want me to Little Monster."

"I know, but it's best they all know anyway." Nodding at Doc to proceed, he clears his throat.

"Are you sure Autumn? We will be discussing everything."

"Mhm."

"Ok then. We'll start with the burns. You have 3<sup>rd</sup> degree burns on your feet and lower legs, 2<sup>nd</sup> degree burns on your left hand and back. You had a broken cheekbone when you came in, it's still broken but seems to be healing well. You had a bad gash on your forehead that was stitched together, a few lacerations on your back that we had to keep an eye on, so they didn't get infected. We had to place you in a coma

because you had swelling on your brain, you had a few seizures when you were brought into the emergency room. We also had to perform a thrombectomy, your heart stopped due to a blood clot, your heart stopped twice but we managed to resuscitate you. You also have an incorrectly healed wrist, that I want to fix at a later date, if it's causing you issues.”

Doc gives us all a moment to absorb all the latest information, nodding at him that I understand, I ask him to continue. I can't look at anyone, because I know what's coming next. I feel dirty, so I remove my hand from Atlas's and hug it around my waist, keeping my eyes on the cover that's over my legs.

“Autumn, if you want this next part can be just between us.”

It can't. I know it can't. I can already feel the rage simmering from everyone in the room, and I know if I ask them to leave, they'll find out eventually. This way they find out now, and when they leave because I disgust them so much, it won't hurt as much than it would if I got attached.

“No, it's ok. Can we just get this over with?”

Doc nods. Then continues. “The rape kit...” a sharp intake of breath and a gasp has my head snapping up to the horrified looks on the guys faces. Ducking my head again, I don't even want to know the thoughts going through their heads right now.

“Continue Doc.” Dad says.

“Right, the rape kit we performed showed severe scarring on your uterus, confirming that there has been sexual abuse over the years.”

“*Years.*” Atlas chokes out.

“The STD test showed up clear, and the pregnancy test we did, came back negative too. Unfortunately, by the time the exam was performed, any DNA evidence that could have possibly been there, was gone after 48 hours.”

My shoulder slumped in relief, I have scarring but that's no different to the outside of my body, but to know I'm not pregnant and that I have no diseases from those monsters. I feel like I can breathe just, a little bit easier.



“Thank you, Doc.,” I whisper out.

“It’s no problem, Honey.”

Blinking back the tears, I slowly lift my eyes to look at everyone, bracing myself for the looks of revulsion and disgust on their face, but that’s not what I see at all. They are all angry, fists tightening on their laps, chests heaving. I lock eyes with Dominic, who is pacing at the bottom of my bed, clenching, and unclenching his fist.

“Who?!” he grits out.

“Dominic! Calm down. Now.” Zander orders.

“Who Cupcake? Who laid hands on you like that, because I’ll kill them. Give me their names and they are done, I promise.” He declares vehemently.

“I can’t. Please don’t make me tell you. I just can’t.”

Dominic nods at me once, then storms out of the room, slamming the door on the way out.

“I’m sorry.” I whisper.

“You have absolutely nothing to be sorry about, Babygirl.” Tobias tells me.

“I do, I didn’t mean to make any of you mad or upset.”

Tobias strides over to me, kneels down until he is eye level with me and links our pinkies again.

“You did absolutely *nothing* wrong, you hear me? Dominic just needs a minute to cool down, because he doesn’t have a way to solve the pain you are experiencing. He’ll be fine, it’s you we are worried about.”

Nodding I understand he goes to move, but I tighten my grip on his pinkie finger. “Please, don’t go.”

“I got you Babygirl, don’t worry.”

Tobias stays on my other side, while Doc discusses my further treatments and recovery with Dad. The others listening in with rapt attention, but I can’t stop thinking about Dominic storming out. Is he ok? He shouldn’t be alone right now.

15 minutes later Dominic strides back into the room with Bertha, my nurse.

“Well look at what I managed to find for you, sweetie. It’s not much but it’s a few of the things you were brought in with.” She holds up a clear bag and my heart stops.

My phone.

Dad’s hoodie.

*Bun.*

“No.” I whisper out. Why is bun there? Why isn’t he with Chloe? “She needs him, why doesn’t she have him?”

“Who Autumn?” someone says.

“Chloe! Why doesn’t Chloe have Bun?! He shouldn’t be in that bag. She needs him to sleep. Why doesn’t she have him?” I cry out.

“Autumn honey. Breathe. I need you to breathe.”

“I can’t.” “Why is no-one listening to me. She needs him! Where is she?!”

“I’m so sorry Little Monster, but she didn’t make it. Chloe was cremated a few days ago, when no-one claimed her body after two weeks.” Dad says.

I can’t be hearing him correctly. Chlo’s dead. I was right but I just had to be sure, because if I had giving up and she was still alive, I never would have forgiven myself. But she’s not and I’m still here.

# Chapter 14

## Dominic

*'Better Days – Dermot Kennedy'*

Autumn doubles over and lets out the most gut-wrenching scream. It's filled with so much pain, that I just want to take her in my arms and hold her to make it all ok, but I can't, because this is her baby sister. Nothing will ever make this ok for her. She starts to hyperventilate, unable to get air into her lungs. Her heart monitor going crazy, she keeps screaming. Begging someone to bring Chloe back.

"Please..." I don't think she even realises that she's speaking out loud right now, she has totally disassociated and all we can do is watch on, while she grieves the loss of her sister. She starts to rip at her IV, screaming that she needs to see her. Unable to take anymore, since no-one else seems to know what to do, I walk over to her and grab her face.

"Cupcake, look at me."

Her eyes are unfocused, she keeps flicking them around wildly like she's looking for her. Shaking her slightly. "Autumn, look at me! You're going to give yourself a heart attack!" Her eyes eventually gain focus enough to look at me. Her bottom lip trembles and tears swim in her eyes. "I know Cupcake, I know it hurts. But we'll help you figure out what happened, I swear to you."

"I was supposed to die with her..." she whispers out "I was supposed to be with her Dominic, and I'm not. I didn't even get to say goodbye. I didn't protect her, she died because I didn't get her out and now, I'm alive and she's not. She was cremated with no-one there for her, she was all alone. She didn't even have Bun with her, he's supposed to keep her bad dreams away and now she doesn't have either of us."

"We'll get you her ashes and we can put her somewhere really pretty. Somewhere you can visit everyday, if you want to, with Bun. And we'll go with you. I don't know how to fix this for

you Cupcake, because I can't hurt what's causing you this pain, but we'll all try."

"I can't live without her Dom, I can't. Please don't ask me to, because my answer won't be one you like."

"You have to Pumpkin; Chloe wouldn't want this." Atlas comes up beside me. I can feel the others surrounding us.

"She's not alive to tell me what she wants!"

"No but we are Little Bear. I can't lose you again Autumn, I won't survive it a second time." Brenn says.

She doesn't reply. She knows she won't win this argument. I'm not dumb enough to think we won it either, but it's enough right now. She's hurting and nothing we say will change that for her.

Autumn shuts down right in front of us, she's still weeping, but she's just staring off to the side of my face, refusing to make eye contact.

"Come on Cupcake, lie back and we'll get Doc to clean up your IV again. Rest and we'll be here."

She doesn't even acknowledge me, as I get her to lay back down on the bed. I go over to the bag and carefully retrieve the blue bunny plush. I tuck it into the crook of her arm and tuck her in. She pulls it closer to her face, and sobs wrack her body as she cries into the only piece of Chloe she has right now.

Doc cleans her up while Atlas and Kelvin sit with her. I leave the room because I can feel the rage building up in me again, now I know she has the others there for her.

How dare anyone lay hands on my Cupcake! I swear when I finally get the names from her, they'll die slowly and painfully. I might look nice, but I've always been slightly off. I become obsessed easily and my Cupcake has just found herself the subject of my obsession, one I welcome with open arms. I was already obsessed with hearing stories about her when she was younger, stories of how carefree and sassy she was, helped to push down some of the darkness and anger that sits heavily on my chest. But now after seeing her, there's a part of me that's screaming *mine*. She's beautiful, but watching

her break apart made her heartbreakingly captivating, I don't want her to hurt, ever and if something does, I'll just kill them, problem solved. I can't take away this pain though and there's nothing for me to hurt. There's this itchiness under my skin, my hand twitching to reach for my knife, to shed blood over this because while she might have been captivating as she was hurting, she was also breaking apart. She told me she can't live without her sister, and I know, I just know that she's one foot into the grave, if we give her the chance.

Tobias slips out of the room and approaches me. "You good man?"

Not answering his question. "How is she?" I ask.

"Not good, she's not crying as much but she's just laid there now staring off into space."

"You think she'll be alright?"

"Honestly? Not at all. I heard what she said, I think we're going to have to keep an eye on her."

"To be honest, I don't think she'll get much time alone anyway. I don't plan on leaving her side, do you?"

He pins me with the scary stare that isn't all that scary. "She barely knows us Dominic, remember that."

"I'm aware, but she's got a long time in here still. I don't see any of us leaving. So, she'll get to know us, fall madly in love with us, then we'll marry her and have lots of babies."

Tobias chokes on his spit. "What?!" still spluttering.

Rolling my eyes at him. "You heard me. Now if you don't mind, I want to get back to my Cupcake."

Walking past him, I smack a kiss on to his cheek and run back to my cupcake's room.

"DOMINIC!!"

"Oh shit." Running faster, I throw open the doors to the ward, rushing to make it to Autumn's room, before Tobias can catch up.

Walking back into the room, I slip in, noticing that Autumn still hasn't moved, I don't think she even knows who's trying to talk to her right now. Brenn is sat next to her, reminding her about the stories behind the tattoos that he got for her, but she's not looking or listening, she's just staring blankly ahead. Exchanging worried glances with the others, we have no idea on how to approach this and we don't want to say the wrong thing and upset her more.

"Atlas, why don't you call your ma? Maybe she'll know what to do." Kelvin suggests.

"Yeah, I'll go do that now." He gets up and strides out the room, dialling his ma on the way.

Walking over to her bed, I crouch down next to her bed and sweep her hair away from her face, her eyes are vacant, dead, and lifeless, she's looking directly at me because of how I positioned myself, but I can't contain the shiver that runs down my spine, from seeing how utterly lifeless she looks right now, reminding me of how she looked when we first got here.

"Hey Cupcake, do you want to tell me about her?" I ask hoping that mentioning her might help bring her back a bit. I refuse to allow her to sit like this for hours. I stroke my finger across her forehead, careful of her still healing wounds. Something in her eye's flickers to life.

"Y-you want to hear about her?" she whispers to me.

"Of course, I do, she seems important to you, which makes her important to us. So why don't you tell us about her, let us carry this pain with you, instead of on your own."

Atlas walks back into the room at that moment, not wanting to chance her shutting down again, Sebastian whispers to him to take a seat so we can all listen to her, to be there for her while she needs us the most. She takes her time before she replies, and I watch as her eyes light up as she starts to talk about her baby sister, who we'll never get to know ourselves.

"She is... was the most important thing in my life."

“Don’t do that Sunshine, she can still be the most important thing in your life, even if she’s not here anymore. Nothing can take that from you.” Sebastian says from where he’s sat on the floor, causing Autumn to look over at him, she gives him a grateful smile while tears swim in her eyes. She clears her throat.

“She is the most important thing in my life, has been since the day she was born. Mom didn’t want to look after her, so she left me at home with her every night, and it eventually turned into me looking after her all the time. She had this fiery red hair, these gorgeous blue eyes that reminded me of the days spent at the lake at dad’s house. She has... had this big smile, with a missing tooth that she knocked out one day while at school, but it just made her even cuter in my opinion, add on the two matching dimples on either side and she is... was like a doll.”

“Bet she has your personality, Little Monster.” Kelvin says.

“Nope.” She laughs out shakily “Worse, she was so unbelievably sassy, she had the hair to match the attitude, every day she *had* to have her hair done for school, so I taught myself how to French braid, and then she just had to have her pink bows. I saved up all the extra change, after mom gave me money for food to buy her those, for her first day at school, and she never wanted to take them out. I bought Bun for her when she was born after saving up all my pocket money, that one of mom’s boyfriends gave me, it was the only teddy she had, ever.”

“We’ll get her lots of teddy bears Pumpkin, when we find the perfect place for her to rest at.” Atlas promises her.

“You mean that?”

“Of course, I do. We will find her the most beautiful tree near the lake, and we’ll make it her special spot. Whatever you want to do with it, you can.”

“Thankyou.” She chokes out, when the tears finally start to fall.

“I got you Cupcake, we’ve all got you.”

When her tears subside a little, she tells us more about her. Small stories since they couldn't afford to do much and just like when Atlas and Brenn had told us about Autumn, I start to love this little girl that we'll never get to know, and it makes me hate this world a little bit more.

“The most heart wrenching thing apart from losing her, is that literally the night of the fire, she asked to call me mommy. Me? I have felt like I failed her at every turn, by not protecting her like I should have, but she still wanted to call me mommy even when I wasn't and now...”

“And now?” I prompt her when she abruptly stops.

“And now she'll never get to experience what having me as her mommy would be like.” She gets out between her sobs.

Everyone in the room has tears in their eyes, feeling the horror that Autumn is going through. Kelvin nudges me out of the way, drops down to his knees in front of her, grabs her hands in his and squeezes until she looks at him.

“Autumn honey, you may have only had a few hours after her asking you to be her mommy. But you were her mommy from the moment you started to do everything a mom does for her kid. Did you go without food so she could eat?”

She nods.

“Did you protect her with every fibre in your being? And don't lie because I have the report from the fire department, on how they found you both.”

“Of course, I did! She is a child, and she should never be hurt by someone who is supposed to protect her!” she shouts at him, no longer laid down, but sitting up, glaring daggers with her hazel eyes that suck me in. She looks like a warrior right now, slightly banged up, but ready to take on the world all from the idea of Chloe being hurt.

Then it hits me in the gut, this is how she's been surviving. Not for herself, but for the protection of Chloe, by being Chloe's mother and without that little girl, I think we would have found Autumn, dead a long time ago.



“Then you were always her mommy, Little Monster. I know that you would switch places with her in a heartbeat right now. Just like I wish, I could take this pain from you just to spare you from it.”

“It hurts so much dad, I can’t do it anymore, not without her.”

“I know baby, I know. My heart felt like it was ripping apart, from the moment you went missing, and nothing could ever cure it and you’ll feel the same.”

“How can I be a mommy when I don’t have her anymore?” she whispers out.

“Because just because she isn’t here, doesn’t mean she isn’t yours. She chose you as her mommy, even when she already had a mom. That love doesn’t go away, and nobody can take it from you. We’ll kill anyone who tries.”

Kelvin climbs onto her bed, and pulls her into his arms, while we all watch on, our hearts breaking for her. She sobs until she finally falls asleep, while all of us just stare at her.

She’s strong, she’s had to be, but will it be enough?

# Chapter 15

## Autumn

Doctors are finally discharging me today, it's been about three weeks since dad told me about Chloe, and I've been feeling empty ever since, the guys have been great trying to keep me grounded, listening to me while I tell them stories about Chloe. It's helped but I still have this constant ache in my chest, my heart feels heavy but also soul crushingly empty, I've barely been able to eat, can't sleep without waking up, screaming from the nightmares, replaying the fire over and over again. I woke up a few nights ago believing I was on fire; the pain was so believable it took Atlas getting into bed with me and holding me, to calm me down until I fell back asleep.

I can't wait to get out of this hospital room though, even if it's one of the nicer ones, it's still depressing as hell. Plain white walls, horrible grey linoleum flooring, big windows but the only view is the other side of the building, pretty sure I could wave to the x-ray department in ward 2 from here.

"You ready to go Little Monster?" Dad asks, as he strides into my room.

"Not at all, I have nothing to wear, and I don't really want to wear the hospital gown as we leave."

"Don't worry about that, Atlas has gone out to buy you loose fitting clothes and I got the hoodie that was in your belongings bag dry cleaned, if you want to wear that as we leave?" he looks so hopeful as he asks, not quite ready to acknowledge, that we both know it really belongs to him but has been a great source of comfort for me over the years, even when I thought he hated me and mom.

"Yeah sure." I give him a small smile.

Finally ready to leave the hospital, Dominic skipping by my side, carrying the duffel bag they brought just for my plushies, while I'm being wheeled out in the wheelchair by Tobias. Bun is firmly in my hand though; I don't think I could let go of him even if I tried.

“You good Cupcake?”

Groaning at the nickname, I roll my eyes. “I’m good, just so ready to get out of here.”

“Same, I hate hospitals.” He says with a shudder.

“Then why on earth did you stay here the whole time then? You didn’t have to stay the entire time you idiot.” I laugh.

“Because you were here, *obviously*.”

“Seriously? You didn’t even know me.”

“I knew enough, and don’t just think that now we are leaving, that you’ll be getting rid of me, because I’m your new best friend, so good luck trying.”

“Who says I want to get rid of you?”

A flash of vulnerability shows on Dominic’s face, before he gives me his usual cocky grin.

“Don’t be saying stuff like that Autumn, I might just decide to keep you forever.”

“Pshh too late for that pretty boy, we’re besties remember?” I laugh holding my fist up for a fist bump. He bumps his fist against mine, then bumps Tobias out of the way, drops the duffel into my lap, grabs the handles to my wheelchair and takes off with me at a sprint.

“Dominic!! Slow down with her!” Tobias yells at him.

“Sorry boss-man, I can’t do that. We have a race to win!” he yells back at him.

“What race?” I laugh more, this is the most carefree I’ve felt since I woke up here.

“The one where we have to get to the car, before the Tobster catches up with us and kicks my ass for stealing the princess.”

My stomach hurts from how hard I’m laughing, Dominic has made me smile every day since my initial breakdown about Chlo, the others have been great, but he brings a lightness to everything that I need right now. He doesn’t know it, but I’ve latched on to his brightness, like a moth to a flame, he might

be a slightly unhinged golden retriever, but my god he is adorable at the same time.

We make it to the car outside, with just a few bumps. Ok so he may or may not have run over a Karen when she was giving us dirty looks, but the bitch deserved it.

Waiting by the car, Tobias comes storming out of the hospital doors heading straight for Dominic, the others following behind him chuckling at what's about to happen. "Oh Shit!!" Dominic exclaims, then ducks down behind me. "Protect me Cupcake, pleaseeee."

"She can't protect you Dominic, stop hiding behind her." Tobias growls out.

Feeling sorry for Dominic, because he really was just trying to get me to laugh, I pull out the best puppy eyes, and make my lower lip tremble a little. "Tobias, he was just trying to make me laugh. Please, don't go all avenger on his ass."

Tobias looks down at me, his brown eyes going wide when he sees that I'm upset, I know I was faking it to begin with, but I really don't want Dominic getting in trouble for trying to make me laugh again. I need that right now; it keeps the dark spiralling thoughts away.

"Shit Babygirl, please don't pull that face. I'm sorry. Dominic isn't in trouble I promise, I just don't want you getting hurt again, especially since we're leaving the hospital."

"I know."

"Also, avenger on his ass?" he laughs out, this is the first proper laugh I've heard from him, normally he's all broody, sitting and watching, especially when the nurses came in to change my IV or bandages, the laugh is deep and sexy, which sends a shiver down my spine.

"Yes." I huff out, crossing my arms over my chest.

"Alright Babygirl, I won't 'go all avenger on his ass' if you tell me, what avenger I am?"

"Easy. Spider-man."

“And why is that the one I get? Why not someone cool, like Iron-man?”

“That’s also easy. Because Spider-Man is my favourite avenger.”

I swear his chest puffs out a bit when I say that.

“Ok deal, I’ll be your Spider-Man.”

“Hey, no fair, why don’t I get a cool nickname from you.” Dominic whines from behind me, where he’s still hiding.

“None of us have nicknames yet Dominic. Apart from Atlas and now *Spider-Man*.” Sebastian huffs out, his eyes slightly narrowed at Tobias, in what I would swear is jealousy.

“I still want one though.” Dominic whines again.

Tobias reaches around me and smacks Dominic on the back of the head.

“Stop whining and get in the car already, I’ll get Autumn.” Tobias orders.

Gently picking me up, since I’m still sore, he carries me bridal style to the back seat of the car, and buckles me in. “I could do that, you know?”

“I know, but then I don’t get to do it. Just indulge me, please?”

“Sure, Spider-Man.” I whisper so only he can hear me. He gives me a sexy little half smile when he’s done, then he’s shutting my door, and jumping into the passenger seat. Atlas is in the back seat with me, Dad’s driving this car. The other car has the others in it, Dominic obviously pouted the whole time, since he wasn’t allowed to stay with me. We’re stopping at mom’s house, then the crematorium before we head to the airport, so I can grab anything of importance before we leave the state and never come back. Dad’s had people watching the house, in case mom makes an appearance, but she’s not shown up once. No clue where the bitch has disappeared too, and I hope I never see her face again, I’m going to get Chlo’s ashes today and take them with me. Fuck that horrible wretch of a woman, Chlo deserves a good send off, not just being abandoned because she can’t be bothered to claim her body.

We pull up outside of my old home, overgrown grass and weeds in the front garden, the horrid red door with the peeling paint and I'm pretty sure a blood stain from when one of mom's few friends face planted it while she was drunk. I think her name was Linda. Horrid woman anyway. The house is so run down and uncared for, it stands out. This might not be the best area to live in, but people try take care of what they have, since they have so little. I can see the frame of the windows on the top floor have smoke damage, slightly warped from the heat from the flames, the glass missing, all the furniture from my bedroom littered in the front garden. The fire department had to throw it out of the bedroom window after they got me and Chlo out and put the fire out, something about it potentially catching on fire again if it internally increases in heat. Looking around at my sparse belongings, a choke catches in my throat when the tattered remains of Chlo's blanket catch my eye, I remember it being consumed by the flames, so sure it was completely destroyed. Tobias turns to face me when I whimper, he follows my gaze, a look of understanding crosses his face.

"I got it Babygirl." He tells me. Then he's climbing out of the car and crossing the lawn, carefully lifting Chlo's blanket, and bringing it back to the car for me, handling it like it's precious. It is to me, but to him it's probably just a silly bit of fabric, but he went to get it for me anyway. He opens the door to my side, and leans down, placing the blanket into my lap. "It's a bit damaged, but that doesn't make it any less special." he says while looking into my eyes, gently running his finger over one of the silver stars. Telling me without words that I'm still special, even when I think I'm too damaged now.

"Was it hers?" Atlas asks me, undoing his seatbelt to scoot closer to me, placing his hand on my thigh. Nodding my head, because I don't trust myself to speak right now without completely breaking down.

"Here, give it to me and we can leave it in the car with Bun, while we go into the house." Atlas says.

Clutching Bun tighter to me, I panic, I don't want to part with him, what if I lose him like I lost Chlo?

“Little monster, why don’t you leave them with me? I’ll wait right here with them, while you go in and I won’t take my eye off of them.” dad says.

“You promise?” I ask hating how small my voice sounds right now.

“I promise.”

Handing them over to him, I take a deep breath before turning back to Tobias.

“You ready Pumpkin?” Atlas asks me.

“Yup. Totally. I just want to grab some stuff, if it’s salvageable then leave. I just can’t bear the thought of my mom getting her hands on any of Chlo’s stuff, not after abandoning her like she has.”

“Then let’s go, so we can go pick up Chlo, then we can get the hell out of this awful state and start your new life with us in Phoenix.”

“Ok.” I say because it’s all I can offer them right now, even if I want to say more, my throat is too choked up to do anything else.

Tobias steps back and holds his hand out for me to take. Walking isn’t great right now, since I still have some soreness, but I’m determined to walk through the house and get anything that is salvageable that was Chlo’s. I refuse to leave any of it behind for my bitch of a mother to get her hands on. Tobias and Atlas support me on either side as I walk, ensuring I don’t fall, we make our way through the rusted gate, that’s halfway hanging from its hinges, up the weed ridden path, I stop at the front door, not quite ready to step foot in the house just yet, not ready to see the destruction that took place the night Chlo was ripped from this world. From me.

Atlas and Tobias both squeeze my hands, bringing me back from my disassociation, something that has been super common since I woke up in the hospital. Apparently, it has something to do with PTSD, but I need to be strong right now, this house holds so many horrible memories for me, but also all of my ones with Chlo. Giving them both a grateful smile, I

squeeze their hands in thanks, taking a deep breath, I steel myself, walk up the front step, and open the door. I step into the hallway, the navy-blue carpet and light blue walls making me feel like I should expect Chlo to come running down the stairs to the left of me and jumping into my arms. The storage cupboard under the stairs with the door half open, threatening to throw me into a flash back of all the times mom locked me in there as a punishment when I was a kid.

Atlas must feel me tense up. “Come on Pumpkin, let’s get this over with. What room first?” he asks me.

“Probably best to do upstairs first, then downstairs, then we can leave. I don’t want to be here any longer than necessary.”

“Let’s go then.” Both men carrying duffel bags, I told them there wouldn’t be much, but they wanted to be sure. The others have stayed back in the cars, I thought it would be too much if they were all in here with me, and I definitely don’t want Dad or Brenn to see how I was living before, they would feel too bad, considering they have lived a life of luxury, while we barely had food in the house.

Trudging up the stairs, the smell of smoke getting stronger the further up I get, the walls are black and dark grey from the smoke and flames. Atlas is at my back in case I fall, and Tobias is at my front, leading me up still holding my hand.

“What room first Babygirl?” Tobias asks me.

“The one on our left, it’s moms and she’ll have all of the important documents I need to grab first. There’s a box under the bed, containing all of our birth certificates, can you grab it for me?”

He nods in response, and we make our way into mom’s bedroom. Lilac walls, light blue carpet, her double bed with the dusky pink headboard, with the bedside tables in the exact same material and colour with the glass tops. Reminding me of those cheesy 70’s pornos. Crucifixes cover the walls, four over her the head of her bed, two more on the wall above the dresser that contains a shrine to Elvis Presley. Dark blue curtains that I’m positive were a shade lighter when she first bought them. Tobias kneels down and reaches under the bed to



grab the box, while I hobble my way over to mom's dresser. She still has her wedding ring from dad, something that even when we were struggling for money, she refused to sell but I'm taking it with me. She doesn't deserve anything to do with the people she's hurt. I'm going to give it back to dad, because I certainly don't want it. Opening her jewellery box, my hand pauses halfway into reaching into it.

Sat on top of her cheap necklaces and bracelets, is Chloe's baby band, a gold-plated bracelet with her name engraved onto it. It was a gift from her grandmother, on her father's side who passed not long after, I was always sure that mom had sold it, but to see it here now I can't help but remember the day Chloe was brought home, undoubtedly the best day of my life, second to her asking to call me mommy.

*"You ready to meet your new baby sister Aut?" Charlie asks me. He's mom's boyfriend and is my new sister's daddy. I don't get to see my daddy anymore, but Charlie said that if I keep being really good for him and keep our secret, then he'll try get my daddy to come and see me with my brother. I really miss them, I miss Brenn's hugs, my time with daddy before bedtime and my Atty.*

*"Super excited Charlie. Is she cute?" I ask.*

*"She's really cute, not as cute as you are though." he says as he strokes his hand over my arm.*

*"Will I be able to hold her?"*

*"Of course, as long as you are careful with her."*

*"I won't hurt her, I promise Charlie."*

*"Then let's go meet her, shall we?" he says as he leads me into mom's hospital room. Mom is sat up in bed, holding a bundle of pink blankets. Is my new sister in there? Stopping at the door, I wait until mom calls me over, I don't want to make her mad. I've been doing that a lot lately, I've not meant to, but mom gets super mad at me then hits me. I try to say I'm sorry and that I'll do better, but she hits me more then. She gets really mad when Charlie stops her, and then gets mad at him. She starts to shout at him about how he loves me more than*

*her, but he always tells her that isn't true. He doesn't mean it. He tells me he loves me more than mom all the time, but if she knew that she would get really really mad, so it became one of our little secrets.*

*"For fuck's sake, come here Autumn." Mom demands.*

*Hurrying over to her bedside, I stand patiently at the edge.*

*"Hi mom, can I meet my new baby sister now?"*

*"How about you sit on the chair Aut, and I'll pass the baby over, so you don't accidentally drop her." Charlie suggests.*

*Nodding my head super quickly, I hop up onto the chair by moms' bed, my feet dangling over the edge. I smile at Charlie to let him know I'm ready. Charlie takes the little pink bundle from mom, moving the blanket away from her face, he comes over to me and tells me how to hold her correctly before placing her in my arms. Pouty little lips, rosy cheeks, red hair, her eyes are closed because she's sleeping. She's perfect.*

*"What's her name?" I ask them, not taking my eyes off of her.*

*"Chloe." Mom says.*

*"She's so cute."*

*"The cutest." Charlie agrees "Are you going to be a good big sister to her?"*

*"I'll be the best, I promise."*

*I can't stop looking at her, even while mom and Charlie have a quiet argument. I just hold Chloe closer to me and promise her that nothing will ever hurt her while I'm her big sister.*

I kept that promise as much as I could, but it wasn't enough in the end. Stroking my thumb over the engraving of her name, all of the memories of us resurfacing in this house, I can feel the tears threatening. Refusing to shed anymore tears right now, I pick up mom's wedding ring and ask Atlas to put them both in his pocket for safe keeping. Finishing up in mom's room, after I go through the documents box, we make our way to Chloe's bedroom next. The door to her bedroom is closed, also charred black and dark grey like the walls. Opening her bedroom door, I'm hit with the multitude of pinkness that is

her bedroom. Her bedroom wasn't touched by the fire, just the door and door frame. Her walls are a bright hot pink colour, with the same light blue carpet that is in all of the bedrooms. Against the right wall sits her metal single bed frame, with her pink bedding with white stars, with matching curtains, photos of us surround her bed, the ones I managed to print off at the library, I'd have to print double because she wanted them too. On the floor sits the only toys she had, a small doll with the same hair and eye colour as her, a wooden build block set and a fake phone I convinced mom to buy her at target that was on sale, so she didn't break mine. Her moon shaped nightlight is on, even though its daytime, so the house must still have power even if moms not been here.

I stand in the doorway, taking a mental picture because once we leave here, I'll never be returning. I'll never step foot into Chlo's room again, just like she won't.

"You don't have to go in if you don't want to. You can just tell us what you want to take with you, and we'll pack it up in the bags." Atlas reassures me.

"No, I have to. It wouldn't be right if it were either of you."

"Ok Pumpkin, but if it becomes too much for you, just let one of us know."

"Do you mind waiting by the door? I know it sounds silly, but it doesn't feel right having either of you in her bedroom."

"Of course, not Babygirl, we'll be stood right here. Just pass us what you need."

"Thankyou."

Bracing myself, I walk into her room. Standing in the middle of the room, I look around wondering where to start. I decide to start with her clothes, I ask Atlas to hold open the duffel while I pack up all of Chlo's clothes, refusing to leave any of them behind. She doesn't have many, but I can't bear to leave them. It's not like I'll have any use for them, but some still have her smell on them, nearly making my knees buckle. I take her doll, and one of her building blocks because she signed our names on it one day, with the cutest little heart next

to them. I take all of the photos that are on the wall, because I know there's no other ones in this house and I don't want to forget her face, I'm too scared to see if my phone survived, in case I've lost everything on it. I pause by her bed, debating whether or not I'm really freaking weird for wanting to take her covers and pillows. I'm aware that I'm probably being ridiculous, but I genuinely can't deal with the pain, at the idea of leaving them behind. Picking up her pillow, I bring it to my nose and breathe in the scent of Chlo.

"Do you want to take them Pumpkin?" Atlas asks me, still stood in the doorway with Tobias.

"It's not weird?"

"Not at all, after you left, I think me, your dad and brother all snuck into your room to breathe in your scent, or to just feel close to you, if this is what you need, then do it. No-one will judge you."

Nodding, I get to my feet clutching the pillow in my hands, I pad over to Atlas and gently tuck it into the duffel, doing the same thing with the duvet. Thankfully, it's a thin one so it fits perfectly.

"I know there's nothing in my room, but I need to look."

"Are you sure?" Tobias turns to me.

"Yeah, I think so."

"Ok then, but we're coming in the room with you."

Entering my room, there's no door in the doorway, and there's nothing in the room due to the fire, everything was out front. My once dark blue walls are now black. What was once carpet, is now blackened and charred floorboards, glass is littered over the floor, crouching down I pick up a photo of me and Chloe from the summer holidays where I took her to Bottomless Lakes State Park, it's burnt around the edges, and I already have a copy from Chloe's room so as I stand, I let it fall from my fingers back to the floor. Gazing around I take in all of the destruction, there's nothing left in this room that would ever hint that it was once mine, there's nothing telling the story of how I lost Chloe. It's just all gone. Just like her.

Just like I was supposed to be, but somehow, I'm still stood here.

Shaking myself out of it, so I don't have yet another breakdown just from standing here. I make my way back out of the room that was once mine, where all of the monsters were and walk back down the stairs with help from the guys.

We reach the bottom and I head straight to the bathroom wanting to pick up Chloe's shower gel, wanting to hold on to her scent for as long as possible.

Blue walls with grey speckled vinyl flooring, a dolphin stick on decal stuck to the back of the door. My gaze drifts to the toilet rim where a chip in the porcelain is from a night mom wailed on me while I was sick. She smacked my head off of the rim repeatedly until I passed out, I woke up covered in my own sick, too weak to even stand up.

Fuck, I can feel my resolve weakening on this no crying bullshit.

I will not be fucking crying anymore tears in this house.

I refuse.

Heading through the hallway to the living room, I take in the brown walls that have yellowed over the years from moms smoking, the horrid deep red crushed velvet couch, that's filled with holes from where she's dropped her cigarettes when she falls asleep smoking or when she's too drunk to hold onto them. The wooden coffee table that Chlo ate breakfast at every morning, covered with chips in the wood and multiple water stains. The barely functioning box tv from 2006, and the heavily stained cream carpet, that probably contains more of my blood from body than I do at this point. There's nothing that I need from this room, but you have to walk through it to get to the kitchen, which always made grabbing food when there was any, hard.

Opening the bright yellow kitchen door to the bright red walls of the kitchen, I can't help but cringe, I've always hated how mom decorated this place, the colours always gave me a headache. Looking down at my feet, I zero in on an old blood

stain, that seeped its way into the stick on black and white checked vinyl flooring. Lifting my head so we can leave, I look around at the black worktops with tan wooden cabinets. No sense of opening them, since there's nothing in them, they've always been empty from food. I make my way to the dryer and ask the guys to move it for me. Squeezing behind it, I reach into the little hole in the wall and pull-out a small tin box containing Chloe's photos from when she was born. I learned to hide them after mom ripped one to shreds as a punishment one night.

There's nothing here for me anymore now that I have everything I need. I just need to go collect Chloe's ashes then we can get out of this state, and I can try start over for a while.

Turning around, I start for the front door ready to get the hell out of here. A hand clasp around my wrist stops me in my tracks.

"Are you ok Babygirl?" Tobias asks me.

"Honestly? Not at all. This house holds nothing but bad memories for me now that Chloe is gone. She made it bearable and now that she's not here, all this house is, is where I lost everything."

"Do you want me to blow it up Cupcake?" Dominic suggests, while standing casually in the doorway, not even bothered that he's just scared me half to death. Holding my hand over my heart while it thuds against my chest, I will myself to calm down. "Shit, I'm sorry Cupcake, I didn't mean to startle you."

"It's fine. And no blowing anything up, please." I laugh at his pouty face.

"And this is for scaring Autumn." Tobias says as he thuds Dominic over the head with his hand.

"Ow, that was completely uncalled for, it was an accident."

"You were told to wait in the car Dominic."

"I know, but then I missed my Cupcake, so I snuck out of the car while everyone else were on their phones."

"Get back in the car Dominic." Tobias growls out.

“Dibs on riding with Cupcake!” he shouts as he races out of the house, lifting the tension that surrounded me just a moment ago. My shoulders falling, releasing the tension that I was holding in them. Walking out of the house, I feel lighter than I did. We make our way over to the cars waiting for us.

“He really has a gift of knowing when I’m needing cheered up though.” I tell them both, hoping that they aren’t too mad at him.

“He does Pumpkin, it’s why we keep him around, even when he’s a bit psychotic.”

A laugh burst out of my mouth before I can stop it. “He really is psychotic, but in a sort of adorable way.”

“You think I’m adorable?” Dominic pops his head out of the backseat window, looking every bit like one of those unhinged puppies, I always compare him too. Stepping towards him, I ruffle his shaggy blonde hair as he gazes at me with those baby blue eyes. “I really do.”

“That’s it! I’m keeping her!” he shouts.

“You can’t keep her Dominic!” Dad chastises him from the driving seat.

“Sure, I can. I promise I’ll feed her and water her, and I’ll even take her out on walks.” He promises sounding so deadly serious.

“You make me sound like a dog.” I huff out. His eyes go wide with panic.

“No! You aren’t... I wouldn’t... I’m sorry.” Hanging his head, his eyes downcast. He slips his head back into the car and scoots himself back along the seats, so I can get in easier.

Tobias helps me in again, while Atlas put the duffel bags in the trunk. He gets in beside me, making it a bit of a squeeze since I’m between them both and they aren’t small men. Thank god for SUV’s. Realising Dominic is still withdrawn and hating that he thinks he’s upset me, I slide my hand into his and give it a squeeze. He snaps his head up and looks into my eyes with such a hopeful look on his face. “You aren’t upset with me?” he asks.

“Not at all. You cheered me up while I felt like I was drowning in there. You have been my lightness the last few weeks, so thank you.”

“Soooo... I can keep you right?”

“Sure Dominic, you can keep me. I already planned to keep all of you too anyway.”

“*Mine.*” He whispers into my ear causing goosebumps to break out over my skin. Laying my head on his shoulder, I soak in the lightness that he exudes, a similar lightness that Chlo had, that I thought I had lost. Slipping my spare hand into Atlas’s, I sit there and bask in the comfort that all these people offer me.

Atlas will always be my knight in shining armour. My best friend, and the boy I will always love, who I know will always have my back and protect me, when I can’t protect myself.

Dominic offers me the light, and I’m desperately hanging on to it right now, while I don’t have any of my own.

Zander is the one who brought me back. I recognised his voice after a few days, but I’ve not mentioned it, scared that he’ll tell me I imagined it all. He’s steady. Not too overbearing but he lets me know that he’s there. He also makes sure I’m fed so bonus points to him.

Tobias has been my protector since I woke up. Always scanning everything with a critical eye, which includes me, like he’s making sure I somehow haven’t procured a new bruise or injury.

Sebastian is the sweetest, my whole stay in hospital he has made sure to watch a film with me every night, to cure my boredom from being stuck in my hospital bed. He gives me silly little fun facts as we watch, and I love it.

Dad and Brenn have both been like nothing ever happened before. Dad making sure to spend those 30 minutes with me before I go to sleep, making sure I’m ok and don’t need anything. Brenn sneaking me chocolate multiple times a day, much to Zander’s annoyance, annoying me constantly too, stating he needs to make up for lost time.



I don't know where I would have been without them all these last few weeks, but they made me feel stronger. I feel like I'm betraying Chlo by not being with her, but I don't think I could put my newfound family through losing me.

We pull up outside of the crematorium and we just idle there for 15 minutes, no-one says anything letting me come to terms with what I'm about to do. I can already feel my heart breaking, I'm going to have her in my arms again, but not how I wished she were. This is the worst.

# Chapter 16

## Autumn

Entering the crematorium, we look absolutely ridiculous, and I would laugh if it was a more appropriate setting. I'm completely surrounded by everyone because no-one wanted to stay in the car this time, all of them practically demanding to support me, and I honestly couldn't be more thankful, because I feel like I'm about to fall apart any moment. Stepping into the reception area, we are greeted by the receptionist, who sweeps her gaze over all of us, eyes widening when she sees my men.

The Fuck. My men? Absolutely not getting into that with myself right now. Yes, I argue with myself, and I know you do the same so don't be a judgy mcjudgerson right now. Anyway.

Miss slutty receptionist must decide today is her lucky day, because she unbuttons her top two blouse buttons and thrust her less than spectacular boobs our way. She's not unattractive, she has that upturned nose that reminds me of the who's from The Grinch, we loved that film at Christmas. Live version not the animated one. We aren't monsters. The receptionist has brown silky hair, that's styled in a high slicked back ponytail and has brown eyes that match her hair, but I'm already upset by being here, and I really don't want to deal with her getting all flirty with the guys on top of this.

"Can I help you gentlemen?" she asks huskily, completely ignoring my presence.

"Hi. I was told that I had to come here to collect my sister's ashes." I step forward, not waiting for any of the others to answer for me, this is my baby sister, and it just feels wrong having anyone else do this for me.

"Yes, that's correct. What is the name of the person you will be collecting today?"

"Chloe Stephens." I say, my voice slightly breaking as I say her full name, somehow making this more real. I could pretend a little when we were just walking into the building, that I

wasn't here to collect the ashes of the one person I love most in this world.

“Ah yes. Pity for that one, didn't even get a service, the poor child, since no-one claimed her body for those two weeks.” She prattles on but I'm too gobsmacked to say anything to her. “Tsk at least someone is claiming her now, right?”

Why is she continuing her little rant? I'm not a violent person, in fact I hate it. But I'm about to make an exception and smack a bitch.

Dominic steps up next to me, causing me to look up at him. His eyes are narrowed on her, and he has his favourite knife between his fingers, as if he's thinking about using it on her. Slipping my hand into his, I tug, getting his attention. “No maiming people Dominic.” I whisper to him, not wanting the receptionist to hear me.

“But she's a bitch, and she's upset you. Surely that deserves a little bit of maiming?” he says quietly, but clearly loud enough that she hears him. Her eyes flare with panic.

“I-I...I didn't mean anything by it, I swear.” She rushes out, tripping over her words.

“Just go get the ashes Shannon, we'll be having a talk later.” An elderly gentleman says as he comes out of a door from the back hall.

“Yes sir.” She bows her head, staring at her shoes and rushing away from the desk, to hopefully go get my sisters ashes.

“I am so sorry for her attitude, unfortunately not the first time. My name is Mr Bennett, I'm the funeral director here at the crematorium.” He shakes all of our hands. “Why don't we all take a seat while we wait on Shannon?”

“Sure.” Dad says, motioning us all to follow him to the waiting room, where there aren't nearly enough seats for us all. The guys make sure I sit down first, and I keep hold of Dominic's hand the whole time, I can still feel the tension he's carrying. Making him sit next to me, the others spread out around the room.

“I am so sorry, for your loss of your sister.” Mr Bennett says.

“Thank you.” Quickly wiping the tears that have appeared away. I just want to get this over with, I’m tired and want to just zone out for the rest of the journey to Phoenix.

“Contrary to what Shannon said, I performed Chloe’s service. While there wasn’t anyone there, I said a small prayer for her and me and my partner, who is the organist here, both paid our respects for her by lighting a small candle each.”

“Thank you, that means a lot. I would have arranged something for her, had I been awake.”

“Awake?”

“Autumn was in a coma for two weeks, when she woke up, Chloe had already been cremated.” Dad informs him, taking over when I can’t talk anymore. Giving dad a grateful smile, I lay my head on Dominic’s shoulder, just needing a moment.

“I am so sorry, if we had known we would have held the body longer. What about her mother?”

“I’m her mommy, her mother isn’t around.” I mutter, leaving no room for further discussion.

“Of course, dear. Ah. Here comes Shannon.” Mr Bennett gets to his feet. Getting to mine also, I turn my body to face the receptionist, all worries from earlier forgotten about as I look upon the small wooden box in her hands. I feel like my legs are about to give way. My chest isn’t working. “I... I can’t.”

“Yes, you can Sunshine, because this is what you need to do for Chloe right now.” Sebastian sternly tells me, as he comes to my side.

“I can’t Sebastian, all I have left of her are her belongings and that tiny little box. I can’t. I thought I could be strong; I really did but I can’t.”

“You don’t have to be strong, but you are. You can do this, and if you need to fall apart as you do, then you can.”

The receptionist stops in front of me and holds out the wooden box for me to take. Gingerly, I reach out and clasp my hands around it, its white with a small silver plaque, her name engraved onto it, with her birth date and the day I lost her.

*In Loving Memory*

*Chloe Stephens*

*12/13/17 – 10/30/2022*

The box is lighter than I expected it to be, hard to believe that someone as large as life, can be fit into such a small object. Like she never really existed. Like none of the things we went through ever happened. How is it that one small box has the ability to bring me to my knees?

Clutching the box to my chest, I thank Mr Bennett and walk out of the crematorium, needing some air away from everyone. Outside of the crematorium is lovely, there is a small flower garden, where people can choose to have their loved one's ashes scattered. The crematorium is surrounded by trees, making it idyllic for services, with the added privacy. Walking over to the flower garden, I take in all the beautiful flowers that are so full of life. Roses, tulips, carnations, and peonies all scattered across the ground. Chlo would have loved this if she were here, she was always begging me to pick some flowers we seen out on walks to bring home, said she wanted her room to be covered in them. Still clutching the box in my hands, I rub my thumb back and forth over the smooth wood, grounding myself in the present, trying not to think about the night I lost her.

Gazing out into the treeline, I swear I see the outline of a person watching me. A prickly sensation breaks out on the back of my neck, the hairs on my arms standing up. They take a step out of the treeline, their stance rigid. Taking a step back, I try keep my eye on the trees while retreating, making my way back towards the entrance. The figure takes a few more steps out, something niggles at the back of my mind, begging me to recognise who it is.

“There you are Princess.” Zander says, scaring the shit out of me. My eyes drift from the shadowy figure and look at Zander, who looks sheepish, rubbing the back of his neck. “Sorry Autumn, I didn't mean to startle you. We just got worried when we didn't know where you wandered off to.”

“It’s alright, I was lost in thought so it’s my fault for not paying attention.” I shrug, looking back to the treeline, looking for the person who was there. “Fuck!” I curse when I see that the figure is gone. Maybe my head was playing tricks on me, it’s been a long exhausting day. It’s probably just sleep deprivation or something.

“You ok?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine. Just imagining things. Are we leaving?”

“Yeah, I just text everyone to let them know I found you. We’re going to meet them at the cars, so there’s no rush if you want to be here for a little while longer.”

“No, I’m good, I’m so ready to get out of here.” I tell him. Zander just nods as if he knows I’m not just meaning here, but also out of this state, away from everything bad that ever happened since mom brought me here.

“Come on then Princess, let’s get you home.” He says, as he places his hand on the bottom of my back. His hand almost spans the entirety of the bottom of my back, he’s huge. I always forget how tall they are, but I have to look up at them whenever they stand next to me, but Zander makes me feel protected, instead of intimidated by his size. Pure heat radiates from where his palm lays against my shirt, I feel like my nerves are zeroed in on where it sits but it feels so good.

God, I want to climb this man like a tree. I mean I want to climb all of them but add on his deep timber voice and he radiates pure sex.

Shaking my head to get rid of my demon thoughts, I know I’m still traumatised and that won’t go away anytime soon, but these men have made me feel nothing but safe and cared for since they came into my life in that hospital room, keeping me sane and lending me some of their happiness while I don’t have any, making me want to be alive. It might not be like that forever, but right now I couldn’t be more thankful to them and also maybe, most definitely, hot for them.

We get back to the cars where everyone is waiting, getting into the back, and waiting to see who calls dibs on sitting next to

me, it comes as no surprise when Dominic gets in on my left side. He smacks his lips to my cheek and it's the most adorable thing ever. "Missed you, Cupcake."

"I wasn't even gone that long." I giggle. I fucking Giggle. Ew.

"Nope you were gone for too long, my heart was breaking without you." He places both hands over his chest, tilts his head to the side and sticks out his bottom lip.

"You're an idiot." I tell him as I push his head away from me.

"Your idiot."

And don't I just blush like a tomato. This boy is seriously so fucking cute.

Tobias comes round to the other side, expecting him to get in next to me, I give him a little smile, but he doesn't. "I thought you might like these back in your hands again, now that you have her." he tells me, while pulling Chlo's blanket from behind his back along with Bun. I thank him, then wrap the blanket around Chloe's box, and hold Bun next to it in my arms.

We finally get to the airport, my jaw dropping when I take in dad's private jet. It's massive, a sleek black looking thing which just screams 'I have money,' making our way up the steps to the plane while the others grab our bags from the cars, Dad leads me to the seats in the back. The interior is gorgeous, all white walls, black leather seats, and tan wooden tables. Feeling uncomfortable, I fidget in my seat, all this show of wealth making me feel out of place. I know this would have been my life had we stayed with dad, but it's not and I don't know how to get over it. The cost of flying this jet could have fed me and Chloe for months, and part of me is bitter about that. Demon thoughts are at it again because I know it can't be helped, that they aren't horrible people just because they have money and use it, and that they did while I was gone, going through everything that I did.

"Are you ok Little Monster?" Dad asks me as he sits down next to me.

"I don't know, this is just a lot to take in that's all."

“Well just you wait, this is a fresh start for you, and you’ll be home with us again, it’ll be like you never left.”

He says all of this with such a hopeful smile on his face, that I can’t bear to tell him that I’m not the same little girl I was when we left, that I’m broken now and that I don’t think I can ever be what he wants me to be, especially not after losing Chloe. That a large part of me still doesn’t think that I should be here anymore, that I should just give up, give into the dark thoughts that tell me that I’m better off dead. Too much of a burden for anyone to care about now. I know, realistically that my thoughts aren’t true, but a part of me believes them and thinks I should listen. I know if it weren’t for the guys I would give in, but I can’t do that to them right now, especially not my Dad, Brenn, or Atlas. They all look at me so hopefully, that everything is ok now that they have me back after all these years and I wish it were, I really do but I’m hanging on by a thread to find the willpower to even wake up each day. I’m hoping that with time it gets better, because I want to live, I want to be here for all of them, but I know it might not be enough.

I’m brought out of my thoughts by the others boarding the plane, and the pilot informing us it won’t be a long flight but to get comfortable anyway. Deciding to have a nap while we fly, I get comfortable in my seat, lay my head on Dad’s shoulder, and drift off, knowing he’ll wake me up when we land.

Muttering wakes me up from my nap, not wanting to wake up fully yet and face everyone, I keep my eyes closed and listen.

“You think she’ll be ok when we get home?” someone asks, Sebastian, I think.

“Hopefully, I mean I’m not delusional enough to think she’s going to be perfect but I’m hopeful this fresh start helps.” Dad replies.

“Trauma doesn’t work like that sir; she’s going to need therapy and lots of it. You heard what Doc said in the hospital. She has been abused for years, moving back home with you, is not going to cure her.” Zander sternly tells my dad.



“We don’t know what’s going to happen. We’ll just have to wait and see. I’m sure that she’ll be fine with a good routine, maybe she can attend Phoenix Falls University, get a good education, rather than whatever she planned to do.”

Dad sounds so hopeful, and I don’t have it in me to tell him that I know I’m not going to be ok, that I’m going to struggle just waking up every day, never mind trying to live a normal life, when in reality I’ll never get to have one, I’m too broken, too damaged.

Yawning and groggily opening my eyes, I pretend I didn’t hear any of them talking about me.

“Are we nearly there?” I ask.

“Yeah sweetheart. Ready to finally come home?” Dad asks, his eyes shining with tears. I know how much this means to him, and I can’t ruin this for him.

“Sure Dad, I can’t wait.” I give him a weak smile, but he doesn’t notice, he’s far too happy to have me back to see I’m uncomfortable with all this talk of being ok.

The plane lands on the tarmac, and no sooner are we exiting the plane, bundling ourselves into the black SUV’s we’ve been in constantly over the last few hours, I expected flashier cars but apparently these scream money, because of the protection they offer. Bullet proof glass, reinforced doors, etc. Honestly, I zoned out when Dad was talking about them, I don’t really care about the protection aspect all that much, all I did was ask if he owned anything more fun.

We drive for around 20 minutes through Phoenix Mountains Reserve, reminding me of all the times me, Dad and Brenn would head there for the day since it’s not far from the house, finally we head up to Lookout Mountain. We pull into a long winding driveway, the house, no scratch that the mansion looms over us, it hasn’t changed a bit apart from a few upgrades such as the artificial grass, the solar panels and the house has a new lick of paint. Before it was a light tan colour, bordering a pale sickly yellow colour now it’s pure white. The roof tiling is still the reddish orange colour that I always loved, the green artificial grass stands out with its vibrant green

colour against the desert backdrop. Dad also had all of mom's flowerbeds replaced with some bushes and trees.

Walking inside, dad's staff rushing to grab our bags, dad ushers me into the grand entryway everything looks white. I'm genuinely terrified to touch something in case I get it dirty. Dad sweeps his arm out in front of him "Welcome home Little Monster!"

An older lady comes bustling out from the kitchen "Oh Sugar, you are a welcome sight. I've missed you so much!" she chokes out, wrapping me into one of those grandmotherly hugs that I've missed so much. She pulls back and holds me at arm's length, looking me over, her already thin lips disappearing as she thins them in disapproval. Taking the time to look her over too and compare the Mrs McKay I knew to the one stood before me. She's smaller than I am, standing at 5'1, her now grey hair that was always perfectly styled, even now, is now shorter than I remember and now sits above her shoulders. Her large brown eyes are slightly narrowed as her gaze gets to my waist, but a subtle head shake from Zander has her keeping her opinion to herself. Her smile lines that she once had, have now blended into her wrinkles that surround her eyes. Her wide nose still has the small scar to the side of it. She's wearing a cardigan with dark blue jeans, the same style that obviously hasn't changed from years ago. After she looks me over, she pulls me into another hug, this time though it's almost bone crushing. "I don't know what put those shadows into your eyes my sweet girl, but you can come to me at any time to talk. Woman to woman." She whispers to me.

"Thank you, Mrs McKay." I tell her earnestly.

"Now let's go to the kitchen, so I can get some more meat on your bones." She orders, as she practically drags me into her most sacred space. I used to be terrified to step in here when I was a kid, Mrs McKay used to shout at anyone who tried to come in as she was cooking, not me though, she would either usher me back out with a smile and a cookie, if she was too busy to keep an eye on me, or she'd sit me on the worktop and let me help while she talked about what she was doing. Mom hated her because she would get shouted at if she tried to

interrupt us from dad, he knew how much I loved spending time with our grumpy cook. Mrs McKay hated mom just as much, if not more, she may have never verbalised it, but it was the way her eyes would narrow when mom would walk in, or the fire in her eyes, the way her jaw would tighten, whenever mom would scream at me in front of her.

The kitchen hasn't changed at all apart from newer appliances, cream and brown marble tiles decorate the walls, solid black worktops sit on top of pure white cupboards with matte black handles. A sleek double door fridge is off to the left of the island, that Mrs McKay makes me sit at. The double top cooker she makes her way over too, is massive. This kitchen makes me feel more like I'm home, Mrs McKay is obviously baking something, because it smells amazing in here.

"Mm Mrs McKay! Are you baking cookies for little ol'me?" Dominic asks as he skips into the room.

"Absolutely not Demon boy, they are all for my favourite girl." She shoots back.

"But... I'm her favourite person, so surely that entitles me to cookies." He turns to me "Tell her Cupcake!"

"Now be careful now Sugar, if you let demon boy too close, you'll need an exorcism to get rid of him." She points the spatula between us "I made the mistake of feeding him once, not been able to get rid of him since."

"Pfft, I'm already attached to her and not even an exorcism could get rid of me." He winks at me. Laying my head on his shoulder, I whisper into his ear.

"I don't want to get rid of you, remember?" He kisses me forehead, slides his fingers through mine and clasps my hand tightly in his, Mrs McKay looks at us with a soft expression before turning around and pulling out the cookies, just as the others walk in.

Atlas sits on my other side and places his hand on my thigh, he visibly deflates as he releases all the tension he was holding.

"Are you good?" I ask him.

“Yeah Pumpkin, just needed to touch you to reassure myself you’re still here.”

“Oh Atty.” I mutter, lifting my head from Dominic’s shoulder, he makes a noise of protest until he sees me laying my head onto Atlas’s, who lets out a shuddering breath at the contact.

“Cookies!” Mrs McKay announces.

Dominic is the first to grab one but as Mrs McKay opens her mouth to scold him, he places it in front of me.

“Cupcake gets the first one!” he glares at the others, kisses me on the cheek and then grabs another one, shoves the whole thing into his mouth and practically inhales it all in one go. The others are more civilised in the matter, all of them taking one and thanking Mrs McKay. Zander stands behind me and reaches over me to grab one.

“Hmm, could do with just a tad more vanilla and they would have been perfect.”

“Boy! My cookies are perfect!” she shouts at him and grabs her wooden spoon, she goes to smack him with it but because he’s stood so close to me, the movement causes me to be throwing back into my memories of mom beating me with her belt.

Throwing myself to the ground, I cover my head with my arms, making sure my back is the target so I can hide the marks.

*“Please don’t mommy, I’m sorry.” I plead. I asked if I could try calling daddy tonight, it’s been months since I last saw him. I know mom told me that he sent us away, but I miss him and Brenn so much. Maybe if I could talk to Brenn, he could convince daddy to let us come home.*

*“How many times do I have to tell you, you little bitch! Your father doesn’t want us anymore!” she grabs my hair, yanking my head back until I’m looking up at her from my knees.*

*“I’m sorry! Please don’t hit me.” I beg “I just really miss them; I promise I won’t ask again.”*

*Mom undoes the buckle on her belt, the little clinking noise telling me exactly what's about to happen, she unloops it from her grey jeans. She backs up as she folds the belt in half, gripping the buckle end until her knuckles turn white. Then she strikes the belt downwards. White hot searing pain licks down my spine, causing me to cry out.*

*"Ask about your daddy again Autumn, see what happens."*

*"I won't" I tell her, my head hanging, tears dripping down my cheeks onto the floor.*

*"You better not, now get out of my sight. Charlie's coming over, so don't leave that room." She warns me.*

*"Ok mom." I get up, struggling. I can feel that my top is damp on the back, telling me that she cut me. I hobble to my room that's bare apart from the bed and my chest of drawers. I curl up on my side on top of my covers. Mom will hurt me if I get blood on my only set of sheets. I must drift off to sleep because I'm woken up by Charlie brushing my hair away from my face.*

*"Let me help you get cleaned up Little one." He tells me. He peels my shirt from my body, making me hiss out in pain then he takes off my trousers. "Shh Little one, I've got you. This looks really sore huh?" his fingers stroke down the side of my back, causing me to squirm away from him.*

*"Uh huh." My voice small and timid. I don't like it when Charlie helps me, he looks at my body for too long, and makes me stand there until she says I can get dressed, where he helps me, his fingers 'accidentally' grazing over my private areas.*

*"Your mommy is asleep now, so she doesn't need to know I helped you. You know how angry she gets."*

*"Thank you Charlie." I tell him, hoping that he'll leave soon. Instead, he sits on my bed and scoots back until he's leaning against the headboard.*

*"Why don't you come give me a cuddle as a thank you, Little one?" he asks. I know he's not asking though; he's telling. The last time I told him I didn't want to, he told mom the next morning that I was being difficult for him that night, while she*

*slept. Mom withheld all my food that day but made me sit and watch as they ate their meals.*

*Nodding, I sit next to him feeling extremely uncomfortable since he had stripped me down to only my panties.*

*“Nuh uh Autumn. A proper cuddle.” He demands, his tone telling me to cuddle him how he like me to, or he’ll tell mom I was being difficult for him again. So, I climb on to his lap and straddle him, laying my head on his shoulder and facing the wall so he can’t see my tears. He wraps his hands around my hips, making me close my eyes tightly, I feel sick, my whole body screaming at me to run away, but I can’t so I lay there rigidly, even when I can feel something hard poking into my leg. He moves my body around claiming he’s uncomfortable, the hard thing poking between my legs now, rubbing through our clothes. Charlie’s breathing has gotten faster, his grip tighter causing me to wriggle because it hurts.*

*“That’s my good Little one, just like that. You give me the best hugs.” He shudders out, the hard thing between us jerks. He kisses the side of my head. “My special girl, our secret, ok?”*

*I just nod, he lifts me up off of him and then slides off of my bed and stands, he then tucks me into bed and turns around and leaves. I lay there for a long time, until finally I drift off back to sleep, ignoring the pain on my back and the hunger gnawing at my stomach.*

I come around to hushed voices, frantic whispering and everyone huddled together at the kitchen entrance. Strong, thick arms are wrapped around me, soft singing alerts me that it’s Atlas before I can panic again. He’s singing *you are the reason* by Calum Scott, one of my favourites. His singing calms me further, his voice was always amazing, but the years have made it deeper, the vibrations from his chest against my head, bringing me fully back from my awful memories.

Slowly I turn my head to look at him, my head throbbing from a migraine that’s rapidly coming on. Looking into his emerald, green eyes, all I can see is worry, panic and sorrow looking back at me as he stops singing when he sees that I’m awake.

“You ok, Pumpkin?” he asks me, his voice deeper than usual.

“I will be, how long did this one last?” the guys got used to me having bad flashbacks while in the hospital, I don’t think it made it any easier on them though.

“You were out for an hour, practically catatonic, we couldn’t bring you out of it.”

Us talking must alert the others that I’m out of it, Dominic, and Sebastian both race to my side, the latter confusing me with his reaction, he’s normally more reserved around me.

“Fuck Sunshine, you scared the shit out of me.” Sebastian growls out, causing my eyes to widen, pressing back into Atlas more.

“Don’t growl at my Cupcake Seb, I’ll kick your ass.” Dominic grits out getting into Sebastian’s space.

“Enough! Fighting whether fake or not got us into this mess. Come on Little Bear, let me take you away from these Neanderthals.” Brenn says as he steps forward and pulls me out of Atlas’s embrace, much to his protest. Brenn leads me past everyone, to the back garden. Stepping out of the double doors, I take in the massive garden that is thankfully attached to the house. The lake we spent so much time at is off in the distance, dad’s garden is super green compared to the landscape but now there’s additional extras like more tropical looking flowers that wouldn’t normally survive in an environment like this. Taking a deep breath, I can feel myself getting more grounded.

“I’ve missed having time alone with you little sis, those brutes have hogged all your time and attention the last few weeks.”

“I’m sorry, I should have tried to spend more time with you. I have missed you Brother Bear, so much.”

“Don’t apologize. They kept you happy in hospital, they chased those shadows away for a little while, I could never be mad at that.” He tells me as he flops on to the chair next to me. We spend the next hour talking, mainly him talking to me about what he’s been doing over the years, while I just listen to him talk. Feeling beyond grateful, that I’m even getting this opportunity to sit and talk with my brother after all these years

apart. Part of me can't help but think about what it would be like if Chlo were here with us.

"Umm Brenn, where's Chloe's ashes?" I ask him, trying to hide my panic, feeling horrible that I forgot about her.

"Relax Little Bear, she's been placed into your room with the blanket and Bun, you fell asleep on the plane, and we didn't want you to drop her so dad gave it all to Tobias for safe keeping."

The air leaves my lungs. "Thank you, I thought I had lost her again, and I freaked out a bit."

The doors opening has me whipping my head around to see who's coming out, I'm still wary of my surroundings and honestly, I don't think I'll ever stop. Tobias pops his head out, looking me over like he always does before striding out. "Come on Babygirl, it's feeding time at the zoo, and I want you fed first, before all these animals get to it." he says as he stops in front of us, hand outstretched waiting for me. Before I can even move, Brenn grabs Tobias's hand and pulls himself up then plants a loud wet kiss on Tobias's cheek before running inside, calling behind him "I knew you loved me Tobster." Causing Tobias to let out a small growl, which causes me to buckle over in a fit of laughter.

"Something funny Babygirl?"

Pressing my lips together, I rapidly shake my head side to side. "Not at all." I manage to get out before I start laughing again. Tobias gazes at me softly, causing me to abruptly stop laughing. "What?" I ask, crossing my arms over my chest.

"Nothing, just really like seeing you carefree like that, that's all."

"Oh."

And don't I just blush like a tomato. I can feel my cheeks heating, ducking my head, I mumble about the men around me being too hot to say stuff like that.

"What was that?" Tobias asks, suppressing a snicker. Kill. Me. Now. Seriously, what sort of sweet hell torture is this? I can't



even mumble about hot men saying cute shit without them hearing me. This is bullshit, I tell you.

“Nothingggg... lets go get food, shall we? I’m soooo hungry.” I rush out, before I grab his hand, pull myself up and drag him back inside, hobbling along the way, because I can’t even run away like any self-respecting embarrassed woman would. Everyone is in the kitchen when we enter, stopping whatever they are doing to stare at us, amused looks cross everyone’s faces when they see my flaming one. Fuck my life. Quickly dropping Tobias’s hand, I grab a seat between Atlas and Zander. Atlas’s hand rests on my thigh, before I even pull my seat in.

“Missed you, Princess.” Zander mutters.

“Are you channelling your inner Dominic, Gimli?”

“Gimli?” he chokes on his drink of water.

“Mhmm, it’s the long hair and the beard.”

“You know Gimli is a dwarf, right?”

“I’ll have you know that I am a massive *Lord of the Rings* fan, I know perfectly well what Gimli is. But while you are channelling the iron giant with your height, your appearance screams sassy dwarf with anger issues.”

“You were right Atlas. She’s a brat.” He looks over my head to tell my *former* best friend if this is how he’s been describing me all these years. Huffing, I turn away from Zander and turn to face Atlas with narrowed eyes. He starts to panic, and his face turns beet red.

“Now Pumpkin, I didn’t say those words at all. He’s adding shit on to be a dick.”

“Mhmm, is that so?”

“100%, I wouldn’t lie to you.”

“Sure, you wouldn’t only one way to tell though.” I smirk at him. “Dominiccc, baby, you wouldn’t lie to your Cupcake, would you?” I bat my eyelashes at him.

“Oh, she’s good.” I hear Sebastian mutter from across the table.

“Never Cupcake. Especially not when you call me baby.” He declares adamantly.

“Did Atlas call me a brat?”

“Both him and Brenn did Cupcake, said you were a massive brat and that you were sassy too.”

Gasping in mock outrage, I turn to Atlas.

“You really called me a brat Atty.” Sticking my bottom lip out, I tremble it a little, making my eyes really wide “I expected Brenn to say that, but never you.”

“Shit, Fuck. I didn’t mean it Pumpkin; you weren’t a brat, I promise.”

“Pinky promise?” Holding out my pinkie finger, while using the sweetest tone I can.

He grimaces. “Ok, you were a little bit of a brat.”

I pretend to gasp again, putting my hand over my mouth. “I can’t believe my *former* best friend; thought I was a brat!”

“Former?! The fuck, do you mean former best friend?”

“Does this mean I’m your new best friend?” Dominic pipes up.

“It does, if you can kidnap me away from my *former* best friend, right now.”

“Don’t you dare Dominic; I’ll have you on the floor before you even touch her.” Atlas seethes.

“No, you will not Atty. I don’t like you right now and want to sit next to my new best friend.” Sticking my tongue out at him, I get up from my seat, walk around to the other side of the table and sit down next to Dominic in the other spare seat.

“Definitely a brat.” Zander smirks. Shrugging, I give Dominic a kiss on the cheek as a thank you.

We finish our meal, Mrs McKay made my old favourite of Macaroni Cheese, with extra crispy cheese on top. I’m still

exhausted from my injuries, and after everything we've done today, then the flashback, I'm dead on my feet. Dad leads me to a spare room where my belongings are, and I just flop on to the bed, not taking in any of my surroundings and swiftly pass out into the sweet oblivion of sleep. Hopefully, Chlo will visit my dreams like she's done a few times over the last few weeks.

# Chapter 17

## Tobias

Kelvin enters the living room, all of us haven't moved after we came in here after dinner, even after he took Autumn off to her bedroom, poor girl was exhausted after everything today. Watching her have the flashback was excruciating because nothing we did helped, we all had to stand back as Atlas held her and softly sang to try get her out of whatever memory she was stuck in, we spent an hour watching her on the kitchen floor writhing like she was in pain, silently screaming. The most gut-wrenching part was when she was whimpering and the tears were free falling down her cheeks, but some reason she never made a sound, like she couldn't. We wanted to ask her about it, but her eyes were so sad, and then when she started to laugh while we were out in the garden, she sounded lighter somehow and I could listen to that sound all day if she let me, she is a little brat though, winding Atlas up at the table, I'll give it to her, she's good at acting upset to get him all worked up in a tizzy trying to make it better, and if that's the glimpse of the girl who she was before I can see why Atlas held out for her even after all these years.

"Is she ok?" I ask before Kelvin can even sit down. I know I just saw her, but since I first seen her in the hospital bed, I can't help but panic a little if she's not in my line of sight, I barely left her hospital room, and if a nurse was in changing her IV's, I had to be there, paranoid that someone was going to try hurt her somehow.

"She's fine, just tired. I swear you boys worry too much, my Little Monster is home where she belongs, it's exactly what she needs." He says as he takes his seat in the armchair that he's claimed as his. You know the one that all dads say you can't sit on and fits perfectly to their butt cheeks.

"But Dad... she's not ok, she literally was out of it for an hour earlier, stuck in a flashback. That is the definition of not being ok." Brenn tells him, I can see the worry in his eyes for his sister, he looked devastated earlier when we couldn't do much

to help her, probably why he took her outside for a while to spend time with her and to try cheer her up.

Kelvin just waves his hand at him. “She’s fine. The little incident in the kitchen was just a small set back. You’ll see, give her time to settle in and she’ll be the Autumn that we knew.”

“Dad...” Brenn starts, but Kelvin obviously doesn’t want to hear anymore.

“Don’t start Brenn, she’s home and she’ll be fine. Whatever happened before, she’ll get over it. She has a whole new life here and she’ll be protected, that is all she needs.” Kelvin gets up and storms out of the room.

“He’s delusional right now, it’s not just me seeing that right?” Brenn asks.

“Nope, I see it. I think he’s just in denial. He’s spent so long wanting her home, and I don’t think he ever expected Jane to abuse her. Granted she wasn’t great to her when she was a kid, but she never hit her, not while she lived here.” Atlas tells us.

“You boys were always blind to what went on around here.” Mrs McKay says from the doorway, carrying a tray with more cookies and beer for us.

“You’re the best!” Dominic cries before snatching the cookies from the tray and sitting back in his corner, protecting them like Smaug protects his gold hoard.

“What do you mean about being blind?” Brenn asks her.

Shaking her head, she places the tray on the wooden coffee table and takes a seat on the sofa. “You and Atlas were obviously young, and Kelvin wasn’t around all the time because of his work. Jane was horrible to Autumn when no-one else was around, poor girl would often tell me her mom had spanked her so hard that she couldn’t sit down for the smallest thing, like getting mud on one of her dresses.” She holds up her hand as Brenn opens his mouth to say something. “Before you say anything, I tried to tell your father, but Jane had claimed that I was lying and tried to get me fired. That’s

when I started spending a lot of time with Autumn, to try keep her away from her mom.”

“We didn’t know any of this. Why did she take Autumn when she left, if she hated her so much?” Atlas enquires.

“Your father really hasn’t told you anything, has he?”

“No, I haven’t, I didn’t think it was important.” Kelvin says from the doorway.

“I’m sorry Kelvin, I thought they would have known.” Mrs McKay apologises profusely as she leaves the room, looking like she might cry. Kelvin just walks back into the room and takes his seat again. He takes a deep breath and then looks at all of us.

“What I’m going to tell you all, cannot get back to Autumn, do you hear me?”

We all nod our agreement. “Mrs McKay is correct in saying you should know these things, if not only for the purpose of protecting Autumn fully.” He speaks.

“Why did Jane take Autumn, Dad? I always thought that it was because you caught Jane cheating on you, and she fled because she didn’t want you to try get custody.” Brenn asks him. Fucking hell, we didn’t even know the reason, just that they woke up one day and they were gone.

“So much worse son, Jane was cheating on me, that part is correct. What I never told you, was that she was telling Chase Wedgewood all the information about the gun shipments that were being imported into our private harbour. While she was sneakily meeting up with him to sleep with him, she was telling him dates, times, where the shipments were coming in, and what were in the shipments. It’s why I had to turn that harbour into a fishing business and arrange for the docks to be built with more security. She even told Chase who the moles were, that I sent in to get information.”

Fucking hell. Scrubbing my hand down my face, I blow out a breath. This is so much worse than we thought, it’s not just Jane involved anymore.

“Do you think that when she ran after the fire, that she ran back to Chase for protection?” I ask.

“I don’t know Tobias; I really don’t know but most likely.” Kelvin replies.

“Still doesn’t explain why she took Autumn.” Brenn glares at his dad.

“I confronted her about everything the night they fled. I showed her all the evidence that I had and told her I should kill her right where she stood. She was the reason good men of mine were dead, why we were haemorrhaging money from the shipments being stolen. I’ve killed people for less, but she is the mother of my child, and I didn’t want to hurt Autumn.”

“Yeah, yeah, you have some sort of a heart. Still doesn’t explain how she got past the gates with Autumn the night you confronted her, or how Autumn was literally being abused under our fucking roof, without us knowing.” Brenn rages at his dad, his fists clenched looking like he’s ready to take on his dad over this.

“She said she would leave, that she wouldn’t come back. So, I told her to just go. I told security to take a break so she could flee without being stopped at the gates, I didn’t think she would have taken Autumn considering how much she hated her.” Kelvin hangs his head; his hands lay limp between his spread legs.

“You fucking knew?!” Brenn flies at his dad, grabs him by the collar of his shirt and drags him up. “You knew she was being hurt didn’t you! But you turned a blind eye to it, just like you did with my mom. I should lay you out, right fucking here for allowing her to be treated like that under this roof.”

“I didn’t feel like I had the right! I was barely around. Jane told me constantly about how difficult Autumn was for her, how she was always misbehaving, I just assumed she was at the end of her rope with her. I know Autumn behaved good around me, but again I assumed it was because I wasn’t around a lot.”

“Not fucking good enough dad. Not even a little.” Brenn swings before we even have a chance to stop him, his left hook smacking Kelvin in his jaw. He lets him go, before he goes down. Wincing I look between them both, I’ve been on the receiving end of his fists before and it really fucking hurts, even Zander who literally made a career out of fighting, winces when he sees the punch since he’s received one or two in the past.

“Come on, up you go. I really want to punch you too for allowing my Cupcake to be hurt, but I won’t hit her dad because that would just upset her too much.” Dominic says, as he lifts Kelvin off the floor before depositing him on to his chair again. Kelvin’s eyes are resigned, like he knows he’s really fucked up. We all look at him in disappointment, he’s always been like a parental figure to me, always thought he was a good guy, even if he’s the head of a crime family. I’ve killed people, but I still think I’m a good guy to the people who deserve it.

“She’ll hate you if she ever knows, you know that right?” Atlas finally speaks to Kelvin, his set mouth, and eyes hard, letting him know he’s close to laying him out too.

“That’s why she can’t know. She’s been let down enough.”

“You mean she’s been neglected enough. I won’t lie to her Kelvin, I refuse to. I love that girl more than life, if she asks me why Jane ran with her, I will tell her everything. I don’t give a fuck if she finds out you were also one of the bad guys in her story.” Atlas shakes his head at him, running his hand through his hair.

“Understood.” Kelvin nods. “I’ll take my leave now. If she needs anything let me know, you all may stay tonight since I know you won’t want to leave her. You know where the spare rooms are.”

All of us are silent as he leaves the room once more, and none of us say anything for a while after he does.

“Soooo... remember when I called dibs on killing Jane?” Dominic declares.



“Uh huh. What about it?” Zander asks suspiciously.

“Shall we make it a group effort? A little team building exercise, you know. Could be our first official job as brother husbands.”

“Brother husbands?” I ask. The fuck is this boy on about, if he weren’t already crazy, I’d think he was on drugs.

“Sorry, do you prefer Autumn’s harem?” He deadpans.

“Who says anything about us being in a harem together with Autumn?” Sebastian questions.

“Pl-ease. You are all just as obsessed with her as I am. Well Atlas may have me beat on that part just because he’s known her longer, but you can’t all tell me that we haven’t liked the idea of sharing a girl between us before.”

“Excuse me!” Brenn waves his hand about wildly. “Her BROTHER is sat right here, I don’t want to know about what you want to do with my *little* sister, but if any of you hurt her, I’ll kill you myself.”

“We won’t hurt her silly, we are all obsessed with her. That girl up there is about to be treated like a queen.”

“Again. Who said we want to be involved.” Sebastian pipes up again.

“Fine, you don’t have to be involved. But I’m not giving her up, and Atlas is in love with her anyway. I don’t particularly care if you want her or not, since it gives me more time with her if you aren’t but don’t be fucking my Cupcake around just because you can’t decide. I don’t care if I never have sex with her, she comes first.”

“Fucking hell. Who would have thought we’d see the day, that Dominic was the hopeless romantic one.” Brenn laughs.

“Oh, don’t get me wrong, I want to fuck your sister in the most unholy ways, but she’s traumatised right now and I’m not a complete dick.”

I choke on my drink. “DUDE!” I splutter.

“What?” he asks seriously as if he hasn’t just told Autumn’s brother that he wants to fuck her.

“Look, I know I’m the mostly mentally unstable out of us all but I’m not fucking stupid. You...” he points at me “call her Babygirl. You...” he points to Sebastian “call her Sunshine and you...” he finally points to Zander “call her Princess, more than her actual name. I know you all, you have never once given a girl a nickname so don’t you try and bullshit me.”

“Well shit, he has a point.” Sebastian huffs out.

“I know she needs to heal, but once she’s better I’m up for trying this group thing, only if she wants too.” Zander says, surprising us all.

“I’m in.” I say, trying not to show how much I want this. I know she has a long way to go, but something about her has sucked me in, and I don’t want to miss out, just because I’m a chicken shit about feelings.

“I want to see how she feels before I agree to anything. She might not even want any of us.” Sebastian says.

Atlas has been quiet for this whole conversation, just sitting on the sofa sipping his beer. Looking at him, I raise my eyebrow. “What are you thinking man?”

“Oh, I’m just enjoying watching you all realise you are all as fucked as I am over her. Dominic’s right, I’m in love with her. Always have been, always will be and I don’t mind sharing her with you all, if that is what she wants but make no mistake. I will kill each and every one of you, if you make her cry, I might love you like brothers, but she is my future.”

Dominic snuffles and pretends to wipe away a tear. “You’re making me tear up, you romantic bastard.”

“Fuck off.” Atlas growls at him, but he has a small smirk on his face, so I know he’s not completely serious.

Brenn turns on the tv to a sports overview just to fill the silence, while we try to wind down before heading to bed, I’m exhausted but I know I won’t be able to sleep, with how worked up I am. I don’t understand how anyone is ever able to treat someone so horribly, especially someone as sweet as

Autumn, she might be a little bit of a brat sometimes, but it's not like the whiny girls at college, when they are trying to demand our attention or fighting like cats in heat over us. I'm not full of myself, but all of us are slightly better looking than the average guy and Zander just screams bad boy, especially with the scar on his face that seems to make girls go crazy over him. We barely interact with them though, Atlas never does, he's been firmly only ever about Autumn, even when she wasn't around to be loyal too. I sit back and watch as the others chat quietly about what they need to do to get Autumn's room set up and things we all need to catch up on, now that we are back from New Mexico. They know I won't reply, preferring to sit there quietly, I'm not normally much of a talker but around Autumn, I want to, I want her to know I'm there, I don't know what it is about her, but I can't help myself. I'm just glad that she's finally here, I thought we were never going to get out of that hospital, and to be honest I genuinely thought at the start that we'd be leaving without her. The condition she was in when we got there broke my heart, she looked so fragile, she still does but she looked like a corpse just being laid up like that at first, covered in bandages, wires, and tubes. Life has slowly been seeped back into her though, and I'm so happy. She looks more alive each day and I'm hoping that with time her mentality also gets there, where she craves to be alive because life is better for her, rather than what it was before. It doesn't feel like we only picked up her sister's ashes today, or the heart wrenching sight of her walking around her house and collecting her sister's belongings from her bedroom, it was obviously not easy for her, but she was so strong. I don't think I could have ever done that.

I eventually managed to calm myself down enough for my brain to relax, now I'm not as worked up as I was, I can feel my eyelids getting heavy. Knowing that I need to try get some sleep, I say goodnight to the guys and head up to the spare room that I normally stay in when I'm here, which is a lot, since I try to avoid home as much as possible. Deciding to take a quick shower, I head into the attached bathroom and turn the knob for the hot water, stripping off, I step into the scalding hot water and feel all of my muscles release all the tension

I've been holding today. My mind starts to wander back to Autumn, to how absolutely beautiful she is. She's started to fill out a little more over the last few weeks in the hospital, and where she was once too skinny, she's started to gain a few pounds. The curves that were naturally there are now more pronounced, her face has also filled out more, more rounded rather than sharp, but all it's done is show off how beautiful she is, scars and all. My cock jerks against my stomach, precum glistening at the tip. Fisting my hand around my cock, I rub the precum into my sensitive tip and start to stroke myself slowly, tightening my fist at the base before loosening it as I move my fist in strokes. Placing one hand on the tile wall, I look down at my hard cock and imagine my baby girl on her knees for me, looking up at me with her soft hazel eyes, sparking with lust at the idea of being at my mercy, I'd gather her hair in my fist gently not wanting to hurt her and guide my hard cock into her pretty little mouth, coaxing her to open for me, with her tongue out to lap at my precum. Stroking my cock, a little tighter, I imagine what her soft moans would be like, as she takes me further into her mouth, focusing on the tip of my cock with her tongue, swirling it around the tip and then taking me back into her mouth, further down into her throat with every inch. Fuck. I'm going to be a wreck if she ever lets me fuck her mouth, just imagining it has my cock jerking in my hand, weeping at the tip, because I'm so turned on by the image. Making my strokes faster, I imagine her pulling back with a smirk as she uses her hand to stroke me, her mouth open with her tongue out, ready to catch all of my release for her to swallow down. Grunting, my hips flex forward as I fuck my hand into release, my cum splashing onto the shower walls. Sagging my head against the wall, I blow out a breath, my legs feel shaky like I've just done an intense workout. Fucking hell, I feel like a teenager again, I can't remember the last time I came that hard, grabbing the shower head I clean off the tile, and finish up my shower. Getting out, I head back to my room with my towel around my waist and get dried, then change into my grey pyjama bottoms in case I need to get up for Autumn at any point in the night. Climbing into the bed, I settle down and soon I'm drifting off to sleep.

Screaming has me throwing my covers off and sprinting out of the bedroom towards her. Her harrowing screams echoing throughout the house, as she screams out for her sister.

“Chloe! No please, please don’t leave me!” she pleads as I reach her bedroom door, I can hear the others thundering footsteps, alerting me to their incoming presence. Striding into her room, I sink down on the mattress next to her, my hand hovering over her, not sure what to do. This is the first nightmare she’s had in weeks, that’s gotten past the point of whimpers, since we’ve always been there to help her as soon as we notice, but we left her tonight, I don’t even fucking know why, probably because of Kelvin’s insistence that she’d be ok now she’s home.

Dominic comes rushing into the room, his fist tightened around his favourite knife that he always seems to have on him, even when we can’t see it.

“Is she ok? What’s happened?” he rapidly fires at me, as his eyes wildly flick around the room, looking for the problem.

“Just a nightmare man” I reply.

“What do we do?” he looks so sad, his gaze looking her over slowly, making sure she’s not harmed physically.

Autumn continues to cry out for her little sister, begging her not to go. My heart is hurting for her because we can’t fix this. “I don’t know, I don’t want to wake her up.”

“Fuck it.” Atlas says from the doorway where the others are gathered, looking sleep ruffled. He strides into the bedroom and sits on her right side, then he starts to stroke her hair while softly singing to her again, he’s singing too quietly for us to hear, but she seems to stop screaming at the sound. She’s still fitful, her nails dig into her forearm, making crescent wounds into her wrist as she lets out small whimpers, like she’s in pain. Deciding I can’t watch this anymore without doing something I get into the left side, under the covers and start to stroke my thumb over her face, focusing on her nose, since it seems to settle her more the longer I do it.

“Why don’t you all get covers and pillows and sleep on the floor? I don’t think any of us want to go anywhere tonight” I tell the others. They all nod, before heading off to do as I’ve told them. Brenn hangs by the door, while Dominic stands at the foot of the bed, just staring at Autumn.

“I don’t like seeing her hurt Tobias, it physically hurts me to see how broken she looks like this, knowing my dad knew how bad her mom was.” Brenn gets out, his voice thick with emotion.

“I know man, I do. It hurts me too, maybe not as much as you, but I hate seeing her hurting like this.”

“I’m going to go get my stuff too, I can’t be away from her.”

“I get it, go, we’ve got her.”

Nodding his thanks, he heads out of the room. Dominic still stands there frozen.

“Hey Dominic, you ok there, buddy?” I ask him.

“Hmm.” He grunts out noncommittally, his eyes quickly flicking to me before they focus back on her.

“Dominic. Why don’t you go get Bun from the bag for her? I’m sure it’ll help comfort her a bit more.” Atlas pipes up quickly, before going back to humming the song he was singing to Autumn. She’s finally relaxed more in our arms, somehow looking more exhausted. How long was she stuck in that nightmare for?

“Yeah... yeah, I can do that. I’ll get Bun for her.” Dominic says, still seeming a bit lost to his thoughts.

“You think the nightmares will ever stop?” I ask Atlas.

“Maybe eventually, I think she has a long way to go first though, before she gets to that stage, but with time and hopefully when we get rid of Jane, she can start her journey to heal from everything.”

Dominic comes back over to the bed with Bun, instead of passing it to one of us though, he reaches over me and tucks him into Autumn’s arms. She instinctively pulls the blue bunny

teddy closer to her, a few tears trickle out of her closed eyelids, before she softly rasps out “I’m so sorry Chlo.”

Dominic hastily wipes a tear away from his face, he might be a little off, but Dominic has always felt the most out of all of us, he feels emotions so extremely that it’s easy for him to get addicted to something, to become obsessed, without ever realising it. “I hate seeing her so sad.” he says.

“Me too, but all we can do is be there for her right now. Why don’t you go get your stuff and come sleep...” before I can even finish my sentence, Dominic is climbing onto the bed, and basically curls up at the bottom like a dog, he has her Oogie boogie plush in his arms. Raising my eyebrow at him, he just shrugs his shoulders before looking back to Autumn like he can’t bear too not to. His gaze is filled with longing for her, but he would never push her, none of us would, anything that could ever happen will only ever be at her pace.

The others file back into the bedroom, Sebastian carrying a spare blanket that he throws over Dominic. “Knew he wouldn’t leave, so I grabbed it for the bastard” Sebastian says before settling his stuff on the floor with the others and getting comfortable.

Autumn has stop being fitful since Dominic got onto the bed, and everyone else has fallen asleep, but I can’t, far too worried that she’ll start having another nightmare and we won’t wake up in time to stop it before she’s screaming again.

A shadow at the door alerts me to Kelvin’s approach, he stands there for a moment before deciding to enter the room. The once asleep Dominic now wakes up sensing someone in the room, his knife once again appearing in his hand, but he makes no move to use it yet, he just lays there pretending to still be asleep. If I weren’t always watching everyone’s movements, I probably would have never noticed. Kelvin approaches the bed, causing Dominic’s hand to flex around the blade. “Is she ok?” Kelvin asks.

“Aswell as can be expected. Was just a nightmare, but we didn’t get to stop it like we did in the hospital before she started screaming, since we all went to our own rooms.”

“Hmm, hopefully with time she stops having the nightmares, especially now she’s back.”

This man is genuinely delusional right now, the Kelvin I know would never have thought this was as simple as a fix as this. “You know she needs therapy Kelvin; she’s been abused and lost her sister in a horrific way. Just because she’s home, doesn’t mean she’s cured.” I tell him sternly. Looking away from him, I see Dominic still laid at the bottom of the bed, but staring at Kelvin through slits in his eyes, his bright blue eyes almost glowing with rage, the moonlight leaking through the curtains highlighting his features. Shivering out of pure discomfort at the look on his face, I genuinely fear for Kelvin’s life right now knowing the only reason that blade isn’t buried in his jugular, is because he’s Autumn’s dad and Dominic knows it would upset her too much. Kelvin totally oblivious to the threat that’s currently tracking him as he moves closer to the bed, continues to move towards Autumn. He reaches his hand out to stroke her hair, but faster than I can blink Dominic is there with his knife pointing at his adam’s apple. “Don’t even fucking think about touching her.” Dominic grits out, his voice low and harsh, a warning.

“She’s my daughter Dominic.” Kelvin warns him.

“Is she? Because no decent father would have allowed his child to be abused under his roof, with the lame excuse of being too busy to be around to know if she was acting up.”

“I didn’t know the full extent of it. You have to understand, I love this girl more than life, and I’ll always regret not stepping in when Jane lived here, but I’m trying now.”

“Trying now doesn’t make up for the fact she’s been abused her whole life Dad. It’s bad enough what happened to her when she was taken from here by Jane, but to know that she was hit so hard that she couldn’t sit down because me and Atlas got dirt on her dress, isn’t ok. You should have believed Mrs McKay, you knew Jane was a horrible bitch to me, so what was to say she wasn’t going to be a bitch to her own child.” Brenn sits up on the floor, glaring at his dad.



“I know it’s never going to be good enough, but I am so sorry I brought that woman into our lives.” Kelvin says to Brenn.

“I’m not Dad, because then I wouldn’t have Autumn. I only wish you got rid of her at the first sign of her being horrible to my Little Bear. If she gets hurt again under your watch, I’ll never forgive you, I hope you know that.”

Kelvin tries to nod, somehow coming to the realisation that Dominic’s knife is still pressed to his throat. “Remove the knife boy, remember who I am.”

Dominic laughs, removing the knife, he hides it again. Seriously, where the fuck does he put that thing. “I know exactly who you are *Kelvin*...” he sneers his name “You’re the bastard who allowed my Cupcake to be abused in her own home as a child. I lost any respect I had for you at that moment.” Dominic gets back to place at the bottom of the bed, showing Kelvin his back, a massive sign of disrespect, showing he doesn’t see him as a threat. Which in Dominic’s case is true, since he’s probably the biggest threat in this room, especially since Autumn is his longest obsession. Kelvin seeming to realise this is a losing battle, nods his head and makes his way back out of the room.

“We’ve got her Kelvin, don’t worry.” Zander tells him, before getting comfy again and closing his eyes.

“Fucking dickhead.” Dominic mutters under his breath causing me to huff out a laugh, which causes Autumn to stir a bit. Looking at her, her brow creases but Atlas hums a little and it soon smooths out. I look back up and Dominic has that creepy ass narrowed look trained on my face.

“What?” I whisper to him.

“Don’t disturb my Cupcake, she needs her sleep.”

“I didn’t mean to. You caught me by surprise with your stupid ass comment. Chill man, I’ve got her, I promise.”

He just nods his head, snuggles that stupid teddy, and drifts off back to sleep. Fucking scary ass motherfucker. His obsession is deadly, I really do think that if one of us, upset her even by

accident, we'd lose a body part. Something small like a finger or something, since he does reign it in slightly, but still.

Everyone has been asleep for hours now, I can't bring myself to fall asleep even if I am tired. So, I lay there, Autumn's shifted slightly and snuggled into my side more, Atlas has his arm wrapped around her middle, his head buried in her hair. I could be doing without Dominic being curled at the bottom like a dog, but Autumn seems calmer with him there so whatever she needs, she gets. Looking down at her face, I study her features, she's so unbelievably beautiful, my chest aches just thinking about what she's been through, knowing the pain that some of her scars carry, I want to help carry it for her, even if it makes my load heavier. I must sit here like a total creep, just watching her, looking at her chest moving, making sure she's breathing, subtly checking her heart rate every hour. It's not changed, but since we left the hospital, we've not had the monitor to help relieve me from this need to know that she's ok. Walking into her room triggered it and since that moment, I have watched every single movement she made, every twinge, every heartrate increase and every slight furrow her brow. She's so expressive with her expressions, she can't hide anything.

As I continue to stare at her, her eyelids flutter open. She looks slightly confused and tense for a moment until she breathes in and realises it's Atlas behind her, she looks up at me and jerks a little when she sees I'm awake and looking at her.

"How are you feeling Babygirl?" I ask her.

"O...ok" she croaks out.

Reaching behind me, I grab the bottle of water Zander left there for her. Uncapping it, I tip it up to her lips, the scenes I imagined in the shower coming to the front of my mind as she opens her lips. Shaking those away, because it really is not the time for that, I let her take a few sips before pulling it away.

"Good girl." I praise her, a pretty pink blush covers her cheeks, as she avoids eye contact with me.

"What time is it?"

“Around 4am, I think.”

“What are you both doing in here?”

“Full of questions, aren’t you?” I chuckle “You had a nightmare, woke up screaming and we all came to check on you. None of us wanted to leave, so we all decided to stay here with you in case you needed us.”

“All?”

Helping her sit up and extracting her from Atlas’s grip, I move the curtain that is at the head of the bed in front of the window to lighten the room with the moonlight more. She lets out a small giggle when she spots Dominic at the bottom of the bed, and then proceeds to tear up when she spots everyone else on the floor.

“You all really never wanted to leave me?” she asks, her voice quiet.

“Of course, not Babygirl, my heart broke hearing you scream, I hated not being able to help you. Atlas was the one who jumped into action and started to sing to you to help, but you didn’t fully relax until we all settled around you.”

I pull her back down so she’s laying down, then I lay my head on the pillow next to her, facing her. She’s shy and doesn’t know how to make eye contact with someone, but it’s to be expected with trauma.

“I’m sorry” she whispers to me. My eyebrows bunch together, and I can’t help but to scowl at her.

“What on earth could you be sorry for?”

“For disturbing you all, it can’t be comfortable to share a bed, or to sleep on the floor, and you were wide awake when I woke up. You need sleep too.”

“Listen to me Babygirl, I’m right where I want to be. The others too. You couldn’t get us to leave this room, even if you tried and it’s not your fault. It’s whoever put those nightmares there in the first place.”

“I’m still sorry.”

“And I’ll continue to tell you, you have nothing to apologise for. So how about we change the subject, before I spank your ass for apologising too much.”

“You wouldn’t.” She narrows her eyes at me, causing me to laugh.

“No Babygirl, I wouldn’t...” her face falls “Now none of that. I wouldn’t right now, you aren’t ready for any of that, but make no mistake Autumn, you are absolutely perfect and that hasn’t escaped any of our notice.”

She looks away again, not knowing what to say, her eyebrows and forehead all wrinkled up in thought. We lay there in silence for a while before she speaks again, tearing me away from my thoughts. She turns her eyes back to mine, our faces mere inches from one another.

“What was your childhood like?” she asks me. My heart beats faster in my chest, my mind warring on whether we should tell her or not, when her own childhood was so much worse. I don’t want her to think I’m weak, or to look at me any differently but she will find out eventually and I would rather it was from me than someone else.

“Um, it wasn’t pleasant Babygirl, I don’t want to potentially trigger you by talking about it.”

“You don’t have to tell me, but I don’t mind. I promise.” She twines our little fingers together, something that has slowly become our thing over the last few weeks, much to the other’s amusement. Focusing my gaze on her eyes, I notice she has a small gold flake in the inner rim of her left eye, surrounded by green and amber, her eyes are so entrancing that I think I could just stare at them constantly. Deciding I need to get this over with, I squeeze our fingers and then pour out my trauma for her to decide if I’m enough to keep around.

“I grew up with a really strict father, who was in the military, paratroopers to be exact. He was my hero for so long, until I seen him beating my mother one day...” Autumn lets out a small gasp, a small tear leaks from her eye “It’s ok Babygirl, I don’t need to continue.”

“No, I’m sorry, my heart just hurts imagining you, as a little boy witnessing that. Please continue.”

Nodding I continue on “I was sent to a military school at the age of 7, I was there for 8 years. It was horrible, but it was better than home. The lesser of two evils y’know? My mother ran away a few years later, leaving me behind with no way to contact her. I was heartbroken, I couldn’t understand why she didn’t love me enough to take me with her. I understood why she left and why she was afraid, but I don’t think I could ever understand why she left me with my father, after he beat her constantly. Maybe part of her believed that he wouldn’t harm me but without my mother to beat on, I became his new target when he was angry and when I was home from the school.”

“Do you still see him?”

“I do, I still stay with him. I try to spend as much time here as possible, your dad even gave me my own room. I only go home when I know I have to.”

“I hate that for you Spider-Man, I wish you never knew what the pain was like.”

“I feel the same about you Babygirl, it’s probably why I always have to be watching you, I worry so much that you’ll get hurt again. My heart hurts just thinking about it.” She opens her mouth “And don’t you dare try to apologise.” I say before she can, causing her to huff out a small laugh.

“Is your father still in the military?”

“No Babygirl, he’s not. He was dishonourably discharged when I was 15. It’s how we ended up here. My father has a thing against woman, and he was placed in a squad with one who was known for being quite opiniated when it came to planning things, there’s absolutely nothing wrong with that obviously but my father can’t handle being ‘emasculated’ in front of others, it sends him into a horrible rage. He beat this poor woman nearly to death, when she disagreed with him, so he was discharged, and I was made to leave the school. We moved here because my father wasn’t welcome anywhere in the small town we were from, and that’s how I met your brother and Atlas.”

“I’m glad you met them, from what Atlas told me in the hospital, you are all like brothers.”

“I don’t know where I’d be without them, honestly. Atlas and Brenn picked up on my limp one day and asked me what happened. I told them, because I was so tired of being my father’s punching bag and feeling alone in this world with the secret. They told your dad, who took it upon himself to have a ‘word’ with my father and he’s never laid a hand on me since.”

She dislodges her pinkie from mine, and I try not to panic. Praying she won’t reject me after all this, but maybe she sees me as weak now, for not protecting myself and getting her dad to do it for me. Before my thoughts can go any further, she wraps her arm around my neck and pulls me into a hug, and squeezes like she can somehow squish all my broken parts back together. I feel like one of those playdough sets that children have, where they mix all the colours and it turns into one big ball of multicoloured pieces that you can never separate, and somehow, I feel like she’s left a little part of her playdough inside of mine, so she knows I’m not alone. I wrap my arm around her waist and pull her closer to me, squeezing her tight but not too tight that I hurt her, I really don’t want to end up at the other end of Dominic’s knife.

I don’t tell her that her dad actually threatened my father with murder if he was to ever lay a hand on me again, or that my father was so scared that he actually apologised when I got home that night. It didn’t last long, he turned to berating me constantly and putting me down with words rather than his fists, but that’s fine because I can handle that much more, than I could handle a belt to the back. It’s why I covered up my scars there, I had so much shame about it all and I couldn’t bear to look at them, feeling shame whenever I seen them.

We spend the next few hours talking about everything and nothing. She opens up more about Chloe and the things they used to do, and I tell her how I first met Atlas in school, how he nearly bulldozed me over in the hallway because he’s a tall bastard, he seen me wince and then did what he did with her, where he declared us friends and that’s how I found myself in the little group of friends that turned into brothers. She finally

drifts off to sleep in my arms, Atlas at some point finding his way back to her, his arm twining around her waist again and his face buried into her hair again, making her softly smile in her sleep. I stroke my fingers over her forehead, down her nose and over her lips, memorising this moment between us and how she sat and listened to me and my story with no judgement. She's amazing and I couldn't be more in awe of her than I am.

I sit there for a few more hours before Dominic stirs at the bottom of the bed, he cracks his eyes open and the first thing he does is roam his gaze over, nodding to himself, he sits up then looks me over. "You haven't slept, have you?" he asks me, his voice thick.

"Couldn't. She woke up again last night, not from a nightmare before you freak out. I think she was just warm, but we ended up talking for a while before she finally fell back asleep. I didn't want to sleep in case she woke up again and needed someone."

"She could wake up one of us, if she needed someone though." he says with a scowl on his face, like it's the most reasonable thing in the world.

"Ah but she won't, because she feels like a burden enough right now. This way when I was awake, it was enough for her to feel comfortable to open up a bit more. I told her about my father, and she pulled me into a hug."

"You did? Fuck man, I'm happy you opened up. Are you ok?"

"Yeah. She didn't look at me any differently either, so I'm ecstatic."

"Of course, our girl wouldn't. She's too nice for that, for God's sake, she thanked the nurses every time they took blood. Who does that?"

Chuckling at the memory, I shake my head at this girl. She really did thank them every time they took blood from her for further tests. They were sticking her with needles, and she would offer the kindest thankyou I've ever heard, and when we would throw her the weird ass looks, she deserved because

if I were her, I would be sick of it by now. She would just shrug and tell us that they were just doing their job and without those tests being done, they might miss something that's wrong with her. And that's how the nurses ended up leaving her room, chuckling with a chorus of thank-yous from all of us following them out.

Everyone wakes up after that, heading out of the room, after checking on her for showers and food. I wait until she wakes up, not being able to bring myself to leave her, Atlas having the same idea, who only leaves to use the toilet before coming back with coffee for the both of us, while we sit on either side of her waiting for her to wake up.

She eventually flutters open her eyelids; her hazel eyes seem to brighten when she spots us still in bed with her. She graces us with a soft smile "You didn't get up?" she asks.

"Couldn't bear to leave you Pumpkin, you looked so peaceful and it's better than being out there with all those dickheads." Atlas says, smiling down at her, where she's still cuddled up between us. Her eyes soften marginally as she gazes up at him, I feel like I'm intruding, but I can't bear to bring myself to leave still.

"Thank you for staying with me last night, you didn't have to." She tells him.

"What did I tell you last night Babygirl?" I ask her.

"That you were all where you wanted to be?" she replies, her forehead doing that adorable scrunch up again. Unable to help myself, I reach over to smooth it out, but before I can touch her forehead, she flinches and screws her eyes shut.

"Shit Babygirl, I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to scare you. I would never hit you; I swear."

Autumn takes a deep breath, and slowly releases it. She opens her eyes again. "I'm sorry."

"Again, what did I tell you last night?"

"That I have nothing to be sorry for and that if I keep apologising, you'll spank me." She deadpans, causing Atlas to choke and splutter on the sip of coffee he was drinking.



“You said what?!” he looks at me, murder in his eyes.

“Relax you overgrown teddy bear, he wouldn’t actually.” Autumn tells him before I can reply, causing me to start laughing, which causes Atlas to start and then we both hear the most beautiful sound ever, where Autumn starts to laugh, her head turned into the pillow to try hide it.

“You think you are so funny, don’t you Pumpkin?” he says, his eyes narrowed playfully.

“Obviously.” She deadpans again before she bursts into another fit of giggles.

Smiling softly at her, I can’t believe how carefree she looks right now, laughing and joking with us, like she would have had she been here when we all became a group. I can’t help but wonder what she would be like, had she never went through what she has, would she be like the other girls at the college? Or would she still be herself, minus all the trauma she went through. Would Atlas even be the same, if he had never lost her? Would we have ever been friends? I know it’s not healthy to play the what if game, but I can’t help but wish this beautiful girl beside me, got to have a normal life, rather than what she had. We still don’t know everything, but that’s ok we’ll learn more as time goes, we have no rush.

# Chapter 18

## Autumn

It's been a few months since I came to stay with Dad, I finally feel more settled in and I'm more healed, my thoughts aren't any better, and I feel like by the day they are only getting darker. The guys have all been a massive help though, staying by my side constantly, I swear I always have a shadow, normally it's Dominic, he's like a stray dog that I brought home, he's constantly there, watching, but also ready to be the guy I need to make me laugh when I feel the dark thoughts dragging me down.

Sebastian continues to watch movies with me, he's not much of a talker normally, but oh boy, if you ask him about a movie fact, he can talk through the whole duration of it. He's always researching my mom, Jane has been missing since the fire, and there's still no sign of her, which is super frustrating, but there's nothing more we can do until he finds a sighting of her.

Zander has been my mother hen, constantly plotting with Mrs McKay about what to feed me, what contains the highest carbs, proteins, etc. They've both been on a mission to get me back to a normal weight, and as of my last check in with Doc yesterday, they succeeded, which means hopefully they'll back off a bit.

Tobias has been my best friend, we've bonded over our shared trauma and he's always there for me when a panic attack sets in, ready to talk me through it. I don't think I would have been able to get through the last few months without any of them, but Tobias always seems to know what I need the most.

And Atlas, I can't forget him, he's been my rock. Sitting with me in my appointments, helping me with physio since the nerves were ruined in my feet the night of the fire. His ma and da have come over weekly to see me again which I loved, Mrs Moore enveloped me in the best hug, I may have shed a few tears in the process, but she just wiped my tears away and pulled me into the kitchen, to make me the hot cocoa she was famous for. Me and Atlas are closer than ever, the crush I had

on him as a young girl, has returned with a vengeance, but I also have thoughts about the others. Shaking my head away from those thoughts again, I know they'd never be interested in someone as broken as I am, which I totally understand but every time I think of it, my heart hurts, these boys have been the glue that's held me together these last few months, and the idea of losing them or watching them with another girl makes bile rise in my throat.

Deciding to distract myself from those thoughts, I make my way outside to the lake. It's February now so still warm but compared to what we're used to, it's a little chilly. Grabbing one of the guy's hoodies that they left here, I pull it over my head and make my way out through the double doors, I make the small walk to the lake, enjoying the peace and quiet while it lasts. The guys are here every day after college and try to stay overnight as much as possible. Tobias and Atlas practically live with us, but Sebastian, Zander and Dominic have parents who would like to see them now and again, especially after they spent so long with me in New Mexico.

Dad appears at my side a little while later, startling me out of my thoughts.

"Can I sit down here?" he asks, with a strained smile.

Things have been rocky between us since I've been back, he's so convinced that I should be ok now I'm home. That I just don't have the heart to tell him, that no matter where I am, I still don't have the one person who I called home with me and that makes me not want to be here, or anywhere for that matter. I have daily thoughts about joining her, but I also have the thoughts that I want to live, that I want to stick around, for my family and for the guys. The panic in their eyes when they can't find me, or when I have a panic attack makes me feel guilty, but I can't help it, I just need time which they understand, but Dad doesn't.

"Sure." I curtly reply, knowing he's going to just upset all the progress I just made, quieting my mind.

"You start college next week..." I open my mouth to reply but he cuts me off "You said you had an interest in psychology, so

I've signed you up for that, everything is sorted, you just need to turn up."

"Why didn't you talk to me first?" I ask him, the anger I feel simmering under the surface.

"Honestly Autumn, I get you went through something hard, but you're home now, you're safe. You need to get on with your life and actually try to live. You just need some structure and you'll be fine; I swear."

Is this man for real right now?

"I went through something hard, are you for real? How did you feel when I was missing?!"

"Devastated, obviously. But I also continued with my life."

"Right. You were devastated and I was only missing. I lost Chlo forever; she isn't coming back. There is no pretty reunion in a few years, there's nothing. All I have of her is her ashes, and you want to sit there and tell me that I only went through something hard, but that I need to just get on with it, just like you did, right?"

"Don't go twisting my words Autumn, you know what I mean. You deserve to move on with your life, she's not here, but that doesn't mean you need to stop living."

"I'll go to your pretty little college Dad, but you don't get to tell me how to grieve for her."

"I wouldn't. I'm not. I just want what's best for you and your grief for her is holding you back."

Unable to listen to him anymore, I get up from where I was sat and make my way back to the house, leaving him sitting there. His words are on repeat in my head as I trek up to my room, shutting and locking the door behind me, intent on having a hot shower to try clear my head again. Unlocking the new iPhone that Sebastian set up for me, I pull up Spotify and start my 'hype shower playlist' because I can't be bothered to get out of the shower every 5 minutes, to change the song because it's not fitting the shower vibes.

Getting into the shower, I submerge my head into the water, letting it drain away all thoughts of choking my dad out, because that man has been *infuriating* the last few months, I understand he just wants what is best for me, but boy oh boy is he in denial about my mental health. *Sweet but psycho by Ava Max* comes on and I start to sing along, using this shower time for an impromptu singing session, I must spend the next thirty minutes in the shower, singing, shaving, and just having a little self-care, to make myself feel normal again. Finally deciding that I'm now smooth enough and pink enough from how hot I had the shower, I get out, wrap a towel around myself and make my way back into the bedroom.

Stepping into the room, I let out a startled scream at seeing Dominic lazily chilling on my bed. "Dominic! I swear I locked that door." I shout at him, clutching the towel closer to my body.

"Don't you make a sexy little lobster." He chuckles, his eyes raking over my body, turning heated as they lock onto a drop of water making its way between my breasts.

"Dominic! I locked that door for a reason. How did you even get in here?" I try to tell him sternly, but my lips twitch from his comment.

"As if a flimsy lock could keep me away from my Cupcake." He rolls his eyes.

"No maybe not, but a locked door normally indicates that I don't want anyone in here. I was in the shower... naked."

"I am aware of that Cupcake; I heard your lovely singing session. Beautiful voice by the way, I wonder if you'll sound that musical when I have my head between your legs." His words making me gasp, but I can't ignore the little flutter I get in my lower stomach, making me clench my thighs together.

"I can't deal with you right now. I need to get changed." I turn away from him and head to my walk-in closet, grabbing a black pair of shorts, one of Atlas's old band t-shirts that go down to my knees cause the man is a giant at 6'5, compared to my short ass.

Heading back into the room, I see that Dominic hasn't moved from his spot, his eyes trailing me as I make my way around the room. Chlo's ashes sit on top of my dresser with her blanket that's still charred and Bun there for comfort. I sometimes bring him to bed, but only on the nights I'm sleeping alone, more often than not I have the guys here, all spread out, even Brenn sleeps in here, I still feel awful that they sleep on the floor, but after I broke down crying one night, they dragged in mattress's and now my room looks like it's padded, because there's like four on the floor at all times now.

Picking up my dirty clothes, I place them in the hamper and head out of the room down to the kitchen, soft footsteps behind me letting me know that my lost shadow has proceeded to follow me.

Abruptly stopping when I feel him practically walking on my heels, he doesn't stop in time and proceeds to slam into my back, his hands falling to my hips.

"Stop walking so close behind me, you can walk perfectly fine right next to me." I tell him, his hands flex but he stays where he is.

"But if I don't walk behind you, how can I look at your ass." He tells me, sounding so serious. Turning my head so I can look up at him, his blue eyes sparkling with amusement, flicking down to my lips. He's always flirting with me, but I can't take him seriously, he flirts with everyone, including Mrs McKay but I'm sure that's just so she keeps making him her cookies. He also would never be interested in someone like me, this boy is so beautiful, he could be a model. Unable to answer him, I just keep looking at him, why does the cute as fuck one, have to look like a fucking runway model? My demon thoughts rise to the surface again, imagining him pressed against me in another way.

Dominic leans down and kisses the tip of my nose, before righting me and patting me on my ass. "Come on, let's feed you."

Deciding not to say anything, because I'm sure I look like I did after I got out the shower, I continue my walk down to the kitchen. Walking in I see Zander and Mrs McKay, heads bent together over the worktop, no doubt plotting about what they can feed me tonight, to help with more weight gain. Clearing my throat, they both swivel round to face me with guilty looks on their faces.

"Hey Sugar..." Mrs McKay greets me "you hungry?"

"Starving." I tell her with a smile. Her face fills with relief, the first few weeks here I found it really difficult to eat multiple meals a day, only being used to one, since my priority was always making sure Chlo was fed.

"Hey Princess, how you doing?" Zander asks me, as he fusses over the ingredients for tonight's meal.

"Great honestly, had my final check up with Doc yesterday."

"Oh yeah, and what did he say?" Zander replies, while batting away Dominics hand from the warm cookies, that Mrs McKay just pulled out.

"He said that I'm at a healthy weight, that my healing is coming along good and that I just need to continue the physio for my feet, and I should be totally fine." I tell him with a wide smile, waiting for it all to click together in his head. No sooner have the words left my mouth, the wooden spoon he was holding drops into the bowl of flour, causing it to cover the worktops. He lifts his head, and his eyes hold a new intensity to them. He takes a step around the worktop towards me.

"He said you were at a healthy weight?" he asks, as he takes another step, making me gulp.

"Yup." Popping the P to emphasise.

"And that you are doing good now? That you are fit and healthy?"

"Well, I wouldn't say fit, I still feel like my lungs are collapsing every time I walk up those stairs but yes, apparently as healthy as I can be, that was Doc's words. Why?"

Zander doesn't say anything else, before he closes up the distance between us, drags me off of the stool I was sat on and into his arms, my legs dangling in the air as he spins me around. He places me back onto my feet and I stumble from being so dizzy from the spinning, he grabs my arm to steady me before pulling me back into his arms, crushing my head to his chest. My arms instinctively go around his waist, holding him just as tight, inhaling his scent in because this man's aftershave makes me go weak at the knees, but he also sort of smells like bread and rosemary, which I'm assuming is dinner.

"Are you ok?" I ask him when he makes no move to release me.

"Yeah Princess, I'm fine, just so glad to hear that you're doing good now." He tells me, his body still moulded to mine, not helping the current demon thoughts that are in my head after Dominic's heated gaze earlier.

"Ok great, so can I be released now? Cause I'd really like to breathe again."

"Shit. Sorry." He exclaims as he releases me, pulling me back, his hands on my shoulders as he looks me over and then graces me with the most blinding smile ever, pulling at the scar on his face and showing off his slightly imperfect teeth, the little chip on his front tooth, which makes him look ever more rugged but no less handsome. He looks like the WWE star Roman Reigns, but his hair more brown than black, his hair currently pulled up into a messy bun, that makes me envious. Seriously this man's hair puts most girls I've ever known to shame, I wonder if he'd help me with my hair routine. Because obviously just shampoo and conditioner isn't cutting it.

He leads me back to the stool, and places me back onto it like actually places me on it next to Dominic. These men I swear. Dominic leans over the worktop and looks my face over. "You ok there, lobster?"

"I will kill you Dominic, don't test me." I tell him, glaring at him, my face flaming.



“Don’t tease me Cupcake, I’m already hard from looking at your ass.”

“Idiot.” I shove him away from me, still glaring at him. Stupid boy, with his stupid comments, that make my heart feel funny, probably just anxiety, not feelings, nope.

“Leave her alone demon boy. And no talk like that in my kitchen.” Mrs McKay admonishes him.

“We all know it’s more like Zander’s kitchen now Mrs McKay.” Dominic tells her, causing me and Zander to let out a groan. I swear he really does have a death wish.

“Now listen here...” She trails off, as my dad comes into the room with the others. Brenn and the others making sure to give me a hug and a kiss on the top of my head, before taking their seats. We all discuss our days, and dad informs them that I’m starting college with them next week, I’ve been doing some of the work from home anyway since I’ve been here because I was so bored, so I’m not totally behind, only really in the actual psychology class.

We spend the next week just chilling out, the guys at college during the day, and all of them coming over at night to spend time with each other. On the night before college starts, I walk into the sitting room to find the guys furiously whispering to each other, my footsteps alerting them to my presence, they all abruptly stop. Pausing next to the sofa, I look them all over, taking in their furrowed brows and the tightness around their eyes.

“Are you all ok?” I ask tentatively.

“Yeah Babygirl, we’re fine. We wanted to talk to you about something though.”

“Oh.” I say, taking a step back, ready to bolt from the room. Whatever they want to talk to me about, doesn’t seem good and honestly, I don’t want to deal with that right now.

“Nuh uh Cupcake, get your cute booty over here so we can discuss something with you.”

My feet stay frozen where they are. “Is it bad?” I ask them, my voice smaller than I like. I really don’t want them to be upset

with me, and from the way they were all whispering to each other, it doesn't seem like it's going to be good.

"No Babygirl, I promise it's nothing bad. Just come sit down and we'll talk." Tobias coaxes.

"Oh, for god sake." Comes from the doorway, and then I'm in the air, landing in a hard lap. Strong arms wrap around my waist which could only be Atlas because of how big they are, when I go to stand up again, I'm pulled back down into his lap, huffing out in frustration, I blow a bit of hair that fell into my eyes, and glare up at my brother.

"Was that really necessary?!" I exclaim.

"Apparently so. Listen to what they have to say Little Bear." He tells me before levelling all the guys with a stare "If you upset my sister, I'll kill you all in the most horrific way after I torture you all for days, do you understand?"

"I'll help if they hurt Cupcake." Dominic pipes up, nodding his head along with Brenn, like threatening people with torture is the most natural thing. Brenn just nods his head after all the guys give him their agreements and leaves the room, leaving me in Atlas's arms. Squirming in my spot, when all of them turn to look at me, all of their eyes hold an intensity to them that wasn't there before. The silence drags on for a bit, making me more uncomfortable by the minute, the guys all looking at each other doing that freaky eye communication thing, that they do so often.

"Can someone say something before I bolt out of here, because you are all making me freak out with the silence." I tell them, I try to get out of Atlas's lap again so I can look at them all for this conversation, but he just holds me tighter.

"Please stay. I need to hold you for this conversation." He all but begs me.

"Ok. You're scaring me now Atty. Please tell me what's going on."

"Fuck's sake. Sunshine, we just want to talk to you about potentially starting a relationship between us all." Sebastian grunts out.

“I’m sorry, I don’t think I quite heard you right. A relationship? Between us all? I’m confused, can someone please elaborate.”

“Look Pumpkin, we’re all interested in you, have been for a while but we all promised that we wouldn’t bring up a relationship until you were better. We have all been flirting with you the last few months, and we are all in awe of how strong you are. In the last few months, we’ve all been slowly falling for you, and I can’t speak for the others when it comes to the L word, but we want to try this. If you don’t, then we’ll all go back to being just friends, but think about it please.”

“How would this work?” I ask, because my brain feels like it’s about to implode right now from all this information, how could these perfect men be interested in a girl like me. I’m so broken that I don’t think I can be put back together but these guys have certainly tried over the last few months.

“Well, we’d all take you out on dates, let you get to know us all one on one, and then we’d also spend time together as a group. I know it’s unconventional, but we don’t care. We all want you, and I love them all like brothers, no point in us fighting over a girl when we can share her.” Zander says from his spot across from me.

“You all want me? Truly? Even though I’m broken and covered in scars.”

“I’ve been obsessed with you since I first saw you Cupcake, and you cemented that when you said you didn’t want to get rid of me, the day we left the hospital.” Dominic tells me, giving me that lazy sexy smirk he always does, his blonde hair messier than usual.

“You’re the only person I let join me during my movie time, it makes me happy. I’d like to try sunshine.” Sebastian says.

“You’ve become my best friend...” Tobias says causing both Dominic and Atlas to let out small growls, Tobias ignores them though and continues on “these last few months, and we both understand the trauma that we’ve both experienced. I’ve been enamoured by your strength this whole time Autumn, and I want to bask in it for a little while longer, if you’ll let

me.” He tells me this so sincerely, that I cry a little. This man is so sweet, I tap Atlas’s hand to let me up and make my way over to him, drop into his lap and wrap my arms around his neck, just like I did the night I woke up with him in my bed, the others around us, while he told me his story. He wraps his arms around me and pulls me into a crushing hug, his head buried in my neck. He releases me, and I turn around, staying where I am to face the last two.

Zander looks me over, giving me a small smile when he realises, I’m ok. “I’ve liked you since you got out of that hospital Princess, watching you in that hospital, how kind you were to all the nurses, even when they were prodding you every moment of the day, you were still kind to them, always thanking them. But you also have this fire in you, that I’ve only watched burn brighter since you woke up. I’m in awe of you. Please give us all a chance to make you the happiest girl in the world. You deserve it.”

I turn to my last man, who just looks at me with so much hope in his eyes, but I can also see sadness, as if he has made up his mind that I’m going to say no.

Deciding we both need to have a private talk without the others here, I ask them to give us a few moments alone. They all leave, kissing me on the head, Dominic of course takes it further by kissing me on the corner of my lips, making me smile at his antics. Tobias sets me on the sofa next to Atlas before he kisses my forehead, then leaves the room, shutting the door behind him before I can ask him too.

# Chapter 19

## Atlas

*'I Guess I'm In Love – Clinton Kane'*

Taking a deep breath, I turn to the girl I'm so madly in love with that if she rejects me, I might just break. She's been my whole world since we were kids and I first claimed her as my best friend, I took one look at her on that playground, her messy pigtails and the wide toothy smile and some part of my brain instinctively told me that she was mine. I've been hers since that day too, she may not have known it, but she's it for me, even if she doesn't want me, I don't have it in me to ever try move on with someone else. I'll always be there waiting for her, hoping that she might change her mind, but if she doesn't, I'll still be her Atty, her best friend, her rock.

Autumn continues to stare at me as I have my mini freak out, she sits there patiently, her eyes shining back at me with unshed tears, she doesn't cry much anymore, she holds it in more and steels herself, but I know she's still sad about her loss of Chlo. I can feel my hands shaking in my lap.

"Can I speak first and then if you have any questions, you can ask them once I'm done? I feel like if you interrupt me, I won't be able to get out what I want to say." I ask her, hoping my voice doesn't betray my nerves.

"Sure Atty." She tells me sincerely.

"I was in love with you when we were just kids, I claimed you as my best friend because I didn't understand the intense feelings that I held for you, I mean we were literally just children, but then you were my best friend, the only person I wanted to spend my time with. I couldn't explain why I punched Tommy Parish in the face when we were nine, just because he had a crush on you..." Autumn giggles and my nerves relax a fraction "but then you went missing and my whole world came crumbling around me, I was beside myself and my ma and da couldn't console me. How do they tell their ten-year-old son that the girl he was convinced was his

soulmate, might not come home. Then Brenn gets that call from your dad saying you had been found, and I'm ecstatic but then I'm broken again because it wasn't a conversation about a reunion but a conversation about potentially saying goodbye to you. My heart broke all over again Pumpkin, I went from having hope that you'd come home one day, talking about you constantly to the others that I'm sure they were sick of it, to having to potentially lose my soul mate again, before I even got to tell her I loved her."

She gasps, her hand flying to her mouth as those tears gather in her eyes, ready to fall. She goes to say something, but I rush out the rest of what I was saying, because if she speaks, I know I won't be able to finish.

"You're home now, and it's been the greatest few months of my life, just having you back and being able to hold you in my arms but it's also been torture, because I want so much more from you, from us. My feelings for you never left, I've never even looked at another girl, never mind anything else. You have been my heart and soul since I first met you, and you will continue to be until the day I die. *Please* give me a chance, give all of us a chance and I promise you will be the happiest girl in the world, I will give you the world, if you ask me to."

"Are you finished?" she asks me, my face falls, I feel like I can't breathe, I knew my feeling were too intense for her, that I've pushed it too far and now she's going to reject all of us because of my stupidity. She must notice the expression on my face change because the next moment, she's climbing into my lap, straddling me. "You really loved me all this time?" she queries, as she lifts my chin with her hand. I look into her soft hazel eyes, and I see the hope there, all I can do is nod, feeling lost for words right now, like I used them all up in my speech.

"You know, I never forgot the boy with the midnight black hair and emerald-green eyes, that has forever been my favourite shade of green. You might not be the little boy from my memories anymore Atty, but you are the very overgrown one that I love."

My head jerks back, my heart thumps heavily in my chest, unsure if I heard her correctly.

“You love me?” I croak out, I think I’m going to have a heart attack, my heart is beating so fast.

“Always have, always will.”

I crush her to my chest, and just hold her there. We sit like that for a while, just basking in the comfort of having each other in our arms. She eventually pulls back, her eyes shining with love for me. Her gaze roams over my face and body, her fingers trailing over my cheeks, down my neck, making me swallow heavily. Her fingers continue to explore, gliding over my shoulders and down my arms. Stopping on the tattoo’s that peek out of my t-shirt. She looks at me with a silent question, so I roll up my sleeve to my shoulder, so she can see it properly.

My first ever tattoo looks back at her. A maple tree with its leaves in fall colours, etched into the bark is our initials in a heart, with pumpkins in orange, white and green surrounding the bottom. Her fingers stall over the heart, taking on a small tremble. Reaching for her hand, I pull them into mine and stroke my thumb over her knuckles, my hands dwarf hers, but I wouldn’t have it any other way.

“I couldn’t live without having a part of you with me. The moment Dominic started tattooing other people, I was his first customer for this piece. That wasn’t enough for me though, and I then got this one.” I reach behind my head and pull my shirt off with one hand, Autumn’s eyes turn heated, and I can’t help but smirk as she admires my body. “Eyes over here angel.” I tell her as I point to my chest, on my right pec sits a rusted compass, surrounded by a black hole, with the compass needle pointing to the letter A. Her hand rests next to it, as she takes it in. “I had to hope that I would be led back to you somehow, this was my way of expressing that.” I tell her.

“And now I feel really shit for not having a tattoo for you.” She tells me.

“We could always change that if you ever want to. But I don’t care if you don’t want to, all I want from you is your heart Pumpkin, anything else is a bonus.”

“I feel too broken for you to love me, like I won’t be enough.”

“You aren’t broken Autumn, you’re a little damaged sure but never broken.”

“You still want me? Scars and all?”

“Baby when will you understand? You could have permanent scarring all over your face and you would still be the most beautiful woman I know. Looks don’t matter, when your soul is what I want.”

Her hands go around my neck, softly playing with the strands of my hair, making me shiver. I can feel my cock twitching in my pants, trying to shift her so she doesn’t feel it, makes her core graze over it causing me to groan.

“Please, let me kiss you” I beg. My hands clutching her hips tighter, trying to will myself to keep control, so I don’t blow my load like the virgin I am. My grey sweatpants and her shorts are the only thing separating us, and I can feel how hot her core is through the thin layers of fabric. Her chest is heaving, licking her lips, my hungry gaze following her every movement, desperate for her to say yes.

“Kiss me, Atlas” she tells me finally and before she can change her mind, I run my hand through her hair, clasp her roots between my fingers and tug her to me, melding my lips to her, finally joining us together in the way I’ve imagined doing for years. Fuck.

This is perfect. My other hand on her hip flexes, gently moving her while she looks for friction, causing her to gasp, my tongue slips into her parted lips, and we become a frantic mix of tongue and teeth. Using the hand that is still on her hip, I rock her gently backwards and forwards, creating the friction that we both so desperately need.

Breaking the kiss quickly I ask, “Is this ok baby?” my chest heaving in rhythm with her, our hearts both beating heavily in our chests.

“Please don’t stop Atty” she whines. Her breasts heaving as she whimpers from the friction, I tug her mouth back to mine. Untangling my hand from her hair without hurting her, I trail the back of my hand down her neck, creating goosebumps



following in its wake. Pulling down the straps to her top, revealing her perky breasts, her perfectly pink nipples that are hard and aching for attention. I cover her left breast with my hand, a perfect fit, and slightly squeeze, before gently rolling her nipple between my fingers causing her to mewl into my mouth, grinding on my aching cock faster chasing her release.

Focusing my attention on her right breast too, I follow the same actions that I did with the other one since she seemed to like it, before breaking my kiss with her and swirling my tongue around her nipple, making her gasp my name in response. Sucking her nipple into my mouth, I suck and bite gently, alternating between them both as continues to grind on me. Popping her nipple out of my mouth with an audible pop, I start to kiss up her neck, my hands wandering over her breasts again, her hands are on my pecs, her nails slightly digging in.

“That’s it Pumpkin, such a good girl, come on my cock.” Peppering kisses down her neck, lightly nipping her collarbone, I continue my way back up to her lips, pulling her hot mouth back to mine. I can feel that she’s close, her hips start to falter in their movement, so I place my hands back on her hips to assist her.

“Come for me baby.” I say as she says “Atty I’m going to come!”

“Let go Autumn, I got you.”

With one last thrust of my hips, she shatters and so do I. Swallowing her moans with my mouth, I pull back and gently kiss her now swollen and puffy lips. I hold her to my chest and ignore the mess I’ve made in my sweatpants. Our chests are heaving between us, and sweat is dribbling down the side of my forehead, mostly nerves from finally having this beautiful girl in my arms. I pull her back so I can look at her, glazed eyes, her puffy lips, and her hair is messy, she looks amazing.

“You ok, Pumpkin?” I ask her.

“Mhhmm.” She mumbles.

Chuckling at her, I frame her face with my hands and kiss her on her sweaty forehead.

“Yes.” She whispers.

I freeze “Yes?”

“Yes Atty, I want to try with you all. You all make me so happy; I want to give this a go; I just don’t want to lose any of you in the process.”

“You won’t Pumpkin, I promise. We are going to make you the happiest girl in the universe. There’s never been another woman for me, ever.”

“Ever?” she rears back, blinking at me with wide eyes.

“Never baby, how could I when I was waiting for you to come back to me.”

“You’re setting a very unrealistic standard here for the others with all this sweet talk, you know that?”

“That’s the plan baby, I might allow them to have a piece of my soul mate, but you have always been mine.” I tell her as I kiss her softly on the lips. Pulling her straps back up her top, I can’t keep my hands off of her skin, wanting to trace every inch of it. “Come on baby, let’s go get cleaned up, then tell the guys the good news.”

I stand with her still in my arms and walk us into the closest bathroom, cleaning us both up while stealing kisses every few moments.

Taking her by the hand after we both got changed, I lead her down to the games room in the basement where I know the others are waiting for us.

Walking in all the guys including Brenn are lounging around the room, Dominic and Sebastian are in an intense game of Battlefield, and the others are just watching on. Our footsteps alert the others to our arrival, Dominic throws the controller on to sofa and leaps over the back, rushing Autumn and pulling her from my arms, lifting her into his own and running back to the sofa before I can even protest. He flops back onto the seat, and positions Autumn sideways on his lap so she’s facing

everyone, wrapping his arms around her waist and just buries his head in her hair. Is he sniffing her? Weirdo.

Shaking my head, I just follow them, giving her a soft smile so she knows I'm not mad.

“Soooo?” Dominic drags out. I swear if I didn't class him as a brother, I'd have probably murdered him already.

“We agreed we wouldn't pressure her D.” Zander admonishes.

“And I'm not, but if she does have an answer, I'm sure she'd tell her best friend.” This boy has a death wish, there's no other reason why he must continuously push my buttons like this.

“*You* are not her best friend.” Me and Tobias say at the same time, causing me to turn my narrowed eyes onto him, while Dominic cackles like a madman while holding my girl. She's giggling along too though, so I guess I can let him off the hook, but I swear he pushes his luck.

“Anyway, are you ok sunshine? We didn't put too much on you earlier, did we?” Sebastian asks her, pausing his game to give her his full attention. Autumn just shakes her head.

“Words baby, we need words. We don't want to pressure you into anything, you know that right?” I tell her, needing her to know that even if she agreed to try after what we did, she could change her mind and that would be ok too.

“I'm ok. Mostly confused really.” She tells us.

“What are you confused about Babygirl?” Tobias asks her, his worry evident on his face. Apart from me, he is the one who is most in tune with her needs, they bonded a few months ago when she woke up in the middle of the night, and the next morning they were like they had been lifelong friends.

“I guess just all of this, like you all want to share me, obviously not you Brenn...” she says with a laugh before he can even open his mouth “But how would it work? I don't want to come between any of you, I refuse.”

“Well, we'd figure it all out as we go Princess, we'd take you on dates and obviously spend time together too, but we would

revolve around you, and only you. There will be no other girls for us, you are it for us.” Zander tells her, voicing all of our thoughts that we spoke about earlier.

“But how is that fair? How can I justify being with all of you when you will only be with me? I mean I don’t want to share you with anyone else, but I feel like I won’t be enough, and like how dare I hold you back from someone else who could make you happier, y’know?” her voice is steady, not giving away her nerves, but her fingers hold a slight tremor in them which is betraying her right now.

“What part of we want you and only you, do you not understand Babygirl?” Tobias growls out.

“Well, all of it.” She smarts him with a smirk on her face.

“You’ve been mine since we were kids’ Pumpkin, you aren’t getting rid of me.” I tell her.

“And I’ve been obsessed with you since I first heard about you, your stories kept the light in me while I was filled with darkness, and then when I first seen you, you lit up the darkness in me like Samwise did with the Phial of Galadriel against Shelob.” Dominic visibly makes her swoon with those words, this girl has been a massive fan of Lord of the Rings since she was a child and for him to use that in a what was basically love confession Dominic style, well don’t I have fucking competition.

Autumn giggles at him and pulls him into a hug. “That was the cutest thing to ever come out of your mouth.”

“You like Lord of the Rings?” Sebastian asks her, his attention zeroed in on her, I know they’ve watched movies together but how does he not know how obsessed she really is?

“She can say the films word for word. While the other girls at school were reciting Disney princess’s, Autumn here was reciting The Lord of the Rings films.” I inform him, laughing at the memories of a little Autumn screaming “YOU SHALL NOT PASS” at the other kids in our class when we were using the little playhouse at break.

“Seriously! Marry me?” he asks her, looking deadly serious as he does. Next thing I know, Autumn’s flying through the air into Tobias’s arms and Dominic is tackling Sebastian to the floor. From there everything turns into utter pandemonium, Dominic has Seb in a headlock on the floor, where they are both grappling for control, Zander’s trying to pry them apart, and Tobias is fussing over Autumn, to make sure she’s not hurt from suddenly being airborne with no warning. I finally decide to help Zander separate the idiots, and we pry them apart, Dominic threatening bodily harm to Sebastian is just the icing on the cake.

Suddenly we hear the most beautiful sound, Autumn’s laugh. She’s bent over from laughing so hard, tears leaking from her eyes as she tries to catch her breath.

“3...2...1...” I mutter under my breath, and then it comes.

She snorts so loud that everyone else gapes at her. She can’t catch her breath, so she’s doing that wheezy laugh that I used to love.

“I’m sorry...” she manages to gasp out between her laughter. Dominic is looking at her like she hangs the moon, Sebastian still looks like he’s serious about that marriage proposal, but jokes on him, I’ve had dibs on her taking my last name since we were 6. Zander is just watching her with soft eyes, unlike any way he’s ever looked at other girls and Tobias still looks concerned but he’s doing that little smile that’s only reserved for her.

Walking over to her, I drag her from Tobias’s lap and haul her up into my arms.

“Get your asses sat down, our girl has something to tell you all.” I tell them all, deciding it’s time we all got serious instead of messing around.

They all get comfortable on the sofa, Dominic and Sebastian pushing each other around until they all find their seats and look at us expectantly.

“So, what do you want to tell us Sunshine?” Sebastian asks.

“Well, erm...” she mutters, unable to get her words out.

Tobias obviously realising that her anxiety is getting worse, decides to throw her a bone and ask her what they are all dying to know. “Are you going to give this... give us a chance baby girl?”

“Mhhmm” she nods.

“Seriously?” Dominic asks incredulously “Like seriously? You really want to give a relationship with all of us a go?”

“Of course, I do, I wouldn’t have been able to get through the last few months without you all, you all make me happy, I don’t see why not. Not sure what my dad will say about it though.” she shrugs.

“Fuck Kelvin... wait... no... don’t fuck Kelvin because that’s just wrong but fuck us instead.” Dominic word vomits. Zander reaches around Sebastian and claps Dominic over the back of the head, causing him to start to whine.

“Do you hear what comes out of your mouth?” Sebastian asks while looking at Dominic like he has three heads.

“Obviously I do, otherwise how else do I know what to say?” he replies.

“So, you’re telling me that you think of that and decide to say it.”

“Well yeah, I mean I didn’t mean the fuck her dad part, obviously. But the rest I 100% meant.”

“Idiot.” Seb mutters.

“Anywayyy... back to the more important topic. We don’t care about what your dad has to say Babygirl, all we care about is you.” Tobias says, getting the conversation back on track, again.

Coughing gains our attention to Brenn, who’s sat on the floor by the window just watching us all with amusement on his face. “While this is totally the most entertaining thing I’ve watched in months, maybe my whole life. I think you need to lay everything out on the table so this can work.” He tells us, turning to Autumn, he continues “and seriously, don’t give a fuck what dad will think, if he has a problem, I’ll put him in

his place. Your happiness is all that matters Little Bear, and fuck what anyone else has to say. I'm truly happy for you if you really do want this, but if they hurt you, I will inflict bodily harm to them." he tells her, deadly serious. He would do it too, doesn't matter how long we've known each other, he will actually hurt us, if we hurt her. He may look carefree and may be gentle with her, but under all of that he's a deadly killer that knows how to torture someone for weeks, while keeping them just barely alive.

"Thank you brother bear." She tells him as she gets off my lap and goes over to him and gives him a hug "I love you" she says to him, softly. He whispers back to her, too quiet for us to hear, but she lets out a tinkling laugh at whatever he says, then makes her way back over to me, but instead of sitting back on my lap, she squeezes in between me and Tobias, pulling her knees up to her chest and stretching the t-shirt she's wearing over her legs. Tobias leaves the room with a final warning look to all of us, and a small smile for her, leaving us to talk about everything and lay it all out there now she's agreed to be our girl.

We spend the next few hours laying everything out for Autumn, so she knows what to roughly expect. Anything that might happen sexually is to be done at her pace and that she needs to vocalise if she feels ready, because we don't want to push her into doing something she isn't ready for. If she's never ready, then that's ok too, all I want from her, is her. I don't care if we never have sex, I've spent this long being a virgin and I'd happily continue to be so, if it means I get to call her my girl forever, maybe even one day *my* wife, because I have dibs on that shit. We've all agreed to communicate if we feel left out, and that irrational jealousy will ruin this before it even begins but a little jealousy is to be expected. We all also agreed that this isn't going to be one of those relationships where she spends time with one of us each day, because that shit just sucks. We'll spend time with her when it feels right too, or when she asks, again we aren't trying to push her into anything she isn't comfortable with. So we go at her pace, even if it's more like friends for a while.

“So, do I get to call you, my boyfriends? Or do you not want labels?” she asks us, while we’re all spread out through the movie room, her eyes almost bugged out of her head when we first brought her in here as she took in the massiveness of the top room.

“Do you want labels?” I ask her, trying to see if this is something she wants. A pretty deep shade of blush spreads over her cheeks and ears.

“W-well yeah I guess I do, I just don’t want you to feel pressured, if you don’t want anyone to know, then that’s ok too.” She tells us as she looks down. Sighing while pinching the bridge of my nose, I look over the girl I’m madly in love with and try to find the nicest words possible to tell her she’s an idiot.

Tobias beats me to it “Babygirl, are you dense?” which causes Dominic to bristle and Autumn to look upset.

“Dude!” Zander exclaims “Princess, he didn’t mean to be so harsh, did you?!” he snips to Tobias, glaring at him for upsetting Autumn.

“Shit, I’m sorry Babygirl, I didn’t mean to be a dick, it’s just...” he blows out a breath “I like you, ok? like more than I’ve ever liked anyone and if I didn’t want to put a label on this. Us. Then I’d be a fucking idiot, I might be willing to share you with these guys, but I’m a possessive bastard and I don’t want any other man even looking at you, never mind flirting with you just because we haven’t made you feel secure in this relationship because of a fucking label, so let me make this clear Babygirl. You are mine...” A series of coughs make themselves knowing, including myself making Autumn laugh “Ok fine. You are ours, but that’s it. You hear me?”

“I hear you Spider-Man.” She rolls her eyes at him, making us all laugh.

All of us tell her we want labels too, without all the fanfare that Tobias had, well apart from Dominic, who has to try upstage all of us.



He flings Autumn up into his arms, swings her around while both of them laugh, before he places her feet back on to the floor, frames her face with his hands and crouches down to her eye level.

“So, I’m your boyfriend huh?” he smirks at her.

“Uh huh.” She replies, her eyes rolling so hard that they could fall out.

“Knew I’d become one of your favourite people, I called it that day at the hospital. I mean, I’m still deeply offended that you didn’t choose Oogie Boogie for comfort, but I can forgive you for that since you didn’t know me then.”

Autumn just rolls her eyes at him again while smiling at him, I worry how she’ll react when she finds out what kind of men we really are, that we all in some way work for her father and that at least 3 of us in the group have killed someone but until her father says that we can tell her about what he does, we have to keep quiet for her safety. All our jobs have been stopped for now, our main focus and priority being Autumn and keeping her safe, and until we know fully what happened back in New Mexico since she still hasn’t opened up about much of it, we are all on high alert.

“I will kill anyone who ever hurts you Cupcake, I swear to you and if another man ever lays his hands on you that isn’t one of us, I’ll cut them off and gift them to you as a present.” He tells her seriously, and he totally would. All of us instantly freeze, unsure of how she’s going to take how intense Dominic is being. But we don’t have to worry about anything it seems, as she doubles over laughing like he’s just told the funniest joke ever, and not threatened to dismember someone for even laying a finger on her, in friendly way or not.

“You’re cute, you know that.” She says, still laughing. Everyone lets out a sigh of relief realising she doesn’t think he’s being serious. Deciding that we should move on from this topic before Dominic lets something slip and she finds out everything before she’s meant to, I suggest that we put on a new movie for us all to watch and coax Autumn into watching

*The Lord of the Rings*, so everyone else can see her cool trick of knowing every single word, like the little nerd she is.

We all get comfortable, and I pull Autumn into my side, while Zander sits in front of her, and Sebastian sits on her other side. Tobias and Dominic sit on the other sofa, and we all grab snacks and drinks, so we aren't leaving the room too much during the film, Brenn even comes to join us, kissing his sister on the forehead, and giving us all the stink eye. We spend the rest of the night watching the film, all of us watching on as Autumn silently murmurs along with the film, and soothing her when Gandalf fights the balrog, it's always been the worst part for her and every time she cries. Dominic of course panics, because he thinks she's genuinely upset before she reassures him after he tried and failed to steal her from my arms.

She eventually falls asleep between us all, so deciding it's enough for one night, I carry her small body that has slowly filled with curves the last few months, to her bedroom and try not to think about what happened earlier on between us. As usual we all cram ourselves into her bedroom, none of us wanting to leave our girl. A smile kicks up my lips at the thought. A year ago, I would have only have ever hoped that my girl would be back here with me, and now she's here in my arms, and is officially my girl. Setting an alarm for tomorrow since it's her first day at the college, we all settle down and drift off to sleep and hopefully Autumn can sleep peacefully tonight knowing how wanted and loved she is.

# Chapter 20

## Autumn

Waking up surrounded by everyone has become one of my favourite comforts in the morning, sometimes I just lay here and bask in the warmth of everyone being here. Stretching my limbs out and trying to stifle the groan that tries to slip out, so I don't alert any of the guys that I'm awake, I slip out of the bed and turn to see Atlas rolling over and snuggling into Zander's back, burying his head into his hair, and sighing in happiness. Tiptoeing over to the bedside table, I pull my phone off charge and sneakily take a photo of the both of them, snickering to myself and setting it as my home screen, so my lock screen can continue to be my Chlo, seeing her face brings me comfort, even when it also continues to cause me pain. I relish in the pain now, it somehow reminds me that I'm still here, I don't think the ache in my heart will ever go away, not without her here, but I refuse to push it down, or try forgetting her when she was the light of my life for so long.

Making my way to the bathroom, I turn on the water to scalding hot, stripping off my clothes and avoiding the mirror as much as possible while I get naked, I still can't bear to look at myself, the scars are too much of a reminder of before, Dominic promised me that the moment I wanted them covered that he would do it for me, but I'm not quite ready to let fully go of my past just yet. If I just sweep it all away, it feels like I'm just pushing Chlo's memory away, something I can never bring myself to do. One day I'll get them covered with beautiful tattoo's but not right now. Stepping under the water stream, I tilt my head back and let the water run over my body, washing the sweat away from the nightmares. I haven't woken up screaming in a while, but the cold sweat on my body when I wake tells me that I'm still having nightmares, even as I'm surrounded by everyone at night. They always inquire how I'm sleeping and not being able to bring myself to give them something else to worry about, I lie. I tell them that I'm sleeping fine, that I'm not having any nightmares and since I'm so used to waking up early with Chlo, I jump in the

shower before any of them even wake and wash off all the evidence from the fitful sleep I'm obviously having so they don't notice. Deciding I've spent enough time under the water, I quickly wash my hair and body then rinse off. Getting out, I pull out the hairdryer from under the sink, and get to work drying my hair so I can straighten it for my first day of college. Thankfully, dad had a hairstylist come out to the house last week to do my hair since my roots had grown in quite a bit, now I have a professionally done balayage done on my blonde hair, rather than the job I did with box bleach, thankfully causing minimal damage to my hair. I got super lucky, but after the monster I hated how I looked, I couldn't look in the mirror without looking for what drew him to me. He was always obsessed with my hair, and the moment I was old enough to box dye it myself, I did with spare money from mom. She wasn't happy, but she couldn't do anything about it once it was on my head, the beatings were worth it every time I would spend the extra change and it was the one thing, I would allow myself to spend on myself, otherwise I probably would have shaved all my hair off.

Shaking off any thoughts of the monster since I want to actually try being a functioning human being for college, I finish drying my hair and move on to straightening it, once it's all done, I decide to get changed before doing my make-up, the guys will be awake soon no doubt, and I really want to start breakfast before any of them can get up. Dressing in black leggings, a sage green long sleeved top to help hide the scars from the fire on my arm, I pull on a thin grey hoodie over the top too. Deciding to just throw on some mascara with a little concealer to hide the bags under my eyes, I'm ready before anyone is awake. Sneaking my way through the bedroom, careful to not wake any of them up, which is hard since I'm essentially playing twister to try get through the ones laid on the floor, I blow out a breath when I finally get out of the room, holding in my giggle at how ridiculous it all is. Heading into the kitchen, I'm greeted by Mrs McKay, who is prepping the ingredients for breakfast this morning.

"Well good morning, Sugar, how are you feeling this morning?" she asks me.

“I’m nervous, but I slept well so I feel up to it, I guess.” I tell her, hoping she doesn’t catch my lie. She just narrows her eyes at me but continues on with making her blueberry muffins. I get the ingredients out to make chocolate chip pancakes, something that I always tried to make a tradition with Chlo for first days, just needing to feel closer to her today since I feel like I’m moving on too fast, feeling guilty that I’m getting to go to college when she doesn’t ever get to move on in life, no more milestones. Discreetly wiping away a stray tear, I focus on my task, and I’m only brought out of it when Mrs McKay places a coffee down next to me. Picking up the warm mug, I take a sip and can’t help the groan that slips out. Mrs McKay chuckles while I mutter a thank you to her between sips. Equally separating the pancake batter out on to the pan, I get lost in the repetitive movements. Pour, wait for bubbles to appear, flip, stack, repeat.

Firm arms wrap around me causing me to startle and drop a pancake that I was about to stack onto the stove and without thinking I grab it and throw it onto the stack.

“Fuck Babygirl don’t do that! You could have burnt yourself.” Tobias grumbles at my back, gently taking my left hand into his, rubbing his thumb over my fingertips that are slightly red from grabbing the hot pancake. Tutting he drags me over to the sink and runs my fingers under the cold water. Taking the time to admire him, his normally neat hair is a bit messy, and he needs a trim on his stubble since it’s longer than it normally is, his brown eyes are roaming over the rest of me, obviously checking for any other signs of injury, like he always does. His muscles strain at the grey top he’s wearing, making me drool, and his black jeans, that I know for a fact make his already great ass look biteable. Fucking demon thoughts.

“Are you ok?” he asks me.

“I don’t really have feeling in that hand as much anymore.” I tell him while I shrug, it doesn’t really bother me as much anymore, I was told the feeling could come back, but the scar tissue had caused quite a bit of damage so not to expect too much. He growls, he actually fucking growls while narrowing his eyes at my hand like it’ll magically fix it. My panties

disintegrate but I pretend I'm not bothered and just roll my eyes at him, extracting my hand from his and moving back to the stack of pancakes, mouthing thankyou to Mrs McKay for turning off the stove. She just winks at me while shaking her head at Tobias, before carrying on with her own meal prep for everyone else.

“So, ready for your first day at college Babygirl?”

“Sure, not like I have much of a choice, but I can admit it'll be nice to get out of this house.” I tell him honestly, we've been stuck in here basically since I got here, the only time I left, was when I was taken shopping so I could pick out clothes for myself that I liked, but we came straight back home. I've spent a lot of time out by the lake, just sitting there either reading or listening to music, it's peaceful and clears my head. The thoughts get a bit too loud when I'm inside too much and I really don't want to hurt myself or blow up at someone when I'm in that mind frame.

“I'm sorry, Babygirl...” he says as he pulls me into a hug “How about I take you out for a date after your one with Atlas?”

Pulling back confused, I look up at him “I don't have a date with Atlas.”

“Fucking good one dickhead, I hadn't asked her yet.” Atlas snips at him as he comes into the room. Looking him over, the demon thoughts return with a vengeance. Fuck, am I drooling? His wide shoulders and all delicious 6'5 of him fills in the black henley shirt he's wearing perfectly and the blue grey jeans he's wearing, leave little to my imagination considering what we did last night is on repeat in my head. Blushing furiously at the memory, I turn away before he can notice and grab some pancakes from the stack and plate them up for myself, adding some syrup and strawberries to go with it. My stomach is a ball of nerves, but I know I need to eat, especially since I've just got to a healthy weight. Skirting around them, I sit at the table, avoiding looking at any of them in the eye, and start to eat my food. The first bite of pancake, covered in syrup with a strawberry stabbed on the end of the fork, has me letting out a loud moan. Groans from around the kitchen has

me snapping open my eyes, to see Tobias, Atlas, Zander, and Dominic all looking at me with heated gazes. Dominic saunters over to the table and sits next to me, turning in his chair to face me, places his elbow on the table, leaning his chin on his palm.

“No, no please continue to make those sinful little sounds Cupcake, I’m begging you.” Dominic says with a groan, his hand reaching under the wooden dining table to subtly adjust himself.

Heavily swallowing the bite of food, I just took, I look around to the others, trying to avoid Dominic’s stare as much as possible, so I can continue with the rest of my morning without having to change my panties.

“Please don’t stare at me while I eat.” I tell him, I hate being watched while I eat, feeling like I’m doing something wrong by eating the food, my mom would call me names when I got myself food, or berate me for eating her hard-earned money.

“Leave her alone Dominic.” Zander admonishes him, whilst moving over to me and kissing me on the top of my head “Good morning, Princess” he greets me, before moving over to the kitchen island and getting himself food.

“Morning, do you all have college today too?” I ask them all.

“Yup. We managed to get all our schedules changed so you are never alone at college.” Atlas chimes in, while plating up his food.

“Really? Why?” I ask. Surely, they don’t all have to be there all the time, its college, nothing dangerous.

“Well, we wouldn’t want to miss out on *our* girlfriends first day of college now, would we?” Tobias says around a mouth of food, with a cheeky grin on his face.

“Girlfriend?” Dad’s voice comes from the entryway, causing me to freeze “What’s this about *our girlfriend*?!” he levels the guys with a glare, causing me to shrink back in my seat.

“Fuck’s sake dad, you aren’t that dense. They’ve all came to like her over the last few months and have all agreed to date her, on her terms, before you start. They have my full blessing,

by the way. I just want Autumn to be happy.” Brenn grumbles as he walks into the room, shouldering past dad on the way. He stops by my seat, leans down, and kisses me on the top of the head muttering a small, good morning before grabbing his own plate of food, and sitting down next to me at the table.

“But...” dad stutters out.

“No buts dad. She’s happy, fucking drop it. It’s the least you can do.” I watch my brother stare my dad down, not flinching in the slightest when dad’s face gets redder by the minute. They’ve been tense with each other the last week, some small fight apparently, neither wanting to tell me what actually happened, just that it’ll sort itself out, but Brenn doesn’t seem to want to forgive dad anytime soon. Dad seems to calm himself down enough to keep his opinion to himself for now, breathing out a sigh of relief because I really didn’t want to fight with dad any more than I already have, I continue on with my breakfast, the others joining us including Sebastian who skulks in 15 minutes later, freshly showered, his reddish-brown hair wet and messy, making my brain fritz just at the sight of him.

“You ready for college, Little Monster?” dad asks me once we’ve all finished our food. All I can do is shrug, like yeah, but I am super nervous, especially with the burns on my hand that’s super noticeable. “You’ll be fine, and you will have the guys with you at all times, so there’s nothing to worry about.” He tells me, like it’s not totally nerve wracking to start at a new place, months past when everyone else has. Hopefully, I can make a friend, someone who isn’t my brother, or the guys. I need a friend that is a girl, someone who I can speak to about the guys and not have it reported back to them.

“How long until we leave?” I ask everyone.

“About 20 minutes, so you have enough time for another coffee Sunshine.” Sebastian says, making me grin widely at him while I hop out of my chair and head to the coffee machine. Mrs McKay apparently beats me to it though, by handing me a warm coffee mug with a wink “There ya go Sugar, enjoy your first day.”



Pulling her in for a quick hug, something she embraces back with an extra tight hold, I thank her quietly then skip out of the room to go grab my bag.

20 minutes later we are all piling into the SUV, with a quick hug and goodbye to dad, we set off for college. The drive goes by quickly with the guys distracting me, Atlas automatically connected my phone to the Bluetooth, so I put on the playlist I made with him for the car, and before I know it, we're pulling into the parking lot while singing *Dial Drunk* by Noah Kahan at the top of our lungs.

Looking ahead, I can't help the nerves that seem to hit my system abruptly, my hands start to shake, and I feel like I can't breathe. This is the first time I'll truly be around people since I got here, and I'm honestly shitting myself. My breaths are coming in choppy pants, I can't get enough air into my lungs, and I genuinely feel like my lungs are about to stop working.

Large hands frame my face and pull my head around to face them, gazing into warm honey brown eyes with eyelashes that I'm insanely jealous of through my watery eyes. Tobias takes a deep breath in, then slowly releases it, which makes me mirror his actions. Once I'm calmer, he gently wipes under my eyes with his thumbs. "You ok now Babygirl?"

"Yeah, I'm sorry, it just hit me out of nowhere." I apologise, feeling ridiculous for having a panic attack from just looking at a building.

"You don't need to apologise babe, it's totally ok if this is all overwhelming." He reassures me, his hands now holding my cold ones, rubbing them to try warm them up.

"I know, it's just I think it finally hit me that this is the first time I'm going to be around people since everything happened."

"Are you scared that people might judge you?" Sebastian asks me, always trying to rationalize everything.

"I guess."

"Well don't worry about that Cupcake, we'll take care of anyone who even looks at you funny." Dominic butts in,

sounding way too close causing me to jump. Turning around in my seat, I come face to face with my unhinged puppy who is practically nose to nose with me, a crazed gleam in his crystal blue eyes. I can see him palming his knife in his jeans, if I didn't know where he kept it, I would assume it was his cock he was stroking at the idea of hurting people. I mean this is Dominic, he probably would. Unable to stifle my giggle, I pull back before I burst out laughing in his face. "What's so funny?" he narrows his eyes at me.

"Oh, um... nothing." My cheeks flushing, I really don't want to tell him I was just thinking about his cock.

"No, no Cupcake, you have to tell me now. Let everyone know what thoughts has you making that adorable little giggle."

"I was thinking that if I didn't know you kept your knife there, that I would have thought you were stroking your um, y'know at the idea of hurting people."

"Fuckkk." He groans, similar groans of exasperation surround the car. "You can't say things like that to me Cupcake. Just thinking about you thinking about my cock has me hard as a rock." He tells me, as he grasps the back of my neck and pulls me into a kiss, his lip ring feels cool against my lips. He bites my bottom lip gently and places his palm on the underside of my breast, making me slightly gasp, his tongue invades my mouth turning the kiss harsh. It's everything that Dominic is, slightly manic but sweet.

"Right, that's enough. I refuse to walk into college with a raging boner. Break it up before I come back there." Zander shouts from the front passenger seat, causing me to abruptly pull back. Looking around the car, I can see the guys not so subtly adjusting themselves, causing me to let out another giggle at their pained expressions.

"I'm so not sorry, that kiss was hot as hell." I tell them unapologetically. Clambering over Tobias's lap, I open the door and fling myself out needing to get away from them before I combust.

"Fuck Babygirl, don't do that." Tobias scolds me as he removes himself from the car, bringing my bag with him. He

grabs my wrist and pulls me into his chest, causing me to look up at him before he pulls me in for a sweet peck on the lips “Let me get out first, please.” He begs me.

“Sorry.” I tell him, giving him another hug, trying to grab my bag from his hand, he pulls it out of my reach.

“Nuh uh, let one of us carry it. What’s the point of having all these boyfriends if you don’t let us carry your bag for you?”

“But I have hands, ones perfectly capable of carrying my own bag.” I cross my arms over my chest, pouting. I know it’s childish but it’s so funny watching them all crack up at my ‘bratty’ behaviour.

“I have another use for your hands Cupcake.” Dominic tells me with a smirk.

“No. Bad.” I tell him, pointing my finger in his face, like I’m telling off a puppy when it does something wrong.

“Tut, such a dirty mind Cupcake, I was meaning that you could hold our hands.”

“Aghh, you are impossible!”

“Come on pumpkin, let’s get you in.” Atlas comes up, pulling my hand into his and kissing me quickly too, Zander coming up next to him and flinging his arm over my shoulder with a wink. Tobias and Sebastian walk behind us, Tobias still holding my bag hostage and well Dominic continues to be his normal self and tries to jump on Tobias’s back and ask for a piggyback ride, which Tobias promptly throws him off with a growled out not a chance.

Walking up to the imposing building that towers above the surrounding buildings, I can’t help but gape at how large it is, knowing I will absolutely end up getting lost while trying to navigate the halls. Red bricks with a sleek black roof and tinted windows covering the building, it’s all very modern looking and expensive. Something I’m not used to, my old high school, was grey and crumbling at the base, never mind how depressing the inside of the building was. Graffiti was everywhere, on lockers, the walls and the outside, just as bad for it. Toilet roll that had been turned into balls of mush after

being mixed in a concoction of soap and water littered the bathroom ceilings, some from years before, the janitor simply didn't get paid enough to care about removing it. The classrooms were dull and made for an environment that no-one wanted to learn in.

We all approach the doors, people who have been milling around in their little groups are gawking at us, specifically where all the guys are surrounding me, their eyes bouncing between where Atlas's hand envelops mine and Zander's arm hangs over my shoulder. I can see the envy on some girls faces, and some are narrowing their eyes at me like I'm some sort of succubus that is going to come after their men. A tall girl with brown hair in the distance sends me a smile and a wink, making me relax further into Zander's side. Sending her a grateful smile in return, I let the guys lead me down the hall to the admissions desk, a lovely older woman who helps me is lovely and manages to get my timetables sorted in no time.

"What class do you have first?" Atlas asks, before I can answer Tobias snatches my timetable from my hands with a grunt.

"Hey!" I admonish "Give it back!"

"You will be escorted to all of your classes Babygirl." He tells me, while pulling out his phone and snapping a photo of my timetable, all the guy's phones chime with a text so I'm assuming he's forwarded the photo to them all. Snatching my timetable back, I scan over it, taking in the workload I'm now going to have. Hopefully, my professors aren't horrible since I really want to try enjoying this semester.

### **Timetable**

#### **Monday**

Psychology 101 – Professor Fleming

10AM – Room 3112

~ Lunch ~

Sociology – Professor Edwards

2PM – Room 0311

Wednesday.

Literature – Professor McIntosh

12PM – Room 0156

Thursday.

Numeracy – Professor Jemima

9AM – Room 2301

~ Lunch ~

Human Studies – Professor Carroll

1PM – Room 0411

~ Break ~

Guidance – Dr Wyatt

Room 2

“What the hell is guidance?” I splutter.

“Just a mandatory thing for now, an hour once a week to make sure you are adjusting to the schedule ok.” Sebastian informs me. Blowing out a breath to try get rid of the panic that rose up in my mind when I thought it was some sort of therapy. I know I need it, but I’m just not there yet, I’m not ready to relive the trauma of losing Chloe, or about anything my mom put me through. Honestly, I’d rather stab myself in the eye with a rusty teaspoon than talk about my feelings. Once I feel calmer, I look up into Zander’s concerned eyes, him and Sebastian have both been pushing the therapy issue, while Tobias understands the difficulty of not wanting to discuss trauma, Atlas just wants me to do what I think is best for me and Dominic jokes that I should join the crazy train with him. Which earns him a slap to the back of the head, every time from Zander or Tobias. Not sure that helps with his mental health, but he’s also perfectly capable of defending himself, the man is constantly armed, even when we can’t see it.

“You alright sunshine?” Sebastian asks me, worry etched all over his face.

“Mhm, just nervous for my first class.”

“I can always come in with you Cupcake.” Dominic tells me, his face dead serious.

“You aren’t in any of my classes, there’s no way you’re getting in.”

He palms where his knife rests “I can be very convincing.”

Rolling my eyes at him, I move around the guys, looking back to the timetable in my hand, trying to figure out where I’m going. “I’m sure you can, but I need to figure this out for myself. Besides how will I make any friends with you glaring at anyone who comes near me.”

“You don’t need friends’ Cupcake, you have me.”

“No, I had friends before they all insisted on being upgraded to boyfriends. Now I’m back to zero friends, so I have no-one to complain to about said boyfriends.”

“I can stick a wig on, paint your nails while you bitch about us Cupcake, you don’t need anyone else.”

Choosing to ignore him, I go to continue with my search for my first class.

“I like that.” Sebastian mutters.

“What?” turning my head to look at him.

“That we’re your boyfriends, I’d prefer husbands one day, but give it a few months.”

All I can do is gape at him, he’s supposed to be my quiet reserved boyfriend. Dominic high fives him, Atlas is grinning, Tobias and Zander both just shrug.

“You are all crazy!” I storm off, before I do something like agree.

“Crazy about you Babygirl!” Tobias shouts after me, his long strides allowing him and the others to catch up with me with ease. My face feels hot, it’s such a large contrast having them all openly flirting with me now that everything is out there.

Finally, I manage to find my first class, with a few directions from the guys, this place really is a maze. Opening the door to the lecture hall, I go to make my way through the door, before

I can even step foot through the doorway, I'm dragged back by my shirt into a hard chest. Looking up into Atlas's emerald eyes that are twinkling with amusement "Leaving without saying goodbye to your boyfriends Pumpkin?"

"No, not at all. I just forgot you were there, that's all."

Shaking his head at me, his head dips down and pulls me in for a deep kiss, pulling back my chest heaving, he kisses my forehead before passing me to Zander who pulls me in for a hug and a kiss to my temple. Unable to control the pout that crosses my face when he doesn't kiss me like Atlas did. He winks at me as he moves back, mouthing the word 'soon' before my vision is filled by Sebastian who follows in a similar fashion to Zander. Tobias's hands frame my face, something he does constantly to ensure he has my full focus on him, his honey brown eyes bounce between mine, a questioning gaze somehow asking if I'm ok without words. We became connected in a way that the others don't understand over the last few months, after he told me about his childhood with his father, he gets trauma more than the others do. I give him a small nod, letting him know I'm all good.

"Please, can I kiss you Babygirl?" he asks, his voice soft almost pleading. All I can do is nod. "Words baby, I need words."

"Yes." I whisper. He pulls me into a gentle kiss, his soft pillowy lips, a sharp contrast to his naturally hard standoffish demeanour. He pulls back with a dazzling smile that instantly floods my panties. Goddammit, all I want to do is pull him back down to kiss me again, but those thoughts are blown out the water by Dominic who hauls me up into his arms, my legs wrapping around his waist instinctively. My back connects with the wall, while his tongue invades my mouth, feverishly kissing him back, my eyes flutter shut from how overwhelming this kiss is, it feels like he's claiming me somehow, a dark mark on my soul, one I don't mind having there. He tastes like sour patch kids, sweet but sour. Finally, he pulls back with a devilish smirk, slowly he lowers me to the ground, my legs wobbly. How am I going to focus on class after that? Dominic's hands roam over my ass before my feet

finally connect with the floor, his blonde hair is messed up at the front, his eyes are hooded, and I can feel how aroused he is from the hard member currently pressing into my stomach.

Fucking men, too hot for their own good.

Chuckling around me tells me my brain is so muddled by them that I accidentally said that out loud.

“Right, I’m going to my class now before you break my brain any further.” I tell them sternly, while backing away slowly like I’m facing a bunch of wild animals, wild animals that are all currently smirking at me knowing exactly what kind of effect they have on me.

When I turn my back to them and make my way into my class finally, I hear “Bye wifey!” from behind me.

“That’s future wifey to you lot!” I shout back.

Making my way to a seat near the back, I settle down in time for others to just start arriving, the tall brunette from earlier walks in and approaches me. As she ascends the stairs, I look her over. She looks friendly enough, what I thought was brown hair is actually dyed dark red hair, perfectly waxed and tinted eyebrows to match the hair on her head. As she draws closer, I can see that she has blue eyes, a button nose that is slightly crooked that tells me it’s been broken before, she has red plump lips that make me want to ask what bomb ass lip tint she uses if it’s not natural and freckles that cover the bridge of her nose and her cheeks. She looks like a complete badass, her leather pants with her red corset top, makes her look like she’s going clubbing and not a psychology class. She strides over to where I’m sat, somehow still staring at her until she throws herself into the seat next to mine.

“Well, hey there toots.” She turns to me, her hand outstretched to me, waiting for a handshake.

Shaking her hand, I smile “Hey, I’m Autumn.”

“I’m Elizabeth, but I hate it. So, call me Ellie or El.”

“Nice to meet you.” I tell her, trying to remember how to talk to someone and now make a fool of myself whilst doing so.



“Oh, you are just the cutest. I can see how you managed to get all those men wrapped around your finger.”

“I am not cute!” I splutter “And I do not have all of the guys wrapped around my finger.” I protest, resisting the urge to cross my arms and pout.

“I watched the whole hot kissing exchange out there, toots. You totally do.”

“Oh.” My cheeks heat, this time I do pout. I was so caught up in them that I didn’t even think about an audience.

Ellie leans over and boops my nose with her well-manicured finger “See the cutest. Don’t worry toots, we’re going to be best friends and you’ll be telling me all the gossip to do with those fine specimens.”

I can’t help but laugh at her declaration, while secretly hoping she’s being sincere about us becoming friends.

“Yeah well, those fine ass specimens are all mine.” I tell her with a wink.

Before she can reply our professor comes striding into the room, Ellie just sends me a wink before pulling out her notebook to take notes, so I do the same.

Our professor turns out to be cool as hell, Professor Fleming introduces himself revealing his heavy Scottish accent, which his ginger hair and beard makes him a walking stereotype. The lecture fly’s past, I learned loads while Professor Fleming threw around awful movie references, and music ones, which makes a lot more sense after seeing his tattoo’s that litter his arms. He dismisses the class, and Ellie waits for me while I pack up. Her gaze lingers on my hand, but she doesn’t ask, something I’m incredibly grateful for. Making our way out of class, I’m greeted by all of my boyfriends standing against the wall opposite my class. I can’t help but run my gaze over them all, my mouth watering and my already damp panties getting damper because of how hot they are. Tobias’s leg is bouncing as his gaze scans over me. He pushes off of the wall, his muscles rippling under his shirt, drawing my stare to them.

Fuck's sake, bad demon thoughts, approaching nervous boyfriend it is not the time!

Ellie starts to cackle, bending over with her hands on her knees to keep herself upright. "I think your filter is broken toots."

Dominic growls at the nickname, causing her to laugh even harder. Tobias eats up the distance between us, pulling me into a bone crushing hug. "I hated being away from you Babygirl." He mutters into my hair, before pulling me in for another sweet kiss. My stomach chooses that moment to let out a loud growl, causing Zander to yank me out of Tobias's arms with a scowl, into his arms before storming away from everyone.

"Put me down! Everyone is staring." I hiss at him "I also dropped my bag!"

"I've got it Sunshine." Sebastian reassures me.

"Too slow. You need food." Zander grumbles.

"Alright, but I can walk. You can feed me whatever you want if you let me walk." I barter with him, practically begging him to let me down before I die of embarrassment, or before my self-proclaimed new friend dies from suffocation from laughing so much at my misfortune.

"Fine." He grumbles, he sets me back on my own two feet, then engulfs my hand in his as he drags me to the cafeteria, I struggle to keep up with his long strides. What must be a brisk walk for him, is a jog for my short arse. What is with tall men walking too fast for us short woman, one stride, is equal to three for us, LITTLE LEGS PEOPLE.

By the time we reach the cafeteria, I'm panting for breath, while the others are just laughing at me. Zander leads me to a table and deposits me into a seat and strides away to the food. The others soon join me at the table with their food, including Ellie who sits to my left, Dominic having snagged my right side. A tray is placed in front of me at that moment, filled with what Zander classes as an ideal for me.

I spend most of lunch eating my food, while the guys talk about their classes. Ellie has basically stolen my timetable so

she can see if we share anymore classes, but unfortunately, we only share psychology and sociology.

A petite blonde approaches our table, wringing her hands nervously in front of her. I can see the table she came from, three girls sit there, giggling between themselves while they furiously whisper to each other, glancing at their friend every few seconds. Narrowing my eyes at them, I watch their friend approach Zander, trying to bat her eyelashes at him while laying her hand on his forearm causing him to tense. Focusing all my attention on the girl in front of me, I watch her try to get Zander's attention.

"Hey baby." She coos at him, pitching her voice higher than what I assume it is. Deciding to see how this plays out since I don't want to come across as a psycho girlfriend, I sit back with a bored look on my face, meanwhile my gut is churning with nerves. Zander's features go from frozen in shock to disgust, he removes his arm from her grip and shakes his head at her.

"Not your baby Shan, I have a girlfriend now, so I'd appreciate it if you didn't touch me." He tells her politely, trying to avoid a scene. Looking behind Shan, I can see her friends are laughing at her, this poor girl. The Lion, The Witch, and the audacity of these bitches. In my peripheral I can see her hand reaches out to touch him again, and before I know what's happening a red haze goes over my vision. All I can see are all the times I was touched without permission, this may be innocent, but he's told her no and I care about him, my mind doesn't know Shan isn't a threat, all I know is that someone I have grown to deeply care about consent has been ignored. I grab Dominics knife from his hand before he can stop me, nicking my finger in the process, the sting from the blade making my heartbeat faster in my chest. I'm around the table, behind her and pointing the top of the blade to her ribcage, upwards. I dig it in enough for her to feel it, her breath hitches, telling me I've got her full attention now.

"He asked you not to touch him, or does consent not matter to you just because you don't have a dick between your legs?" I seethe at her. Some part of my brain is trying to kick in and tell

me that this girl has been fooled by her friends but I'm not able to listen to reason right now.

"I-I-I thought it was ok, we slept together a year ago. I-I was going to ask him if he wanted to go out sometime, that's all." Shan stammers.

"He said he had a girlfriend, you deluded bitch. He said no, he asked you specifically not to touch him. Just because he consented once, doesn't mean you get to ignore his wishes now."

"But..."

"There is no but! Do you want me to drive this knife into your lung?"

"N-no."

"But I really want to..." I pout "Should I just ignore what you want because of what I want?"

"Please don't" she begs. Removing the knife, I step around her until I'm stood in front of her, obscuring her view of Zander.

"Good. Hi, I'm Autumn, Zander's girlfriend." I tell her in an overly cheery tone, holding my hand out for her to shake. With a shaky hand, she takes mine.

"I'm Shan. I am really sorry, my friends convinced me that he was interested in me and pushed for me to come over and try ask him out, said I had to be pushy with it since you were apparently all over him this morning. If I knew he had a girlfriend, I never would have, you have to believe me, I'm not like that."

"Doesn't sound like you have very good friends Shan. How about this? Don't try anything with any of my boyfriends and we can be friends." I tell her honestly. The girl seems sweet enough, and it's obvious her friends are bitches who pushed her into this by lying to her.

"I'd like that. Who are your boyfriends?" she asks.

Turning round to point at them, I realise I don't have to. All of my men are sat there with raised hand with massive smiles on their faces. "Apparently I don't have to say anything." I tell

her with a laugh “Come on, come sit by us.” I grab a chair from a table next to us and sit her next to Ellie. As she sits down, I march my way over to her table with her bitchy ex-friends. “What bag is Shan’s?” I ask them with narrowed eyes.

“Like we’re just going to hand over our friend’s bag to you.”

“Some friends you are. Give me my new friends bag, or I’ll send over one of my boyfriends to retrieve it. Little hint, it won’t be any of the sane ones.” Feeling heat at my back, I glance over my shoulder to see my dark angel smiling down at me, his hand resting possessively on my hip.

“You heard my girl, hand over her new friends’ bag.” Dominic tells them, a warning tone in his voice that makes me shiver. His hand flexes, pushing the bulge in his pants into my ass, discreetly. “You were so hot holding my knife, Cupcake.” He whispers into my ear.

“Here!” bitch number 1 says, shoving Shan’s bag into my arms.

“Thankyou!” I smile sweetly to them, clutching the bag in my arms, I turn away ignoring the daggers the bitch squad are glaring into me and make my way back over to my men and my new friends. Handing Shan her bag, I smile at her before re-taking my seat next to Ellie, Dominic still shadowing me decides he wants me on his lap so before my ass even hits the chair, I’m dragged into his lap.

“That was so hot Cupcake.” He groans into my ear, making me squirm, his hard cock twitching when I accidentally grind on him.

Shrugging cause what can I really say that I had a small psycho moment when I embraced my inner Dominic and threatened someone with a knife, my mind feels muddled, I know I did the right thing inviting her to come sit with us and away from bitch squad, but I still feel bad for threatening her with a knife. Oh god, what if they kick me out of college? I’ve only been here for less than a day. Dad will no doubt kill me. I know Dominic approves, obviously. But what about the guys, will they decide I’m too much for them, I literally snapped.

I'm brought out of my thoughts by a scowling Sebastian who's rooting around in his bag, grumbling. Seeming to have found what he was looking for, he stomps out of his seat around to me, and grabs hold of my hand. Trying to pull it free from his grip, he just tightens his hold.

"Stop moving." He grunts, while inspecting my finger, that I'm just noticing has blood on it. He pulls a small plaster from his pocket, muttering under his breath as he does while he applies a batman plaster to my cut, before gently kissing over it. I can't help the blush that coats my cheeks, ducking my head so he can't see because I really need to stop blushing whenever one of the guys even looks at me.

"Sexy little lobster." Dominic whispers in my ear, whipping my head around to glare at him, my hair whips around to the other side of my face, covering my eyes and mouth causing me to splutter. Laughter rings out around the table.

"I will end you all. No hesitation." I mock glare at them, trying not to smile myself.

"So cute." Ellie laughs.

"Not cute! Fear me woman!"

"Ha! Not a chance. Little mouse next to me is scarier than you are." She points to Shan who looks absolutely mortified, her face is redder than a tomato right now and I can't help but laugh a little at her, since she doesn't seem to know what to say to any of us.

Thankfully, I'm saved from any further discussion by having to go to my next class. Ellie drags me to our Sociology class, while the guys just follow along behind us, someone has my bag because I'm still not allowed to carry my own. The rest of the day passes in a blur, and I can feel my mind drifting because my social battery is so drained after months of barely interacting with people. I'm met by the guys at the end of my class, where I'm once again dragged into someone's arms. This time it's Atlas. "Missed you Atty." I mumble into his shirt, trying to band my arms around his waist but coming up short. Fisting his shirt instead, I just lay my head on his chest for a few moments, basking in him.

“Missed you too Pumpkin.” He kisses the top of my head, squeezing me tighter “Come on, let’s get you home.” He tries to pull me back from his chest.

“No.” I squeeze into his chest further, not ready to move yet. Suddenly arms are banding under my thighs, and I’m being lifted into his arms with a small squeak slipping from my lips. He walks to the car and extracts me from his grip to place me in the back seat. I can feel my energy leaving my body by the minute, maybe a full day at college after minimum movement the last few months wasn’t the best idea. Resting my head against the car window, I can feel myself drifting off before the others get in, just before my eyes close, I see a figure standing in the shadows of the parking lot, staring directly at us. They are too concealed for me to see who it is, assuming it’s just one of the guys friends or something, I let my eyes fall shut and drift off before we’ve even left.

Waking up, I feel super groggy. Looking around, I realise I’m in my own bedroom, on my bed above the covers, still wearing the same clothes from earlier. Grabbing my phone, I unlock it to check the time but freeze.

Unknown

She won’t get an education, why should you? 6:04PM

Me

7:16PM Who is this?

Unknown

You’ll find out soon enough Autumn. 7:17PM

Feeling like I’m going to be sick, I throw my phone to the other side of the bed and run on shaky legs to the attached bathroom. Hitting the tile hard, I throw up what was left of my lunch into the bowl, narrowly missing the floor. When my stomach has nothing left to give, I flush the toilet and sit back against the wall, the coolness of it against my head grounding me. Thinking to the message, I know exactly who the person they are referring to is and they are right. She’ll never an education, and the guilt that I was trying so hard to push down, hits me then.

Sitting on the bathroom floor, I cry. I cry because my baby sister will never know what it's like to go to high school or college. I cry because they are right, why should I get to move on with my life when she hasn't. And I cry, because I had such a good first day, that I forgot for just a moment that I was being selfish by continuing to move on when she doesn't get to. I must sit there for a while because my ass starts to get numb. The tears don't stop flowing, so I shakily stand up, forgoing brushing my teeth because I have no energy left and make my way back to my room. Picking up my phone from where I threw it, my fingers tremble when I unlock it again, expecting to see another message from the Unknown number, but there's nothing but the message from before glaring back at me. Deciding to hide it in a folder, just in case one of the guys decide to check my phone for any reason, I move it out of sight and mind, lock my phone again and place it on charge. Moving over to my dresser, I run my trembling fingers over Chlo's ashes box and her blanket. Mrs McKay managed to salvage it a bit, by cutting off the burnt sides and attaching it to an old white one they had, just to give it more support as I was so afraid of it crumbling apart. Picking up Bun, I pull him into my chest and bury my face into his fur, the slight smell of smoke lingers, pulling me back to that awful night. Stumbling over to my bed, I pull the covers back and get under them, bringing Bun with me and pull the covers back over my head, where I fall into my memories while sobs wrack my body.

*“Do you promise that you'll never leave me?” Chlo asks me, her bright red hair whips around her as we sit by the water at Bottomless Lake State Park.*

*“Never Chlo.” I promise her. Mom was especially horrible to her this morning, and I took another beating, so Chloe doesn't have to. My body aches but I plaster on a smile for Chloe's sake, hoping this doesn't affect her day at all.*

*“Can we dip our feet in the water?” she looks up at me with her blue eyes that sparkle like the lake, and pulls out her best puppy dog eyes, begging me, literally. Her palms are together in the prayer formation as she looks up at me “Please, please, pleaseeee...”*



*“Fineeee” I groan, getting up from my position, I hold out my hand, but she bounces up from her spot and races into the water.*

*“Wait! you need to roll up your trousers or they’ll get we...” before I can even finish my sentence, she’s rushing into the water with a squeal, wading in up to her knees, the water splashing around her as she runs as fast as she can from me. Thankfully, I wore shorts today, so I wade in after her. I grab her around the waist and spin her around in my arms in the air “You aren’t supposed to run off missy” I laugh, I know I should probably tell her off more sternly but these moments between us, where there is so much happiness radiating from her are few nowadays. Mom has dimmed her light a bit, while she may not hit her, I cannot always protect her from the verbal abuse that mom seems to favour.*

*Chloe squeals again as I throw her into the shallow water. She emerges laughing and spluttering, her wide toothy grin taking over her entire face, she flings herself at me, soaking my clothes from how wet she is.*

*“Again!” she squeals, begging me to throw her again, so I do a few more times before the aches in my body begin to get worse from me pushing myself too much trying to ensure that Chloe has fun. “I had so much fun Aut! Can we come back tomorrow, and the next day, and the next.”*

*“Maybe, but we need to get home now so I can feed you and get you to bed.”*

*“Nuggets?”*

*“Not tonight baby, tonight we’re having spaghetti.”*

*“Paghetti! Yay! You are the bestest big sister ever!” She exclaims, wrapping her arms around my thighs.*

*“And you are the best little sister in the world Chlo. Come on let’s go home.” I take her hand, and we walk home, the sun setting over the lake. Her legs conveniently get tired 10 minutes later, so I pick her up and hold her as I make the walk back home as she nuzzles into my neck and proceeds to fall asleep.*

I'm awoken to murmurs in my room, the cover no longer concealing my face. I can feel how gritty my eyes are, and the tears that have now dried on my cheeks. Deciding I'm not ready to leave my memories yet, I lay there listening to my guys talking to my brother while I try to fall back asleep, hoping to see Chloe's face again.

"What do you think happened?" Brenn asks the group in a hushed tone, obviously trying not to wake me.

"No clue, it could just be that today was a lot. Or that she feels bad about what she did to Shan." Sebastian tells him.

"What happened with this Shan?" my brother demands, his tone getting harder. So, Sebastian recounts the events of lunch with Shan, something I feel incredibly bad about now I've had time to think about it, the poor girl didn't deserve that. Deciding that I'll message her later with an apology, I continue to listen to the conversation that is going on around me.

"So, she put a bitch in her place?" my brother laughs, the others all following him.

"Pretty much, I said no and then Shan decided to continue to try put her hand on me, and I think it potentially triggered her." Zander tells him.

"Didn't you sleep with her?" Dominic points out helpfully, causing me to tense up.

"Once. I slept with her once, a year ago, at a party where I was very drunk, and I regret it."

"At least golden boy doesn't have that problem. He was practically a eunuch before my Cupcake arrived."

"No regrets" Atlas declares "at least she knows that I only have ever wanted her."

"Seriously how are we supposed to compete with that?" Dominic whines.

"Gross, can we not talk about your sex life with my sister." Brenn spits out.

"Or you know, maybe don't talk about me while I'm laid right here." I tell them, as I struggle to sit up, my body still feels just

as tired as my mind “I don’t care about any of you having pasts, and I’m truly sorry for how I dealt with Shan today. She didn’t deserve that and neither did you Zander, it wasn’t my place to interfere.”

“Princess, you don’t need to apologise. I understand why you would react that way, what with your past and all. Plus, it was sort of hot, having you protecting my honour and all that.” Zander sits next to me on the bed and pulls me into a hug, stroking my sweat and tear-soaked hair from my face.

“How about you let me run you a bubble bath Sunshine, and let me take care of you, while the others head out and get you food from that Chinese you like so much.” Sebastian suggests, already heading towards the bed before I answer. Zander gives me a quick peck on the lips before he’s lifting me off the bed and into Sebastian’s arms. A small thud has my head whipping down to the sound. Bun lays splayed out on the carpet; a distressed sound slips from my throat as I try not to cry from a teddy falling on the floor.

“Hey, it’s ok Babygirl, I’ve got him. You go have that hot bath while I put him back with Chloe.” Tobias offers me, causing more tears to form in my eyes.

“C-can you put him back in the bed please? I need to have her close tonight.”

“Of course, Babygirl. Sebastian take care of our girl while we go get food. We’ll be back soon, but don’t rush, you need this baby.”

All I can do is nod, as Sebastian leads me into my bathroom.

The toilet rim has some remnants of sick on it, but Sebastian just grabs a wad of toilet paper, wipes it off and flushes before flashing me a small understanding smile. He turns back round to the bath, turns on the hot bath then adds my favourite bubble bath of jasmine and vanilla. He folds down the toilet lid and sits me on it, before carefully finger combing my tangled hair.

“Do you trust me?” he asks me quietly.

“Of course, I do.”

“Good. Then close your eyes.”

Closing my eyes, the warmth from his closeness disappears before reappearing just as quickly. Then something cold is being ran through my hair with his fingers, making me jump.

“Shh Sunshine, I’ve got you.” He whispers in my ear, causing goosebumps to break out over the back of my neck. He massages whatever he placed in my hair, into my scalp causing me to groan from how good it feels. Could I orgasm from this? because it really feels like I could. Slowing his movements, the energy in the room seems to shift as he seems to hesitate about something, his ministrations on my hair stutters.

“You don’t have to let me, but I would really like to stay in the room as you bathe. I don’t want anything from you, I just really want to look after you, by washing your hair. I won’t even look, I swear.”

“You promise you won’t look?” I ask him, my heart thudding wildly in my chest.

“I would never, not until you tell me I can. Scars are an awfully personal thing Sunshine, if you don’t want me to see your story then I won’t look.”

Tears fill my eyes at this thoughtful man. Nodding is all I can seem to do.

“I need words Sunshine; I need verbal consent that you are going to let me take care of you.”

“You can look after me Sebastian.”

Seeming appeased, he turns away from me and turns off the water for my bath, before taking my hand and leading me over to it. He leaves the bathroom, telling me to let him know when he can re-enter, so I quickly strip off my clothes and slip into the hot water, the bubbles covering everything I don’t want him to see. Slipping under so only my head and shoulders are peeking out, I call him back. He enters the room again, his gaze fixated on my face, never straying just like he promised as he bustles around the bathroom, collecting a comb, a bottle of oil and a sheet face mask. He also lights the candle I keep in

here for when I take longer baths. Sebastian proceeds to place the mask on my face, making me slip out a small giggle when he compares me to Ed Gein. He asks my permission constantly before touching me somewhere new, or before he does something else. He combs out my hair, and washes out, what he explained was a face mask, massaging my head when he applies the shampoo and conditioner.

“Why did you need to take care of me?” I ask him, the silence that’s extended between us becoming unbearable, and also needing to know.

“Have you ever heard of Dom/Sub relationships?”

“I’ve read about it a little bit in my books, but I don’t know much about it in reality.”

“Well, I’m a Dominant, not in the way where I want to punish you or anything, even though I have thought about spanking your ass red when you have been a brat. But I’m mostly a pleasure dom, I like to take care of you, I have this need inside of me to do so.”

“And this helps?”

“Absolutely. In fact, it makes me incredibly happy to do it. My job is to care for your needs, and that doesn’t always mean in the bedroom. If this isn’t something you feel comfortable with, then you let me know and we stop.”

“No, no I like it. It’s been a long time since anyone has really looked after me, until you all came along. Is this why you’ve been so stand offish with me?” I ask him, needing clarity on why he seems to take a step back so often.

“Honestly, you needed them in that moment. I don’t like to talk often, I’m a man who likes to show how I care with actions. You didn’t know me, hence why I offered to watch movies with you, we may not have spoken much during that time, but I tried to show you without words that I can be consistent, someone you can come to for some quiet time, where you can be alone without having to be alone, or that I would be there for you every day, no matter how busy I am.”

“I never thought of it all like that. I just assumed you were spending time with me because you felt sorry for me while I was laid up in hospital, bored.”

“Jesus Sunshine, no. I seen a strong as hell girl, who was trying her best to hold it together while being constantly surrounded by others without a moment to herself. While I didn’t feel like I had the right to evict them all from your room, I could give you peace for a few hours while we watched a movie. They know I hate it when they talk when I watch something, so I knew I could guarantee some sort of silence in those moments for you.”

This sweet, thoughtful man. I look up into his eyes, seeing the honesty radiating from his grey eyes. His reddish-brown hair is messy as always, making him look sinful right now, with his sleeves rolled up, showing off his forearms. God, forearm porn should totally be a thing. These men have awoken my libido the last few months and I constantly find myself wanting to jump their bones for the slightest things they do. Other people still make me shrink away though, and the idea of another man laying a hand on me, makes me break out in hives. Grabbing hold of his forearm, with my wet hand, I stroke my fingers over the only bit of ink I’ve seen on him so far, a phoenix with red and orange watercolours surrounding it.

“Kiss me please, Sebastian.”

His fingers grasp my chin, locking our eyes together. “You want me to kiss you, Sunshine?”

“Yes.”

He gets to his knees, making me shiver at other ideas of him on his knees for me. He shakes his head at me, seeming to realise exactly what I’m thinking. He asks me again if I’m sure, being unable to take it anymore and wanting his lips on mine, I yank him forward, meeting him halfway. He doesn’t let me control the kiss for long, before taking control. I get so lost in our kiss that when he breaks away from me, we are both breathing heavily. He strokes his thumb over my lower lip, pulling it down slightly so I part my lips.

“You are the most breathtaking woman; I have ever met Autumn Carraher.” I can feel the blush coating my face, thankful that the hot bath has made me pink so I can hide it. “Come on beautiful, let’s get you out and fed.” He says, as he reaches for the towel, he placed on the towel radiator. Sebastian holds it open for me, while looking away, stepping into it, I take it from his hands and wrap it around my body. Quickly pecking him on the lips, I turn and make my way into my room, Sebastians footsteps following behind me.

“Wait here Sunshine, I’ll go grab the clothes I made Tobias put in the dryer for you.”

“Sebastian.” I call after him, just as he reaches the doorway “Thank you for taking care of me, it really helped.”

“Always.” He returns a moment later, holding a bundle of clothes. “I’ll wait outside of the door while you get changed, then we’ll go down and eat.”

We spend the rest of the night, eating Chinese and watching Game of Thrones, everyone laughing and telling stories from the last few years of them being friends. Dad even joins us at one point and instead of being tense, he joins in the fun. For the first time since I came back here, I feel like I have a family again. Nothing will take away the ache in my chest from losing Chlo, but right now it feels a bit like patchwork, it won’t do the job forever but it’s enough for now.

That night as I drift off, I’m alone in my room, wanting to try sleep alone for once. I hope the nightmares stay away, even for a little while.

# Chapter 21

## Autumn

Waking up burrowed under my covers, I peek out of the little gap seeing the guys whispering furiously while manoeuvring balloons and what looks like little gifts into my room. Yeah, nope not today. It didn't even click for me that it was my birthday, I've been so checked out lately.

I slept through Chloe's birthday, not having the ability to even get out of my bed. I spent all of December shying away from all of the big events, not able to face them without Chlo beside me. Everyone understood and gave me space when it was her birthday, making sure I was still eating and staying hydrated, but they let me stay in my bed all day clutching Bun and her little box of ashes to my side, sensing it's what I needed to heal.

Christmas was a bit different, where I spent the day with dad and Brenn. The guys gave me presents on Christmas eve, with the instructions to wait until the next day, when I opened all my gifts, I sobbed. I has such bone crushing guilt that I was here to celebrate another holiday when Chlo wasn't and I felt awful that I had ruined the day for my dad and Brenn, who both reassured me that I hadn't. We spent the rest of that day cuddled up under covers, watching Christmas movies and just chilling out.

Atlas's birthday, I genuinely made the effort to be a functioning human being that day, for him. When I asked him what he wanted, all he asked for was a day just me and him, like when we were kids.

*"What do you want for your birthday?" I ask Atlas, twisting the cover in front of me, trying to hide the nerves that are churning in my stomach.*

*"Do I get anything I want?" he asks me, his tone flirty. Something that has been happening more lately, the healthier I've gotten, the more he's flirted with me, little stolen touches, a skim of his fingers over my waist when he's pulling me in for*



*a hug, his thumb ghosting over my lip when he brushes my hair away from my face. A low heat settles in my lower abdomen. Coughing to get rid of the lust that is so obviously clouding my judgement, this is Atlas, my Atty. It feels wrong to be feeling anything for him, and there's no way he feels anything for me, he's just being nice.*

*"If I can get you it, I will." I tell him honestly. Wanting to get him something good for his birthday to thank him for everything he's done for me since October. These last three months, he has been my rock, along with the others, I need him to know how much I appreciate it, when he didn't have to do anything that he has done for me.*

*"I want a day."*

*"A day?" I quiz, how do you give someone a day?*

*"A day Pumpkin, just me and you. Like old times."*

*"That's all you want? Just a day, me, and you? Nothing else?"*

*"That's it. For 8 years I would blow out my candles and wish for you to be home. My birthdays were never the same, even with the others. All I ever wanted was to have you back for it, for us to just go do something together for the whole day."*

*"Ok Atty, I can do that for you."*

*So that's what we did, I planned a whole day, just me and him, alone. Something Dominic had tried to protest against. I took him to the Japanese Garden for a walk, then to a karaoke room, where we both sang together for hours, and then a Mexican restaurant since it's his favourite food. I obviously got him a few gifts too. A voucher for a music store in town, a watch since he had been going on about wanting one and a voucher book for things we can do together away from everyone. He cashed in one the very next night 'one free voucher for permission to steal Autumn away for a movie night ALONE.' We spend that night cuddled up on the massive sofa, watching Pitch Perfect, something that I am apparently never allowed to tell anyone else about as it's one of his guilty pleasure films.*

I don't really want to make a big deal out of today, it doesn't really feel right without Chlo waking me up by screaming "Happy Burfdayyyy!" in my ear. I know that the guys are going to a lot of effort for me, I can see it through the tiny sliver of a gap in my covers, but I really just want to go to college and pretend it's not happening.

All of a sudden my covers are ripped back causing me to slam my eyes closed, and a cold hand is wrapping around my ankle, the cold press of metal rings, tells me that it's Dominic.

"Come on Cupcake! You are officially 18!" He shouts, then proceeds to drag my ass down to the end of the bed. He lets go of my ankle, it plopping back down to the bed with a thud. I decide to be childish and keep my eyes closed, star fishing out on the bed, hoping that if I play dead like a possum, they'll leave me alone. Dominic is having none of it though, he grabs my wrist and yanks me up into a sitting position. Groaning, I try to flop back again. I know that they won't let me hide from it though, so I slowly open my eyes to see all of my men stood over me, smirking. Atlas's midnight hair is flopping over into his emerald eyes, his tattoo's flexing with his muscles that are on show with his short-sleeved forest green shirt. Sebastian stands next to him, his grey eyes are like storm clouds rolling out over the sea, his reddish-brown hair is brushed today, showing his natural waviness, rather than the unruly mess it can be once he's ran his hands through it a few times, his lean body towers over my legs, his plump lips are pulled into a wide smile. Zander is in the middle, his long mahogany brown hair is pulled up into a man bun, his gentle light blue eyes twinkling with amusement, his smile is so wide showing the small chip on his tooth, the scar on his face pulled taught. The man might look dangerous but he's a big softie really. Dominic is bouncing on his toes next to Zander, causing my big softie to throw him a dangerous look, Dominic's bright blue eyes sparkle with mischief, his piercings glint in the light, drawing my gaze to his lips. Lips that I desperately want to kiss, even if he did drag me down the bed. Tobias is on the end, my rock. He is just softly smiling at me, knowing deep down how hard this day is for me. His brown eyes are filled with understanding. He stretches his arm out, reaching for me.

Deciding I need to try face this day, I reach out and grasp his hand, allowing him to pull me up, into his arms.

“Can I kiss you?”

“Uh huh.” I reply, breathlessly.

He pulls me into a gentle kiss “Happy birthday Babygirl.” He whispers into my lips, before kissing me rougher this time. Finally pulling back, he sets me on the floor, turning me around to face the rest of my men. They all take turns kissing me, Zander only pecking me on the lips. Resisting the urge to stomp my foot, I turn to Atlas and walk into his arms. He hauls me up into his embrace, his arms banded around my thighs. “Happy birthday Pumpkin.” He tells me, kissing me deeply. His tongue teases my lips, so I open for him, our tongues dancing together. Pulling myself away before I do something embarrassing like grind on him, I wiggle to try get down, but he just grips me harder, before striding back over to my bed, sitting me down on top of my now made bed.

“Are you ready for presents Little Monster.” My dad announces from the bedroom doorway, Brenn grinning wildly from behind him, his arms overloaded with gifts.

“I think you all went crazy.” I deadpan.

“Nah, no such thing when it comes to you Little Bear.” Brenn saunters over to me, dumping all the gifts he was carrying on the bed, next to me. “These are old ones too. We wanted you to have the option of opening them, so you know we never forgot you.”

Well how can I say no to that, so that’s what I do, I spend the next 30 minutes opening all of my old presents that I never got to receive. Some were toys, others were teddy bears, and some clothes that would never fit.

“Can we donate the toys and clothes to a shelter?” I ask my dad, needing them to not go to waste. Remembering what it was like for us, struggling to even find a good pair of shoes that would last Chloe, children destroy shoes, it’s a given but when you don’t have much money, it becomes a whole other problem trying to figure out how many holes are too many.

Thankfully, dad agrees, so I carefully place them back in the bags, and put them by the door.

Then I'm bombarded by my actual gifts. Dad goes first, showering me in designer clothes and bags, then hands me the keys to my dream car. A 1967, black Chevrolet Impala. Shut up, yes I like Supernatural. No, my car has nothing to do with how panty melting Dean is when he sits in it. Brenn goes next, causing me to gasp then throw myself into his arms for a hug. An updated version of my old teddy Lois, my own guitar that is sage green, and a paid holiday to New Zealand to Hobbiton. I may or may not have squealed.

Sebastian gifts me the most beautiful necklace, a simple silver chain with diamond raindrop pendant settles between my breasts and a Lord of the Rings chess set, something we both agreed we wanted to try together.

Zander gives me a voucher for a cooking date night with him, something he tells me I can cash in whenever I like and matching aprons for us both that read 'kiss the chef.'

Dominic nearly gets shanked with his present. A knife that matches his exactly with an intricately woven holster to hold it around my thigh, what nearly gets him sliced up is the little lobster that is engraved into the hilt. He makes up for it though with a drawing, a tattoo that he has specifically designed just for me, when I finally want to let him put a needle to my skin.

Tobias, my ever-thoughtful man gifts me a e-reader with a year's subscription on it. Also, a silver charm bracelet with multiple charms. A cupcake to represent Dominic, a book, a tiara for Zander, a blue rabbit, Spider-Man that's self-explanatory, a leaf of Lorien to represent Sebastian, a guitar for Atlas and the one that pulls tears into my eyes is the custom made one in rose gold, a beautifully simple charm that reads 'Chloe.'

Atlas is last, something he insisted on. He gifts me perfume that smells of vanilla and jasmine. He tells me he's wrote a song for me that he will only perform for me when we are on our first date. When I think that we are finally finished, he holds up a finger and jogs out of the room, my bed is

absolutely covered in all the gifts I've received, and I don't think I could possibly get anymore, when he returns carrying a brown woven basket with a lid, a bright blue bow on top.

He places the basket gently in front of me, then steps back, nodding at me to open it. Pulling off the bow, I remove the lid, but my arms freeze when big brown soulful eyes peer back at me. A pure white husky puppy is sat in the basket, trying my best not to scare the poor soul, I place the lid down then reach in to pull him out, letting him smell my hand before I lift him. What I once thought was a pure white dog, is actually a white face, with a black saddle pattern on his back. Big brown eyes stare back at me, as I look at him in awe.

"He's seriously for me?" I ask Atlas.

"Yup, cleared it with your dad too. Figured we could train him to be your guard dog."

"Oh, but we don't want that do we" I coo at the dog in my arms "you're going to be my bestest boy ever."

"We're going to have to get another dog, aren't we?" Tobias grumbles.

"Yup. Get me all the doggo's. I don't mind if we train him, but he will be treated like family. He will be allowed on the sofa, and will be treated as a family member, not some poor guard dog. He also sleeps in the bed. Don't you baby." His tail wags furiously, letting out a small bark. "Come on baby, let's get you some treats." I pick him up again, scooting off the bed and make a beeline for the kitchen, hoping there's some cooked chicken there for him.

"What an adorable puppy." Mrs McKay coo's over the small bundle of fluff.

"I know right? And he's all mine." I smile at the puppy in my arms, who's happily snuggled there.

"What are you going to name him Sugar?"

Thinking on it for a moment, I light up. "Nanook."

"Nanook? As in from The Lost Boys?" Sebastian questions as he walks into the room, the others following behind him.

“Uh huh. You want your name to be Nanook baby?” I ask the fluff ball in my arms, snagging a piece of chicken from the worktop to feed him.

“Have we seriously lost our girlfriend to the dog?” Zander grumbles to the others, his brows furrowed.

“Your biggest mistake was only buying me one dog. Now I’m going to dedicate all my time to Nanook here, because I’ll be oh so worried that he’s lonely without a friend to play with.” I tell them, letting Nanook on the floor, while I sit across from him, while he chews on my fingers.

Step one – Neglect them for the new puppy.

Step two – Acquire another dog, because they don’t want to share my attention.

Step three – Repeat until I own all the doggo’s.

“You want another dog Cupcake?” Dominic asks me seriously “because I’ll get you another, just say the word.”

“Word.” I tell him seriously. I’m serious, I want more dogs.

“No more dogs.” My dad announces as he walks into the room, ruining all my fun.

“What if I said please?”

“No.”

“You’re no fun.” I stick my tongue out at him, narrowing my eyes. Nanook decides I’m obviously not paying him enough attention because he decides to bite my big toe. “Ow! You little shit!” I scold, as I hold my throbbing toe. Laughter surrounds me, everyone laughing at my misfortune. Glaring at the little traitor, I stand up and turn to get myself some breakfast. A plate is thrust into my face from Mrs McKay making my eyes cross. Looking down at the holy grail of birthday breakfast foods, I kiss her on the cheek and take my plate of golden pancakes, smothered in maple syrup with crispy bacon to the dining table. I can’t contain the groan that slips free as I shovel the food into my mouth. Once I’m done, I sneak my plate to the sink and wash my dish before Zander or

Mrs McKay can catch me, and then bolt to my room to get changed for college.

Dressed in black leggings, a stolen t-shirt from Sebastian and my converse, I head out, grabbing a pale pink hoodie on the way. “Come on! I have Literature and don’t want to be late!” I shout from the doorway. Arms band around my waist, Dominic’s scent surrounding me, making me want to press my nose to his throat and just inhale. Seriously, why does men’s aftershave smell so damn good? And why does it last longer than perfume.

“Happy birthday Cupcake.” He whispers in my ear, making me shiver. Leaning back into him, I tilt my head up for a kiss, something he happily obliges. Before it can deepen, my dad appears next to us.

“Paws off my daughter in front of me, please. I do not need those images in my head.” He looks at Dominic pointedly.

“Sure thing boss-man.” Dominic two finger salutes him, striding out the front door. Giving my dad a peck on the cheek and a quick side hug, I rush after Dominic, ready to honestly get this day over with and get back to Nanook.

The day passes really quick since I only had one class, Ellie got me a bag full of snacks and coerced me into a sleepover in the a few weeks’ time. I apologized to Shan, feeling bad for the knife incident, but the girl is too sweet for her own good, she just hugged me and told me not to think about it anymore. We finish off the night watching Game of Thrones, dad got me a huge chocolate cake and Mrs McKay surprised me with a raspberry cheesecake. Nanook stayed cuddle up to my side the whole night, a lot of grumbling came from the guys when they realised that one side of me was now permanently taken by him.

Tobias pauses the show, turning his body to face me. “Babygirl, we have one more present for you.”

“You have already got me enough.” They got me a dog for god sake, what else could they possibly give me.

“Well, this one is more special. We thought it would be a nice way to finish off your birthday.”

“What is it?”

Sebastian hands me his iPad, a black screen faces me with a play button, ready for me to press. Hesitantly I tap the screen.

Chloe’s angelic face looks back at me, his red hair pulled into her signature braids with the pink bows. Her baby blue dress makes her eyes shine brighter than usual. Quickly hitting pause, I look back up to everyone, tears already swimming in my eyes.

“How?” I croak.

“I hacked her school database looking for some photos of her, we were hoping to get some to get professionally printed for you, but I found this instead. You don’t have to watch it if you don’t feel up to it Sunshine.” Sebastian tells me.

Dominic’s hand settles on my thigh, giving it a squeeze to let me know he’s there and Nanook seems to bury in closer to me, sensing that I need that comfort right now.

“N-no, it’s ok. I’d like to watch it.”

“Do you want to be alone when you watch it Pumpkin?” Atlas asks me. Honestly, how did I get so lucky to have these people in my life.

“I think I need you all here while I do. That is if you don’t mind.”

“Not at all Little Monster, we’re all right here.” Dad tells me, a small smile gracing his lips.

Blowing out a shaky exhale, my trembling fingers reach out to press the play button over Chloe’s face.

*“Do you know what we are doing today Chloe?” Mrs Fraser asks Chloe.*

*“Uh huh. We are talking about our heroes.” She nods as she speaks. The little bows on the end of her braids bouncing with the movement.*

*“And who is your hero?”*



*“My sister. She’s the bestest.” Chloe tells her teacher with a grin that takes over her whole face.*

*“And why is your sister your hero?”*

*“She’s superrrr nice to me and plays with me.”*

*“Is that all?”*

*“Nope! Autumn makes the bestest food for me too. My favowite is nuggets but she watches The Lion King with me too.”*

*“She sounds like a good big sister, doesn’t she?”*

*“Uh huh. The bestest big sister in the whole wide world. I love her this much.” She stretches her arms as wide as they can go.*

*“Wow, that is a lot.” Mrs Fraser says with a small laugh.*

*“The most. Autumn doesn’t let me ever get hurt. She takes the boo-boo’s away for me.” Chloe’s eyes turn down with a small frown, her eyes turning sad at whatever she is thinking about.*

*“Why does that make you sad Chloe?” Mrs Fraser enquires.*

*“Because I wish I could take her boo-boo’s away too.”*

*“Oh sweetheart, I’m sure you do.”*

*Mrs Fraser comes around the camera and crouches down to Chloe, pulling her into a cuddle, where she sniffles into her teachers shoulder. She pulls away, her nose is red and a little snotty, her eyes are puffy.*

*“Are you ok sweetie?” Mrs Fraser asks her.*

*“Yes Mrs Fraser.”*

*“Do you want to stop? We can always do it again tomorrow.”*

*“No, I’m okie. Autumn says I’m a big girl, and big girls wipe their tears and get up and cawwy on.” And that’s exactly what she does, she wipes away her tears from her face and continues on with the video, telling Mrs Fraser all about me, of all the things I did for her and how much she loves me.*

By the end of the video, I can’t even hear her speaking anymore because of how loud my sobs are. She really did love me. Tobias takes the iPad from my hands and passes it back to

Sebastian, then he's lifting me into his arms and striding out of the room.

"Come on Babygirl, lets run you a bath." He tells me, as he sits my ass on the worktop in my bathroom, before he's running me a bath. As it runs, he steps between my legs, with a wet warm facecloth. He wipes away my tears, kissing my eyelids and cheeks as he does. I pull him into a sweet kiss, thanking him without words for being there for me.

"Get your cute butt into the bath. We are all setting up in your room for the night, so we'll all be right outside if you need someone."

"C-can you ask Dominic to come in?" I ask, my fingers trembling. Tobias's eyebrow raises but doesn't say anything else, just kisses my forehead and leaves the room. I know Dominic seems like the least likely option for comfort, but I can feel the darkness trying to pull me under and I really need the light he gives me right now.

Soaking in the water, bubbles covering me to my shoulders, a knock at the door pulls me out of my spiralling thoughts.

"Come in." I call out. Dominic's blonde hair peers around the doorframe, his eyes are filled with concern, and maybe a little sadness too.

"You want me here?" he asks me.

"I need you right now." I tell him honestly. I don't feel the need to hide with Dominic, he gets it.

"You have me Autumn, always."

"Can you sit next to the tub and just talk to me?"

"Whatever you need."

Closing my eyes, I sink down to my chin in the bubbles, listening to him talk about a new tattoo piece he's working on.

"You know, I made a similar video when I was in school." His words pull me from my thoughts.

"Who was your hero?"

“My foster mom. Kathleen took me in as a baby, I was born with NAS. Which is neonatal abstinence syndrome, I was born an addict and she took in this tiny little baby that was going through these horrible withdrawals. She saved me though, me and one other boy who she adopted around the same time as me. I was a little shit, but Kathleen stood by me no matter what I did.”

“So she was your hero?”

“One hundred percent. She is my mom, and I love her to bits. She was the only person other than the guys to understand I’m not all there, but she loves me anyway.”

“I love her already.” I tell him. I’m glad he had a stable mother figure in his life, after he was failed before he was even born.

“Good. Because she won’t leave me alone about meeting you.”

My face must be horrified, because he starts to panic. “I promise Cupcake, she’ll love you. Please don’t panic, you don’t have to if you don’t want to.”

Oh bless his poor heart. “No, no I do want to. It’s just such a massive step meeting your families, that’s all. I guess I never really thought about it.”

“There’s no rush, whenever you are ready Cupcake.”

“Maybe soon, just not right now.”

“Got it. I think it’s time you get out now, you are looking more like a wrinkled grape rather than a sexy little lobster.” He cackles as he stands up.

“Aghh” I splash water over him before he manages to escape “I will cut you Dominic! Don’t test me.” I shout after him.

“So hot Cupcake!”

“Stop threatening Dominic, Princess and get your cute butt out of that bath.” Zander shouts through the door.

“Fine! Someone better grab my puppy so I can get some nighttime snuggles!” I shout back.

“Already taken care of. He was taken out for last toilets too.”

“You’re the best! Thankyou!”

Finding my clothes, I crawl into bed with Atlas and Tobias, Nanook laid in between me and Tobias. The others get comfortable on the floor surrounding us.

“I really should have asked for a new bed for my birthday.” I joke.

“We can arrange that, now sleep Princess.” Zander answers from somewhere on the floor.

“Goodnight guys.” I tell them all.

All of them wish me a goodnight, and a last happy birthday. With a kiss on the forehead from Tobias and the press of his lips to my shoulder from Atlas, I drift off.

# Chapter 22

## Autumn

I have my first official date with Atlas tonight, he insisted that he had to be the one to take me on my first date, since it's also his. Something that makes me immensely happy. We decided to wait a while longer before we did something together, and now that it's March we figured now is a good time since the weather is warmer. Looking through my expansive closet for something to wear, I start to get incredibly overwhelmed, do I need to look smart, or is it just something more casual? Deciding to just message him and ask so I don't ruin the date by wearing the wrong thing, I stride over to my phone.

Autumn

7:02PM What should I wear?

Atty.

Where whatever you want Pumpkin,

it's a casual date. 7:03PM

Breathing out a sigh of relief, I would have no doubt loved whatever he had planned but I'm so glad that our first is casual. Feeling like I can breathe a bit easier now the pressure has lessened, I continue my perusal of what to wear. Deciding to still try to look nice, I choose a sundress that is black with little daisies covering it, pairing it with my converse and a thin white pull over cardigan. After having an internal debate on whether or not to curl my hair, I settle on quickly straightening it and then pulling it up into a sleek ponytail. Doing a quick makeup look that's full coverage with some eyeliner and mascara, I make sure that the scar on my neck is covered as much as possible. I know the guys don't mind it, but to me it's a constant reminder, and I don't want to dwell on it tonight.

A knock at my bedroom door startles me, opening it reveals a scowling Brenn, who looks over my outfit and starts to shake his head. Looking down at what I'm wearing with a frown I start to panic if it's wrong.

“What? Do I look stupid? Should I change?” I rapid fire at my brother.

Shaking his head again, he pulls me in for a hug “You look beautiful Little Bear.” He compliments me.

“Thankyou” I deflate “I know it seems stupid since I know him already but I’m so nervous.” I ramble, I need him to calm me down because I can feel myself starting to spiral.

“It’ll be fine Autumn. This is Atlas, the exact same Atlas who has been in love with you since you were children.”

I pull back, looking up at my big brother.

“Exactly! What if we go on this date and he realises that he doesn’t actually like me at all. People change, what if he’s just built me up in his head and I can’t meet those expectations. I can’t lose him Brenn, it’ll kill me.”

Before I can continue with my rant, a voice appears at the doorway.

“Can I have a moment with my girlfriend?” Atlas asks, his voice hard.

Brenn just nods and starts to leave, pressing a quick kiss to my forehead. Atlas closes the door the moment Brenn leaves the room, before marching over to where I’m stood, my arms wrapped around my middle. Stopping before me, he puts his hands on my shoulders, and leads me over to the bed, making me sit on the edge. He gets down on his knees, and scoots forward, my legs naturally parting for him to fit between. He cups my face, making me look him in the eyes.

“You think I want anything more from you, than what you can give me?” Atlas asks me, his tone hard.

“Well no, but I’m just so scared to lose you.”

“You never will Autumn, ever. I have no expectations for you, apart from that you just be who you are. I love you because you are you.”

“But...” I trail off, looking away from him.

“But?”

“What if I’m not enough?”

“You are more than enough Pumpkin. I don’t know how to make it clearer, that I will only ever want you. If you told me today that we were done, I’d stalk you from the shadows just so I could still be in your presence.”

“You’re crazy.”

“Crazy about you. Now how about I show you how crazy I am about you, then you let me take you out on that date I promised.”

“Ok?”

I expect him to pull me in for a kiss, something we haven’t really moved past since the night I grinded on him. But Atlas is full of surprises tonight apparently, because he lays me back on the bed and pushes the skirt of my dress up my thighs until it’s around my waist. He kisses up my parted thighs as he does, gently grazing the skin with his teeth. I can feel my breaths coming in pants already, wishing he would stop teasing me, but I know he needs to do this just as much as I need him to do this to me. To make me feel desired and wanted. Atlas’s teeth grazing over my panties, brings me out of my thoughts.

“Can I touch you baby?” he asks me.

“Please.” I whine.

His fingers dip into the hem of my panties and pulls them down my legs before letting them fall to the floor. His palms cover the inside of my thighs, before he’s pushing my legs open wider, then inches his hand up towards my shaved pussy. His thumb parts my folds, lightly grazing over my swollen clit from how turned on I am right now. He continues to slowly move it up and down my folds, before circling over my clit. He teases my entrance with his middle finger, before sliding it into my heat. Working in tandem with his thumb circling my nub.

“I want to touch you too.” I beg.

Pulling back from where he was watching his finger fuck me, he searches my face.

“You don’t have to. This is about you.”

“I want to. *Please.*” I whine. I need to touch him, to feel his cock in my hand too, as he makes me feel good. He withdraws his finger, and sucks it into his mouth, his eyes rolling back into his head.

“You taste like heaven Pumpkin. Fuck.”

He stands from his spot between my legs and undoes his belt.

“Take my cock out baby.” He tells me.

Reaching out with shaky fingers, I undo his button on his jeans, before pulling down the zipper. Shucking them down around his thick thighs, I stroke over the outline of his hard cock in his boxers. He shudders. Feeling empowered to continue, I don’t pull him out just yet, I keep running my fingers over his cloth covered cock, gently grazing my nails over it too. His hand comes to wrap around my hand, making me squeeze his cock. It’s thick, and long.

“I don’t think that’s ever going to fit in me.” I tell him with a gulp.

“We’ll make it fit baby, now pull down my boxers and wrap your hand around my cock, while I make you feel good too.”

I do as I’m told and pull down his boxers. His cock springs out, it’s hard and angry looking right now, precum leaking at the tip.

“You see what you do to me Autumn? No-one other than you has ever made me this hard. No-one other than you has ever touched this cock. It’s yours baby. Whatever you want to do to it, it’s all for you.” He tells me, before he’s pushing me to lay back down. He comes to kneel at my side, his cock within grasp of my hand, while he begins to run his hand over my pussy again, before dipping his finger back in between my folds.

“Fuck, you are so fucking wet Autumn.” He groans.

Wrapping my hand around his bare length, I gently start to stroke it. It’s soft and velvety feeling, and suddenly I have the urge to know what it’ll feel like inside my mouth. So I prop



myself up on my arm, using my other hand to keep stroking him. Atlas inserts a second finger, and crooks them inside me, making me gasp.

“Fuck.” I breathe out.

I lean forward as far as I can and take the head of his cock into my mouth, sucking on it, while using my hand to stroke near the base. Atlas bucks into my mouth.

“Fuck baby, you don’t have to do that.”

Pulling back, I continue with my strokes.

“I want to. I want to know what you taste like.” I tell him, before taking his cock back into my mouth before he can say anything else. I can feel my orgasm building, so I start to suck faster, matching with my strokes, as he fucks my pussy with his fingers, his thumb circling my clit. I can feel my pussy fluttering around his fingers, my orgasm nearly there.

“Come for me Autumn. Come all over my fingers.” He demands. So I do. I scream out my release around his cock, muffling my moans.

He continues to pump his fingers in and out of me slowly, prolonging my orgasm. Swirling my tongue around the head of his cock, I can taste the saltiness of his precum, and I know he’s close. He tries to pull away “I’m going to cum baby.” But I just tap him on the thigh once and continue my ministrations. He withdraws his fingers from inside of me, and uses my juices to circle my clit, working his fingers in a circle, moving faster until I can feel another orgasm building inside of me. I shatter again, but this time he follows me over the edge. His salty cum filling my mouth. Swallowing it, I realise it doesn’t taste terrible. Pulling my mouth from his cock with a pop, I look up at him but he’s smiling down at me with a heated expression. Before I can protest, he’s pulling me up into his arms, kissing me wildly even though I’ve just swallowed his cum.

“I love you Pumpkin.”

“I love you Atty.”

“Always have, always will.” He tells me.

I repeat the same, before snuggling my head into the crook of his neck, feeling sleepy.

“Come on Pumpkin, we still have a date to get to.”

He stands with me, placing me on the ground before placing his flaccid cock back into his boxers and pants.

“I’ll meet you downstairs.” Atlas tells me, before he walks out of my room after quickly kissing me again.

I quickly right my dress before rushing into the bathroom, to pee and then brush my teeth. Replacing the panties he took off of me with a clean pair, I check my hair and make-up.

Deciding I look good, I make way downstairs, and come face to face with all my boyfriends.

“What are you all doing here?” I ask them.

“We’ve came to have a game night with Brenn. But now I want to crash your date. You look so fucking beautiful Babygirl.” Tobias strides towards me, takes my hand and makes me give him a twirl “Perfection.” He says before he dips me for a kiss.

“Thankyou.” I blush. Thank god for make-up. Otherwise they’d all see how red I feel right now.

“Fuckkk me Cupcake. How about you ditch golden boy here and let me show you how hot I think you are right now.” Dominic bounds over to me, twirling me in his arms, until my back is pressed against his front, he nips my neck with his teeth, causing me to groan. Matching groans surround us, breaking me out of the little bubble Dominic created around us.

“Paws off. She’s mine tonight.” Atlas growls out, causing my already damp panties to get wetter.

“But.. Sharing is caring.” Dominic pouts, then grunts when I elbow him in the ribs.

“No.” I tell him, removing myself from his arms and move towards Atlas. Before I even get a few steps away, I’m being pulled into an all-encompassing embrace. Sinking into

Zanders embrace, I breathe him in. He smells like freshly baked bread and rosemary, which means he's making focaccia.

"Save me some bread Muffin-man."

"Anything for you Princess." His voice rumbles, causing shivers to travel down my spine. His head tips down, so I go on my tiptoes to meet him halfway. He pulls me in for a kiss, deeper than normal but still not enough. This time I can't help but pout.

"Soon Princess, I promise." He tells me, kissing me on the forehead, then pushes me into the arms of Sebastian with a pat on my bum.

"Well hello there Sunshine. You looking forward to your date?"

"Yup." I tell him with a bright smile.

"Have fun!" He tells us both, kissing me on the lips, before letting me go.

My dad walks in, coming over to me and pulling me into a side hug "You look gorgeous Little Monster" he tells me before turning to Atlas "be good to my little girl." He growls, before turning on his heel and stalking out of the room.

"Shiver. Actual shivers." Dominic says, showing his arm that has goosebumps. Raising a brow at him in response, he just shrugs before saying "You're dad is a scary guy Cupcake. You can't blame me."

"My dad is not scary." I protest but all the guys just do that weird choke laugh. Rolling my eyes, I finally manage to make my way over to Atlas. Linking my arm through his.

"Ready Pumpkin?"

"Yup. Get me out of here, before Dominic tries to steal me again." I laugh.

"Got it." he says, before he's lifting me in his arms bridal style and running out of the backdoor, towards the lake.

Halfway there, he tells me to close my eyes, and I happily oblige.

“Open.”

I can't contain the gasp that slips out of me. There's a blanket by the lake, filled with pillows, and little tealight candles in mason jars. There's a basket, which I'm hoping contains food, and some Coca-Cola cans next to it in a box of ice. The tree that's next to the picnic blanket, has string lights wrapped around it, and hanging from the branches, with a warm glow. Tears spring to my eyes, when I realise how much effort he's put into it.

“You did all this?”

“I had some help, Dominic manage to spider monkey his way up the tree to hang the lights, and Zander cooked the food because I apparently can't be trusted to feed his Princess right. His words, not mine.”

“Thank you Atty, this is amazing.”

“Come on, let's get you some food, before Zander comes out and force feeds you.”

He leads me over to the beautifully lit blanket, and helps me lower to the ground, before placing a brown blanket over my legs. Sitting down next to me, our thighs touching, he drags the blanket so it's covering us both. We decide to play twenty questions while we eat.

“If you could have any superpower, what would it be?” I ask.

“Does the world already have hero's, or would I be the only one?” Atlas counters.

“Hmm...” I think, tapping my chin with my finger like a villain “there's other hero's.” I tell him.

“Then I'd want to have regeneration like Deadpool.”

“Lameee.” I drag the word out.

“Ok, miss smarty pants. What would your power be?”

“I would be a borrower. One touch and I store that person's powers, that I can use whenever I like, and that person will never even know that I did it.”

“Wow! I didn’t know that my girlfriend was actually a supervillain.” He mock gasps.

“I am not a villain!” I protest, throwing a chocolate covered strawberry at his head.

“That’s villain behaviour baby.” He plucks the strawberry from his lap and pops it into his mouth.

We finish off the food from the basket. Zander put so much thought into it, considering it wasn’t even his date. A spread of chocolate covered strawberries, roast chicken and pepper subs and his homemade macaroni cheese topped with breadcrumbs, bacon bits and tomatoes. It was warm too, so the cheese was perfectly gooey. Remembering to thank him later for being so thoughtful, I turn my thoughts back to the man sat next to me.

“You have one last question to ask.” I remind him, turning my body to face him instead of the lake, reaching over, I link our hands together, his dwarfing mine.

“What do you want your future to look like?” he asks me.

“I don’t know.” I answer honestly. Atlas’s eyes fill with hurt. “I don’t mean that in a bad way, it’s just before my future was going to be raising Chloe. Then that was ripped away from me. I nearly died; I did die. Now I’m just trying to survive, I love you and I’m falling in love with the others, but I’m still trying to figure out what my life looks like without Chloe.”

“I understand.” And I know he does, but I can still see the lingering hurt in his eyes, so I continue.

“I know you do. I just need you to know, that the future I see has all of you in it. We might not be happy all the time, but we would be happy.”

The hurt fades from his eyes, replaced by fierce determination.

“You know, I will do everything in my power to make you happy every single day of our lives.”

“And I appreciate that, but it’s not logical. We’ll have fights” he opens his mouth to protest but I raise my finger to stop him “We’ll have fights and god do I want us too, because it’s

normal. I want normal with you Atlas. I want normal with you all.”

Atlas doesn't say anything, but he reaches over and drags me into his lap. His hand curls in my hair, before he pulls me into a heated kiss that makes my toes curl.

“I want normal with you too Pumpkin.”

Stroking my fingers over the tattoo that he got for me, I can't help but hope that we'll get that one day. I'm not delusional enough to think that it will happen right away and maybe not ever, but I can hope that we get to have what we consider normal, since our relationship dynamic is unique. I want them all to come home to me every night, I want children with them all. I want everything with them. Slowly over the last five months, these men have wormed their way into my patchworked heart. It will never be whole, not without Chloe, but it's close since they have all filled it with so much love since they met me.

Yawning, I lean into Atlas further, his arms flex around my waist.

“I love you Autumn. Always have, always will.”

“I love you too. Always have, always will.”

“Let's get you home to your bed you're beat, and I don't want my ass kicked because I kept you out all night.”

“Ok.” I say around another yawn.

I help Atlas pack up the picnic, he left the lights around the tree when I asked. Hoping it can become a place that I can come to when I want to be alone. We head back to the house, laughing and joking on the way. Atlas opens the backdoor for me and gestures for me to go ahead, as I step through, I hear the others laughing in the games room. Dropping the blanket I was carrying onto the dining room table; I take off into a sprint to the room.

“Autumn! Slow down before you slip!” Atlas bellows after me.

Refusing to listen, I run straight into the room, beelining for Zander. Plopping myself into his lap, dislodging the controller he was holding and wrap my arms around his middle.

“Thank you for preparing all that food for our date. I loved it.” I tell him, planting a wet kiss to his cheek.

Zander’s ears turn pink, so unlike the gentle giant I’m used to.

“You’re welcome Princess.” He kisses my cheek back, then pulls me further into his embrace, stroking his hand over my thigh. Resting my head on his shoulder, I get a front row seat to a huffing Atlas, storming through the doorway.

“I told you to slow down.” He huffs out.

“Uh oh. What did you do?” Zander whispers into my ear. Looking up at him, I try my best to make myself look as innocent as possible.

“Me?” I say, pointing at myself “I did nothing, I may or may not have lightly jogged here so I could say thank you.”

“Uh huh.” He says disbelievingly.

“Liar. You sprinted here. You still need to be careful. You could have slipped.” Atlas admonishes.

“If I say sorry, will you come cuddle instead of being mad?”

“Maybe.”

“I’m sorry?”

“That’s not even a proper apology! It was more of a question.”

“What did you expect from a super-villain babe?”

“You are so lucky I love you.” He tells me, before he’s storming over, throwing himself into the seat next to Zander, grabbing my feet and pulling them into his lap. Quickly leaning over, I kiss his cheek too.

“Yes I am.”

Waking up in my bed is so disorientating since the last thing I remember is being in the games room with everyone. Realising I must have fell asleep, I turn over expecting to bump into a hard body but come up empty. Reaching for my

phone, knowing the guys always put it on my nightstand when I do this, I open it up to a text from Zander.

Zander

We all had to go to our own  
houses tonight Princess, we'll  
see you tomorrow. 11:10PM

Me

7:05AM Just woke up, missed you.

Deciding to get up and shower, I groan when I throw back the covers. A yip catches my attention, my gaze snapping to the floor, where my favourite ball of fluff sits, staring up at me with his big brown eyes.

“Well good morning Nanook.” I reach down and pick him up, giving him kisses. Changing my plans, I throw on one of the guys hoodies that they left in my room for me, and head out to the back garden to let Nanook out for a toilet, standing out on the patio, I scroll through my notifications and reply to the messages that Shan and Ellie left. Looking up, I check that Nanook hasn't gone far, when my phone dings with a message, assuming it's one of the girls or Zander replying, I click it without thinking.

Unknown

You looked cozy last night. 7:10AM

Unknown

Why are you allowed to move  
on and date, when Chloe will  
never get that privilege. 7:10AM

Unknown

Did she mean nothing to you? 7:11AM

Me

7:11AM You know nothing about  
me or Chloe.

Me



7:11AM Leave me alone.

Unknown

I know everything Autumn. 7:11AM

Unknown

I wonder what those boys would  
think if they knew how you never  
protected her. 7:12AM

Deciding to just ignore the messages, I lock the phone with shaky fingers and call for Nanook to come in. Unable to shake the feeling of being watched, I look up running my eyes over the whole back garden. The woods behind the house are too dense to see anything. Figuring I'm just freaking myself out, I turn back around and head back into the house, filling Nanook's bowl up with fresh water and food before finally deciding to shower.

My hands won't stop shaking when I reach for the knobs, but I manage to turn them to scalding. Stripping off, I jump into the shower before it's barely had time to heat up. Soon the bathroom is filled with steam. Unable to shake the messages from my head, I sink to the shower floor, my body racking with sobs, my tears blending in with the water. They are right, I barely protected her, and in the end it wasn't enough. Chloe's still dead, and I'm still here. Digging my nails into my upper arm so hard I draw blood, the bite of pain grounding me, so I do it again and again, until my bicep is covered in little crescent moon markings, the blood mixing with the water. I don't know how long I sit on the shower floor, just watching the blood-stained water travel down my arm, dripping onto the floor next to me. The sting from the small cuts, making my head finally feel clear, like I've punished myself for failing my sister. Realising that the guys will be here soon, I quickly wash, cleaning the cuts as I go, then turn off the water and wrap my towel around me.

Dressing in a black long-sleeved shirt today with leggings and my brown flats, I decide to go out in the garden and do some training with Nanook to try keep my mind clear.

I spend most of my afternoon out in the garden with the dog, training him to learn a few tricks while also playing with him so he doesn't get too bored before bringing him in to snuggle on the couch with me and watch a film.

The guys arrive not long after, they notice I'm a bit off today but none of them push and I don't tell them. I don't need to bother them with this, I know I should but honestly I can't bring myself to care if this is a threat because I know I failed Chloe. Nothing they are saying is a lie. So I just enjoy the time with everyone that I have. Snuggled in between Zander and Tobias, Nanook on my lap and the others surrounding me, I allow myself this small bite of happiness for now.

# Chapter 23

## Autumn

June comes flying around. I've been with the guys for five months now. They've all taken me on individual dates, multiple times and I've gotten closer to each of them. They stay over regularly but still go home a few times a week to see their own parents apart from Tobias. He still stays over here a lot more since his dad is still a dick, but he gives me my space, something I insisted on. While I love spending time with them, I know I need to be alone sometimes, so I don't depend on them too much. He does sneak into my room at night when I scream from my nightmares.

Dad is still in denial about my mental health, assuring me that I still need to get used to being here with them. I think he does it because he thought everything would be fine once he found me, not expecting me to be this damaged. He tries, I know he does but there's times I wish he would really listen to what I'm trying to tell him.

Brenn is always in my corner, and still sneaks me chocolate even when Zander tries to stop him, claiming that, that much chocolate is bad for me. He gave that up the moment I gave him the puppy dog eyes.

Talking about puppies, Nanook has grown so much over the last three months. He's fully trained now, just needs more direct training for certain commands but he gets me through the day. He's gave me routine and helps with the bad thoughts I sometimes get.

I'm still getting messages, whenever I leave the house or do something fun. It's brought my mental health down drastically; I'm barely eating now because I constantly feel sick at the idea of someone watching me. The guys have noticed and have tried to talk to me about it, but I just can't so I tell them a bullshit reason like my nightmares have just gotten bad again. Which isn't a lie, I'm either waking up every night screaming or in a cold sweat. I can see the worry in their eyes, but I just

don't have anything left in me to try reassure them or to fake it.

Hurting myself helps, I'm only using my nails still, refusing to go further because I'm sure the guys would notice, but I need it to clear my head. I should probably stop but I just can't.

"You ready to go Babygirl?" Tobias walks into the room, coming over to me, his gaze raking over me where I sit on the end of my bed, I've taken to wearing long-sleeved shirts everyday even as the temperature gets hotter, refusing to allow them to see the marks I leave on my upper arms. His eyebrows furrow in concern when my lifeless eyes lift up from looking at the same spot on the floor to him.

"Yeah, I'm ready." I stand up, walking over to him and kissing him. Kissing them is the only time, I truly feel alive nowadays, so I do it often and they always oblige me.

He leads me downstairs and out the front door to the black SUV pulled up in front of the front door. The others sitting inside and in the other car. Tobias opens the door to the back seat, lifts me and secures my seatbelt. Grabbing hold of his arm, I stop him from moving away.

"Thank you." I tell him. I'm thanking him for more than just buckling me in, I'm thanking him for being my rock. I know he's noticed that I'm not right and while the others have noticed, he's noticed all of the smaller details, but he hasn't said anything yet and I am so thankful he hasn't because I genuinely think I would shut down at that point.

"I got you Babygirl." He kisses me softly before pulling away, closing the door, and climbing into the front passenger seat.

Dominic scoots closer to me, putting his arm around my shoulders.

"Missed you Cupcake." He kisses me too, demanding I open to him. His hand clasps over my throat, running his thumb over my pulse point. The darkness lifts in me a little more being around him. The knife he gifted me for my birthday sits in its holster against my thigh, comforting me even when he's not with me. It's become a part of me, just like he has.

“Missed you too.” I murmur against his lips, before kissing him again. Pulling his bottom lip between my teeth, I gently bite down making him moan.

“Alright, enough you two before I end up crashing this car.” Zander scolds us from the driver seat, making me giggle.

“But she tastes so good.” Dominic moans.

“Don’t care. Paws off until we get to where we’re going.”

“And where are we going Muffin-man?” I ask him as I lean forward, sticking my head through the centre.

“When am I going to get a nickname Cupcake?” Dominic nips at my ear.

“When you earn it.” I scold. Turning my attention back to Zander “So…”

“It’s a surprise Princess, but we’ll be there soon.”

Sitting back, I cuddle into my light and just daydream while feeling lighter than I have in a while. A little while later, we’re pulling up to a bowling alley. Squealing, I try to undo my seatbelt to get out as fast as I can.

“Are we going bowling?” I ask them, bouncing in my seat.

“Yup. We’ve booked it for three games. You any good Princess?” Zander asks from the front seat.

“No clue, I’ve never been.”

“Well lets go then.” Dominic jumps out, rounding the car and flings open the door to my side, before he’s lifting me out and taking off at a jog towards the bowling, making me laugh.

“Dominic!” Tobias bellows across the parking lot, as Dominic narrowly misses us being hit by a car trying to leave. The others eventually catch up once we are inside, Atlas and Sebastian pulling me into a hug before we step up to pay and get our special shoes. I can’t contain my excitement, I’ve always wanted to go bowling, but we just never had the money when we left, and we just never went when I lived with dad before.

We spend the afternoon bowling against one another, I don't win but I do come second surprisingly. Dominic is exceptionally bad at the game, he even launched his bowl into another alley, knocking down the pins in that one and managed to slip and fall when he tried to do a trick shot that obviously failed. Sebastian won, Atlas came in third, Zander and Tobias were joint fourth and Dominic was last. Sebastian has a massive grin on his face.

"You a sore winner Sebastian?" I ask.

"Nope. But I did just win the right to ask you out on the next date."

Looping my arms around his neck, I pull him into a kiss. "Did you now? And what will this date be?"

"I'm thinking we should go see The Lord of the Rings re-run in cinemas. It will of course be a three-week date, one each Saturday so we can see them all, but we wouldn't want to only go see one of them now, would we?" he smirks at me.

"You mastermind." I tell him with a laugh, pulling him in for another kiss.

"That's cheating!" Dominic cries out "I can't go three Saturdays without seeing my Cupcake. I say we all go!"

"Would you like that Sunshine?" Sebastian questions.

"I mean, I wouldn't be against it. It's been a while since we all did something together more than one weekend in a row. Plus I don't want them missing out on the absolute masterpiece on the big screen."

"Then that's what we'll do but I need an alone date night with you too."

"Of course." I kiss him again. There's something absolutely addicting about kissing my men. I know I want to move further with them, but a few times when things have got hot and heavy between me and Atlas and I think we're going to finally have sex, I spiral. My panic attacks have only gotten worse, the feeling of being watched is constant now, even when I'm alone in my room.

“Come on, let’s get you fed.” Zander says, taking my other hand and leading me out of the bowling. We head to a small little Mexican restaurant, where a lovely older woman serves us. Her and Sebastian exchange a few words in Spanish, then she bustles off to get our food. It’s served with iced tea, something I’m grateful for since I feel so hot. When we finish up, we head back to my house, the guys deciding to stay over tonight.

“Cupcake, can I jump in your shower?” Dominic calls out down the hall.

“Yeah sure.” I shout back, while playing with Nanook on the dining room floor. We’re both stuck in a battle of wills in a game of tug of war, and I’m refusing to back down. He playfully growls at me, while shaking his head, and I mimic the sound, shaking my hands side to side, trying to dislodge his mouth from the toy so I can win. Finally Nanook drops the toy. “Victory!” I shout, before throwing the toy for him to fetch. When he flops down onto the cool floor with a huff, I can tell I’ve tired him out enough that I can leave without a shadow for a while. So I carefully get up, trying not to disturb him and head to my bedroom to get ready for bed.

Opening my room door, I can see that my bathroom door is slightly ajar, the water running from the shower.

“Fuck Cupcake.” I hear being groaned from the bathroom. Curiosity winning, I creep towards my ensuite bathroom door. Peeking through the slit, I can see Dominic through the shower screen door, steam billowing around the bathroom, but I can see him. One hand braced against the shower tile wall, the other wrapped around his large, thick cock. I’m captivated. I know I should leave, but my feet are glued to the spot, my eyes unable to look away from how he is stroking himself. He’s pleasuring himself slowly, his grip firm around his cock. Swirling around a bead of pre-cup over the tip. Is that piercings? Yep that is definitely piercings.

“Are you just going to stand there and watch Cupcake?”

Letting out a squeak of surprise, I stammer. “I-I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be a creep, I heard you moan my name and I

got curious.”

“I left the door open on purpose, and I knew the moment you entered the room.” He tells me “Now come here.” He demands and my feet start moving towards him before my brain can even catch up. I can feel the blush creeping up my neck and over my cheeks. While me and Dominic have only heavily made-out the last five months, we’ve never went past grinding on one another. Stopping next to the sink, I keep my head down, feeling mortified about being caught watching him, even if he did do it on purpose. I hear the shower screen door slide open, the water still running. Peering up at him through my lashes, he stalks towards me, his cock bobbing against his stomach as he walks, his piercings glinting in the light, making me gulp. I’ve never seen a pierced cock before; sure I’ve read about them, but I’ve never seen one in person.

“Do you like what you see Autumn?” I can hear the smirk in his voice, as he stops in front of me. I can’t stop looking at him, he’s beautiful, but utterly sinful.

“Sex on a stick.” I mutter under my breath, accidentally saying it out loud instead of in my head. Dominic chuckles, making the flush on my cheeks deepen. His chuckle promising filthy things.

He gently wraps his hand around my throat, backing me up to the bathroom counter until my ass is flush against it.

“You didn’t answer me Cupcake, do you like what you see?” tightening his grip around my throat, I can feel my panties getting damp, rubbing my thighs together to try get some friction where I desperately need it.

“Yes.” I whisper out. Dominic’s eyes darken with lust, his bright blue eyes turning a dark stormy colour. Roaming his hooded gaze over my body. My chest is heaving, my nipples hard and pebbled through my shirt, my thighs still trying to get me the friction I am so close to begging for.

“Are you feeling needy Cupcake? If I plunge my fingers into your tight wet heat, am I going to find you soaking for me?” running the pad of his thumb over my bottom lip, I instinctively part my lips, my tongue snaking out to lick it.



“Maybe.” I say back before I suck his thumb between my lips, swirling my tongue around it. As he draws it out from my mouth, I nip the pad between my teeth causing him to groan.

“Again.” He demands as he pushes his thumb back into my mouth and groaning when I do it again, his cock twitching against his stomach.

“Fuck Cupcake.” He growls out. Before I can register what’s happening he’s yanking down my leggings, then grabs me by the thighs and hikes me up onto the bathroom, making me gasp from the coldness on my butt and bare thighs.

“Dominic, what are you doing?” I squeak out.

“Having my dessert before dinner.” He sinks to his knees, prying my thighs apart with his tattoo’s hands, the rough callouses scraping against the smooth skin of my thighs, making me even wetter. Smirking up at me from his place on the floor, making me bite my lip so I don’t embarrass myself before he even touches me.

He parts my folds, rubbing his thumb over my clit, then circling it, while he blows cold air over my already sensitive nub. He’s barely even touched me, and I can already feel myself about to shatter. All the different sensations making me dizzy.

“Play with those perky tits for me baby.”

Instead of removing my top, because of my arms. I pull my top up, exposing my breasts to him. I obey, pinching my nipples between my fingers, gently rolling them, and tugging on them to make them more sensitive.

Dominic growls in satisfaction before he runs his tongue over my slit, gasping out in surprise because holy shit, I try to close my legs because this sensation is foreign to me, but he holds them where they are, tightening his grip on them. The slight bite of pain has my eyes rolling back in my head, letting out a loud moan.

“*Mine.*” He dives back in, eating my pussy like a man starved. Circling my clit with his tongue, he pushes a finger into my

slick heat, pumping his finger in and out while he lavishes my clit with his full attention.

“Fuck.” I gasp out, my head flopping back into the mirror. I can feel myself about to shatter, so I look back at my slightly unhinged golden retriever of a man, his eyes are closed, groaning as if he can’t get enough of how I taste. His free hand is wrapped around his cock, furiously pumping at the same pace that he is fucking my pussy with his fingers. The sight of it causes my pussy to clench around his fingers.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck.” I chant as my orgasm crashes over me. “Dominic!” I squeal out as he keeps sucking at my overly sensitive clit, his fingers still pumping inside of me, prolonging my orgasm.

“Fuck Autumn.” He groans out against my pussy, as he finishes over the bathroom floor “I’ve never tasted anything so delicious Cupcake, I think I’ve just found my favourite meal.”

Blushing I look away while quickly pulling down my top. Dominic rises back to his feet, stepping between my legs, careful of the mess he left on the floor. He grips my throat again, pulling me into a sweet and gentle kiss that shocks me.

“I-I’ve never done that before.” I tell him.

“I can’t say that I’m not glad to hear that Cupcake, the possessive caveman in me is practically salivating at the idea of having a first from you. I’ll wake you every day to me eating that beautiful pussy.”

“You’ll spoil me Pet.” I smile at him.

“Pet?! What sort of nickname is that?” he asks in outrage.

“The perfect one obviously. I call you an unhinged puppy in my head and I did just have you on your knees for me.” I smirk.

“I’ll have you on your knees next time, Cupcake. Count on it.”

Jumping down from the counter, glad my legs don’t wobble. I push him back, grab shorts from the floor and put them on. Grabbing my navy lace boy shorts, I tuck them into Dominic’s

hand, pat him on the chest then turn to leave. Grabbing the door handle, I crack the door open, turn my head to see Dominic's amused expression, I nod my head towards the panties in his hand.

"Something to remember this by Pet, and if you ever want me on my knees for you, you'd have to catch me first." Giggling I swing the door open, and break into a sprint back into my room, hearing his thundering footsteps as he rushes after me.

All the other guys are in my room, so I make a run for Atlas and hide behind him. Peeking around him, I get to witness, Dominic storming into my room, in all his tattooed naked glory. His still half hard cock, swinging around wildly.

"Dude!"

"Fucking hell Dominic! Put it away!"

"Why are you chasing Autumn, NAKED?!"

"Jesus Christ."

Breaking out into a fit of laughter, I lean my head against Atlas's back as I try to gain control of myself. Atlas's rumbling laugh jostles me and the others soon follow.

"She called me Pet." Dominic shudders.

"It's revenge for Lobster! Also I did have you on your knees for me!" I call from behind Atlas, feeling cocky since I know he'll keep me safe.

"You did now, did you?" Zander enquires, standing a lot closer than what he was before causing me to squeak.

"Yup." My voice coming out higher pitched than normal.

"Good to know Princess." He says, before he pulls me in for a heated kiss that makes my knees nearly buckle. Fucking hell, it feels like I've been waiting for him to kiss me like this, forever. Pulling back, he smirks at me "Come on, let's get you ready for bed." He leads me to my closet, then turns around and leaves to grab me Bun. Something I've needed to sleep with lately, otherwise I wake up calling for Chloe. The guys are tired, I can tell. It's why I've insisted they go home more often; I love having them with me, but when they are here,

they don't sleep. The only exception is Tobias, sometimes I manage to wake up before my screams wake him, and I'll just read until I pass out. Dressing in a thin jumper and sleep shorts, I crawl in between my covers, calling for Nanook to jump up for cuddles.

"We really need a bigger bed, if that dog is going to keep sleeping between us." Zander grumbles.

"Feel free to sleep on the floor if it's a problem." I deadpan. No-one is taking my fluffy cuddles from me.

"Not a chance." He growls, before slipping in on my left side, pulling my leg over his hip and burying my head into the crook of his neck. My favourite position. I'm falling asleep before Tobias even gets in on my other side.

Waking up surrounded by everyone, is still one of my favourite feelings in this world, even five months in but what I don't love is how sweaty I feel when I wake up surrounded by heat. Extracting myself from between Zander and Tobias, I grab my phone and head into the bathroom. More texts from the unknown number are waiting for me, just like they are every time I leave the house and do something. Deciding to just get it over and read them before I get in the shower, I open the text thread between me and the unknown person. Even though I know to expect it, what they say still hits me in the gut. I know in my heart they are right, and I feel so guilty for carrying on with my life, but I can't bring myself to hurt the guys. Skimming over the messages, two stick out the most. Putting those texts into the folder with the others, I lock my phone, throwing it to the counter with a clatter and strip off before stepping into the hot stream of water.

Unknown

You really never loved her. 3:12AM

Unknown

If you did, how would you move

on so easily. 3:12AM

My head keeps replaying those messages over and over again, in my head. They aren't wrong, I feel guilty as hell for moving

on with my life while Chloe's gone, but I can't bring myself to hurt the guys or my dad and Brenn. Deciding to quickly get out and changed so I can go sit out on the patio for a bit while everyone's asleep, I throw on another long-sleeved top with my leggings. Grabbing some cozy socks, I make my way out of the room. Finally getting there, I feel like all my energy is gone. I know I'm losing weight again, but I can't bring myself to eat, whenever I do I feel like I'm going to be sick, so I eat a few bits then move the rest around my plate. Zander's been grouchier lately, noticing my lack of appetite. Dominic has been winding everyone up around me, to try get me to at least crack a smile. Atlas has practically been glued to my side, constantly checking up on me. Tobias has a permanent scowl on his face, I know he understands but he doesn't like that I'm more withdrawn. And Sebastian, bless his heart, he's insisted on watching a film every night, all of us, even if they aren't staying overnight. They'll come by about 3pm and stay for dinner, we'll watch a movie, then they'll kiss me goodnight before going home.

"You ok Babygirl?" Tobias startles me from my thoughts as he walks over to where I'm sitting, Nanook cuddled into my side after playing for a while together.

"I guess." I shrug.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"Not really. I guess I just feel guilty for being alive, when she isn't, y'know?"

"I get it. it's not something you have to feel guilty over, but I understand why you do. You both went through something traumatic together, then you were both in that fire, and instead of you both getting out, unfortunately she didn't. you ever heard of survivors guilt?"

"Of course I have, but I don't think this is it. I was supposed to protect her, I told her over and over again that I would always protect her from danger. I didn't do that Tobias, I got out and she didn't. Now I'm sat here happy and moving on in my life. She doesn't get that chance."

“You’re stubborn Babygirl, I’ll give you that. I really think it’s time you look into getting therapy for this. No-one else is going to be able to convince your mind that it’s wrong, so I think talking to a professional might help.”

“Yeah, I think you’re right.” I sigh.

“We’ll all be right here, I promise.”

Laying my head on his shoulder, I throw Nanooks ball for him to chase. We sit like that for a while, just soaking in each other’s presence. Tobias pulls me into his lap at some point, his arms pulling me close to him. His lips caress my hairline.

“I love you Babygirl.” He tells me.

Turning to face him, I look over his face searching for the truth. All I can see looking back at me is love, his eyes soft.

“I love you too Spider-Man.” I reply, before pulling him into a deep kiss. Pulling back, my chest is heaving, his too. Tobias pulls me in for another kiss, before getting to his feet and dragging me inside. When we reach my room, I realise that the others must be up, but instead of getting to wonder where my other boyfriends are, I’m thrown on to the bed by Tobias, his body coming to cover my own. We spend the next hour in bed, making out and touching one another. He respects that I want to keep my top on, and I respect that he does too. I love this man so much; he has been my rock throughout this whole process.

# Chapter 24

## Autumn

Reading on my e-reader that Tobias gifted me for my birthday since the guys are out doing something for my dad, I get cuddled up in my bed with Nanook next to me and try to make my way through the mountain of books I downloaded with my subscription. Not like I'm poor anymore, so I could buy the books too, something I do when I really like a book, but my mountain of a library, doesn't agree.

Sucked into a world where a girl is in a multiple person romance like mine, makes my imagination work overtime, this book has everything I love and even has a character named the same as one of my men. The chase scene in this book, gets me hot every time I re-read it, because I can't help but imagine one of my men doing that with me. I've become extremely comfortable with sexual intimacy the last few weeks, still haven't had sex with any of them, but I'm so glad none of them try to rush me, not like any of them would. My guys are great, and treat me like a queen, even when I don't deserve it.

I've definitely spiralled down the rabbit hole of why choose/reverse harem the last few weeks since I got my e-reader, and I'm obsessed, not because I have my own harem or anything. Nooo, not at all, but it does give me some great ideas for when I finally take that leap with the guys, we've done some stuff, like me sucking Atlas's cock and Dominic eating my pussy like it was his last meal. Fuck, I really need to stop thinking about all this before I get myself all worked up. I turn my attention back to my e-reader, where the FMC and her men, help me forget all my worries for the next few hours.

My phone going off pulls my attention from my book, placing my e-reader down on to my nightstand, I search for my phone in the bundle of covers. Finally finding it with shout of triumph, I unlock it, all the blood drains from my face. I feel like I'm going to be sick. Racing from the bed, Nanook's panicked barking following me, my knees barely hit the tile in front of the toilet before I'm retching up my dinner. Tears

stream down my face, unable to get the message out of my head, I can feel the panic building up. The pain from losing Chloe, rushing to the forefront, like I'm losing her all over again.

Getting to my shakily, using the toilet bowl to push myself to standing, I turn on the tap for the bath, not caring what one I turned, just needing something to shock my system back into working. Climbing in, I don't even bother to remove my clothes. I just submerge myself in the water, I dunk my head under and hold my breath, until the heaviness in my chest changes from panic to my lungs screaming for air. Emerging from the water, gasping for air, I do it again and again until my lungs physically hurt when I try to take a breath.

Finally from the small bite of pain, my head feels a little clearer. I spot my razor on the side, and all the thoughts start to spiral in my head again, growing darker by the minute. Knowing my usual coping method with my nails, isn't going to work this time. I need the pain to take the thoughts away, I need to punish myself. I failed her. I let her down. She's dead because of me. All the text messages swim around in my head, repeating over and over about how much I let Chloe down. My mind is in a daze, and before I can register what I'm doing, I'm breaking the plastic surrounding the blades. I remove the blades successfully, nicking my fingertip I suck in a sharp gasp. I become entranced by the sharp sting of pain and the bright crimson drop of blood that wells on the end, dripping down my finger as I hold it up and inspect it. Pulling my sleeve up, I cut into my skin. Not deep enough to hit anything, I'm aware enough for that, but just enough to hurt myself, just deep enough to punish myself, to drown out all the thoughts in my head that never go away, all the expectations dad has for me, forcing me to pretend that I'm ok because he looks so damn happy to have me home.

The text messages forces itself to the forefront of my mind, unable to unsee it, I know I'll never be able to forget, I'll never be able to save her, never hold her again, never tell her how much I love her because she's dead. Dead because of me.

*Cut.*



A picture of Chloe, lying dead on the cool silver metal bed in the morgue, a white sheet covering her body. Her face chalklike, an ashy complexion, almost pure white. Her lips a deep blue, a dark contrast against her pale skin. Her once bright red hair, now lifeless, fanned around her. The worst of it, someone has opened her eyes. Her once blue sparkling eyes, that were full of life and mischief now stare back at me, like she's looking into my soul, knowing how much I let her down, that I didn't protect her like I promised I would. Now they are dull and milky, like all the light left her when she died in that fire.

*Cut.*

It's all your fault she's dead. That's what the message reads, something I became accustomed to over the last few months, but now seeing her laid out on that morgue, makes it more real. I could pretend when I held her ashes in my hand, I could pretend it wasn't my Chlo in that box but now, that picture has snapped something in my brain. I can't pretend anymore. They aren't wrong. Whoever is sending those messages is right. I broke a promise and now I'm the one still here, while she's gone.

*Cut.*

It's all my fault.

*Cut.*

I didn't protect her.

*Cut.*

And now she's dead because of me.

*Cut.*

Dropping the blade into the water with a plop, my head doesn't feel any clearer, but for the first time in months, I'm no longer pretending. I'm not ok, I shouldn't be ok. Washing my wounds, I get out of the bath, only now realising the water was freezing because I'm shaking. My teeth are chattering, and my whole-body trembles, now that the shock has left my body. Draining the water, I walk back into my room in soaking wet clothes. Wind batters against my windows, rain beating

against the house. Sighing because of course the rainy season starts now, fitting for how much of a mess I feel right now. Stripping off, I put on a long-sleeved top again, and some shorts, dumping my wet clothes in my hamper and climb into bed, I grab my phone and move the messages, trying not to look at the photo of Chloe again. I must lie in bed for hours, before I finally drift off to sleep.

*Me and Chlo are finally snuggled up in bed, watching The Lion King after a long day of work this is exactly what I needed. Chlo's covered us both with her blanket with the silver stars, Bun tucked in between us, because we both apparently need him to keep away any bad dreams that we might have, something that has been a common occurrence since we both escaped Mom. I now have full custody after a long battle with CPS, but we did it, and now Chlo is officially mine. Pulling her closer to me, I stroke her hair with a sigh, just enjoying sitting here with her in our little bubble of peace.*

*"Are you ok mommy?" She asks me.*

*"Of course, I am Chlo, are you?"*

*"I guess, I miss you and Bun though."*

*"How can you miss us, silly girl. We are both right here." I tell her, picking Bun up and cradling him into the nook of her arm. She lets out a massive sigh, furrowing her brow.*

*"I guess so."*

*"You want to sleep in here tonight?" I ask, hoping to cheer her up with a sleepover since she seems down for some reason.*

*"No, it's ok." she sighs again.*

*"Are you sure? You know I love our little sleepovers."*

*"I'm sure mommy. I need to go back tonight."*

*She looks so sad, but I won't push her, I know how important it is to have your own space sometimes. About an hour later, the film finishes, and Chlo is half asleep next to me. As tempted as I am just to leave her, I know she doesn't want to sleep here tonight, so I wrap her in her blanket and carry her back to her room. Her moon nightlight is on, so I don't need to turn on her*

*main light or trip over her toys while trying to navigate my way to her bed. Pulling back her pink princess bed covers, I gently lay her down, she gives me the sleepy smile that only shows one of her dimples off.*

*“Cover on or off?” I ask since tonight is a little warmer than it usually is.*

*“Off, I have my blanket.”*

*“You got it.” I bend over and give her a kiss on the forehead, stroking her hair away from her face. Her eyes are shining with tears, her little bottom lip quivering.*

*“What’s wrong baby?”*

*“Thank you for being the best mommy ever.”*

*“Thank you for being the best kid ever Chlo, but why are you crying?”*

*Her tears spill over onto her cheeks, she hastily wipes them away, trying to hide the evidence. She pulls her blanket over her head murmuring “I just don’t want you to get hurt.”*

*“Hey.” I pull her blanket back, sitting on the edge of the bed, I stroke her hair away from her face “No-one is going to hurt me Chlo, we got away from mom remember.”*

*“Yeah, I know.” she sighs again.*

*“I promise Chlo, we’re safe here.”*

*“I believe you.” She tells me.*

*“Good, now let’s dry those eyes” Swiping away her tears with my long-sleeved t-shirt “Now, let’s try to smile” I grab her face between my hands and kiss all over it until she starts to giggle “And now let’s try sleep.” I run my hands over her eyes, up the side of her face and down her nose, trying to make her sleepy like I did when she was a baby.*

*“I love you Chlo, sweet dreams.”*

*“I love you mommy.”*

*Gently closing her bedroom door, I make my way back to mine, slipping into the bathroom on the way to brush my teeth*

*and wash my face. Getting onto my bed, I leave the covers off and notice Bun was left on my bed, since she did not ask for him, I just leave him, so I don't disturb her, since we left mom's she's been a notoriously light sleeper, so I cuddle Bun and slip into a deep sleep.*

*"Autumn!!" A scream pierces the air "Mom is coming!"*

*Chloe's screaming wakes me up with a jolt, panic clawing at my chest, realising she is having a nightmare, I will my body to calm so I can go to her without making her worse. We have both suffered from nightmares since we escaped, I get up out of bed and pick up Bun to take to her, to try help her sleep better once I settle her again. The walk to her room feels longer than usual, and the air has gotten chilly. Maybe I'm getting sick, and my body just feels sluggish. Finally reaching her door, after feeling like I was walking forever, I push open her door expecting to find a crying Chlo but finding her bed empty. What the fuck. Is she sleep walking again?*

*"Autumn! Mom is coming!" I hear her scream again, this time from down the stairs.*

*"Fuck." This is one of her bad nightmare nights, still clutching Bun in my hand, I pad down the stairs on light feet, so I do not startle her, but she is not there. Starting to panic, because I heard her shouting for me, I run to the back door, hoping that she is wandered outside and is waiting for me there.*

*"Autumn! C'mon wake up Sunshine."*

*The hell. No, I need to find Chloe. I cannot sleep until I find Chloe, she's having a bad dream, and I know that if I can just find her and get Bun to her, she'll calm down. She needs Bun. Running into the woods that surround our house, ones so similar to the one is at dad's, I take off into a sprint, hoping that I can find her before she gets hurt.*

# Chapter 25

## Sebastian

A shrill alarm going off jolts me from my sleep, shooting out of my bed and rushing over to my monitors to wake them up. Hoping it's just the monsoon that hit a few hours earlier, maybe knocking out the power, or blowing over a tree. My monitors flicker to life, so not the power then. Pulling up the software for the alarm system, I see it was tripped at the back door at Autumn's house. Fuck! Grabbing my phone from my bedside table, I text the guys, if someone has broken in, I don't want to call them in case one of them is at her house. It could tip off whoever broke in, since they always have their phones on loud. The alarm system is only set to go off upstairs at night and to alert me, since I deal with most of the security remotely when I'm not there. Having the alarm system only go off upstairs gives everyone the time to prepare, and gives us the element of surprise, thankfully it's not one of those alarms that blare out a siren, we developed one where it flashes a bright light into the room ten times, then turns off. Pulling up the messages app on my phone, I shoot a text off in the group chat.

Me

3:02AM Alarm tripped. Back door breach.

Dominic

I want to breach Cupcake's

backdoor. 3:02AM

Tobias

I stayed over last night, I'll

go check her room. 3:04AM

Zander

Be serious Dominic! Let us

know when you get her T. 3:05AM

Dominic

I am being serious, thank you very much. Imagine fucking Cupcakes ass and killing bad guys? I'm also hard as fuck right now. 3:05AM

Me

Trying to pull up outside surveillance now.

3:06AM

Me

Monsoon's fucked with it. Visibility is shit.

3:06AM

Atlas

She there? 3:07AM

Tobias

Just got to her room now.

She's definitely not here. 3:07AM

Tobias

Bun's gone too. 3:07AM

Dominic

You don't think? 3:08AM

Zander

Definitely not!

She was happy earlier. 3:10AM

Dominic

That doesn't mean anything! 3:11AM

Me

She walked out the backdoor, 3:12AM approx. twenty minutes ago.

Atlas

I'm going after her. it's a fucking storm out there! 3:12AM

Zander

I'm coming. We can split up and  
find her faster. 3:12AM

Dominic

Same. 3:13AM

Tobias

I'm going to head out now. I'll update  
if I find her. Let me know when you  
get here. 3:13AM

Sebastian

I'm on my way too. Be there soon. 3:14AM

Grabbing everything I need, and quickly getting dressed, I grab my waterproof coat from my closet and race downstairs to my car. I must break at least three speeding limits to get there and driving like an idiot in this weather isn't great but I'm pulling up in front of her house in record time. Jumping out, I shoot off a text telling the others that I'm here and run into her house. Kelvin and Brenn are both pacing in the living room, looking sleep ruffled.

"Has she came back yet?" I ask, trying my hardest not to let the panic that I can feel, take over.

"Nothing yet, find my daughter Sebastian. She can't have gone far." Kelvin orders.

"You coming?" I ask Brenn, knowing Kelvin will stay here to direct his men.

"Yeah man, do you have any idea where she went?" Brenn asks.

Before I can answer, the front door swings open, banging against the wall, revealing a wild looking Atlas, Dominic, and Zander.

"Anything?" Atlas practically begs. All I can do is shake my head. Dominic is vibrating with tension, and Zander has descended into his fight mode. Before every fight, Zander would shut down his emotions, to be able to get through the

fight with a clear head, and I can see that the man in front of me, isn't my friend who bakes Autumn cookies, or any of the softness that he's shown before. Now he's a killer. Willing to do anything to find his girl. The man next to him is what worries me the most, Dominic has completely closed himself off. I believe that if we were to try touch him right now, one of us would find ourselves with a knife embedded in our stomach. Deciding to take charge, and give them direction, I tell them all I learned.

"I checked cameras, last I seen she was walking into to the woods." I inform them.

"We'll split up then. The woods are too large for us to try search as a group." Brenn tells us, passing us all a glock19. The weighted dark metal is cool in my hand, making this even more serious. We have no idea why she's left the house, or what could be out there right now. We all agree to keep communication open, and then head out, splitting up at the path. I turn left, towards the lake. Hoping that if this is all because she needed to go somewhere, she choses the one place that brings her comfort. The rain beats down on me, the high winds making the tree's dance above me. The night sky lights up with lightning.

"One elephant, two elephant, three elephant..." I count, trying to figure how far away it is. A boom of thunder makes the ground feels like it's shaking.

Why would Autumn come out in weather like this? all I can hope is that we find her soon, she's been out here for forty minutes now, she must be soaked to the bone. Pulling out my phone, I try to text the others for updates, but I can't keep my screen clear enough from the rain enough to even unlock it. Deciding to just keep looking until I get a call, I shove my phone back in my pocket and turn right, heading deeper into the woodland, hoping to catch sight of her.

It's been two hours and still no sign of her. It feels like I've been searching for her all night, my trousers are soaked through, water droplets are running down my face from my hair that's plastered against it. Lightning streaks across the sky directly above me, thunderclaps straight after. Fuck, we are so



fucked but I refuse to stop searching until someone finds her. I can hear the others faintly, calling out for her.

“Autumn!” I shout, hoping to hear her respond, even when I know I won’t. We’ve been out here for hours now, and she’s not once responded.

“*Cupcake!*” I hear Dominic shout in the distance, closer than he was before. Rounding a tree, I almost smack into Tobias’s wide frame.

“Fucking hell man!” I place my hand over my heart.

“Sorry.” He grunts, before he moves around me, striding further into the darkness of the treeline. None of us have heard from him, since we originally said she was gone. Knowing I need to focus on finding Autumn, I continue my trek.

“CHLOEEEE!” I hear being screamed in the distance; the voice is raspy like it’s been screaming for hours. Taking off into a sprint, I run through the trees, tripping over roots, tree branches smacking me in the face and brushing against my jacket. I can’t stop though. I hear the same scream again. Quickening my pace, I come to an abrupt stop. Autumn is on her knees in the mud, soaked through from the rain. Another strike of lightning hits, lighting the woods enough, that I can see Autumn is covered in scrapes, her hands lie limp on her lap, a dusky blue bunny teddy is clutched between them.

“Autumn?” I whisper, trying not to startle her. Thunder booms and her head snaps up, her eyes are unseeing, glazed. A bruise is forming over her cheekbone and tears mix with the water running down her face. Her lips are practically blue. Fuck, I need to get her home before she gets hypothermia.

“Autumn! C’mon wake up sunshine.” I gently place my hand on her shoulder, hoping to get her to register my presence. Before I can reach for her hand, she’s taking off into a sprint further into the trees, a slight limp in her left leg.

“Fuck!” I take off after her, easily catching up to her in a few strides. Tackling her to the ground, I turn our bodies before we hit the floor. We hit the ground with a thud, the hit making my

teeth rattle. Autumn screams and kicks in my arms, scratching at my forearms, begging me to let her go.

“Please, I need to find Chloe.” She begs.

“Sunshine, please. You need to wake up.”

“Chloe!” she screams again.

Knowing I won't be able to get her back to the house on my own, I make sure my hold on her is secure with my right arm and use my left hand to fish for my phone in my pocket. Ignoring the other messages I have; I manage to pull up my contacts and dial Kelvin. He answers on the first ring.

“Do you have her?”

Autumn lets out an ear-piercing scream at that moment.

“What the fuck are you doing to my daughter Sebastian?!”

“I'm holding her sir; I don't think she knows where she is. She's searching for Chloe.” I tell him.

“Where are you?”

“In the woods...” I trail off, looking for some sort of landmark to distinguish where we are. Seeing an old tire swing, I relay the information to him, and he promises to send the others. Hanging up, I tuck my phone away to stop it getting damaged, and then wrestle my jacket off with one hand.

Loosening my hold on a distraught Autumn, I wrap it around her, and manage to get her arms in too, I fasten the zipper, and she snatches Bun out of my arm where I had him tucked between my elbow and stomach. She holds him in a death grip, while I hold her close to me, rubbing her frozen hands. Autumn is completely shut down right now, she's not even screaming anymore, just a silent cry trying to escape her. It reminds me of the day in the hospital when we told her, her sister was dead. Holding her in my lap, I sit on the wet ground, hoping the others will get here soon. I won't be able to carry her back myself, and I don't want to drag her since she's barefoot. Her feet no doubt destroyed from the landscape of the woods. I look her over for any serious injuries and pull up her sleeves since they were torn. My breath hitches and my

lungs seize. Her right arm is covered in deep straight cuts, and they look freshly done.

“Why Sunshine? Why would you do this to yourself?” I whisper to her, tears gathering in my eyes, my heart breaking for my beautiful girl who feels like she needs to hurt herself.

“My fault.” She croaks, her gaze locked on the distance, still glazed.

“What’s your fault?” I keep my tone low, hoping to coax out some answers before the others arrive. Nothing else matters right now, not the storm raging above us, not the fact I’m soaked through, nothing but my girl in front of me who feels like she needs to hurt herself like that. Lightning could hit me right now, and it wouldn’t hurt as bad as this does. She doesn’t answer though.

“Autumn, what’s your fault?”

“Chlo. My fault.”

“No, sunshine. No, that wasn’t your fault.” The tears fall freely now. She is in so much pain, and none of us truly noticed. She’s been so distant the last few weeks, barely eating, sleeping more. Like a zombie, she would just walk around doing what she deemed was normal, what she had to do to look like a functioning human being, but my girl is obviously struggling. And that’s ok, we’ll be here, through all the struggles. We just need her to be here, so we can do that.

“My fault. My fault. My fault...” she chants, over and over.

“Babygirl...” Tobias’s anguished sob comes from next to us, the others all looking destroyed as they see her laying limp in my arms, repeating the words ‘my fault’ again and again.

Zander steps up next to me, and holds out his arms, an offer to take her, not a demand. Nodding my head, he lowers himself and scoops her from my arms. Holding her close to his chest, he kisses her forehead, his eyes are filled with sorrow. Her arm falls limp to her side, a sign that she’s passed out and Bun slips from between her fingers. Dominic gets there before it hits the floor, clutching the teddy to his chest like he would if he had Autumn.

“Is she going to be ok?” Atlas asks me, his voice hoarse, the tears run freely down his face. He loves this girl, deeper than any of us do, we’ll get there, but he’s loved her from a child, through losing her, then finding her. They have a bond, unlike any other that I’ve ever seen.

“We’ll make sure of it.” I tell him honestly, clapping him on the shoulder. We turn around and make her way back to the house, Zander and Tobias already walking ahead. Zander holds her to him tightly, like he hopes he can protect her from anything if he holds her tight enough, even her own mind and Tobias follows behind, a silent soldier. His eyes fixated on our surroundings, surveying for threats to our girl. There is none, not like what we thought. Our biggest threat right now, isn’t one we can kill, or beat to death, it’s her thoughts, it’s her trauma and we have been so wrapped up in the happiness of having her be our girl, we missed all the signs. Has she done this before, I didn’t see any other marks on her lower wrist, but we can check the rest of her later, hopefully this is the only time. I can’t bear the idea of her having been hurting herself this whole time and not one of us noticing.

We trek back to the house in silence, none of us knowing what to say. The only sounds coming from the storm that is raging above us, our minds just as stormy as we all ruminate over what our girl is going through, how we missed this. Dominic trails behind us, still holding a soaked Bun to his chest. He looks like a lost child, his eyes looking as lost as he’s probably feeling. Dominic is a fixer, normally through means of torture but he can’t fix this, none of us can.

Finally, the house comes into view. A pacing Kelvin and an equally soaked Brenn wait for us.

“Doc’s set up in the room.” Brenn says, his eyes locked on his sisters limp form. Zander storms past them all, marching up to the room set up specifically for when Doc needs to treat someone. It has everything he needs to help. Blood bags, IV lines, monitors, etc. We all follow, not being able to take her out of our sight for even a moment.

“Place her here.” Doc orders.

Zander lays her down so gently, like he's afraid she'll break.

"I need to remove her clothes. She'll get hypothermia if she stays in those ones."

"No!" Dominic shouts from the doorway.

"But I need to."

"You don't get to!" Dominic says in a raised voice "Brenn, go grab her dry clothes, a tank top and some shorts so Doc can work" Brenn just nods, and leaves to do that "Doc? Can you and Kelvin please wait in the hall?"

"That's my daughter!" Kelvin shouts.

"And it's my girl! She wouldn't want you to see her like that. So please, leave. Let us do this for her. She's been through enough." The last part comes through in a hushed tormented whisper.

"Ok son, just try hurry." Doc claps Dominic on the shoulder, that Dominic jerks away from. Doc leads a raging Kelvin from the room.

We all work as a team, carefully manoeuvring our girl so we can remove her clothes and place the dry ones on her that Brenn handed through a gap in the door, respecting what we asked. Tobias lets out another sorrow filled choke; we all follow where his eyes are locked onto. An inhuman noise escapes Dominic, before he's falling to his knees next to her. Her upper arms are covered in angry crimson crescent marks, in the exact shape of her fingernails. Dominic runs his fingers over the marks "Why Cupcake?" he whispers.

The door to the room creaks open "I need to check her over boys." Doc tells us.

All we can do is nod, but we all step out of the way, standing against the walls of the sterile room, letting Doc work his magic. He knows not to ask any of us to leave, none of us can bear to have her out of our sight, it's like seeing her in that hospital all over again as he attaches an IV and wires to check her heartbeat and pulse. Kelvin and Brenn stand next to us, both of them watching Doc's every move. Dominic is at the head of her bed, still on his knees, softly stroking her hair, Doc

thankfully just works around him, knowing it's best to let Dominic do what he needs to do to keep himself in the present.

"You men might want to go get into dry clothes. We don't want you getting sick too." Doc hums, not even looking at us as he attaches something else to Autumn's IV line.

"Dominic? You coming?" I ask him, trying to gauge if he's ok enough to leave her side for a few moments.

"Ye..." he coughs "Yeah." He bends down and kisses her forehead "We'll be right back Cupcake."

Her eyes are still closed, her lips still blue. She's slowly regaining some colour, but it's not enough. We all leave and come back in record time, just long enough to get changed out of our wet clothes into something warmer and more importantly dry.

Mrs McKay bustles into the room, carrying a tray of hot chocolate and coffee, declaring it was to warm us on our insides to prevent sickness. The coffee was to keep us awake, since none of us will be able to sleep until Autumn wakes up.

"She'll be fine. She's lost weight again, and she's probably going to get sick from being outside for so long, but I've administered fluids and some antibiotics to try prevent the worst of it." Doc tells us. All of us release a breath at the same time, feeling relieved.

"Why is she still unconscious?" Kelvin asks Doc.

"Honestly, Kelvin, she's tired. She's passed out from whatever happened tonight. I'm suspecting that she was sleepwalking, but she's not doing ok mentally. She needs therapy." Doc tells him honestly, something we all know Kelvin does not want to hear.

"Yeah ok. We'll arrange it for her." Kelvin says, before he's storming out of the room.

"I'll go after him." Brenn sighs "Someone has to make sure he's ok. Let me know when she wakes up."

"I take it you seen the cuts?" I ask Doc.

“I’ve bandaged her lower wrist and applied an antibiotic cream to the upper arms. Some were scarring, so she has been doing this for a while. Did any of you notice anything?”

“Not at all. She was wearing her long-sleeved tops, but we just assumed she was trying to cover her left hand at college, using the sleeve to cover it. we never would have thought...” I can’t even finish my sentence. I failed her, we failed her by not noticing how much she was struggling. She has enough marks on her skin, she should never have had to feel like she had to add to it.

“We’ll get her help son. All we can do is be there for her. Trauma has to come out some way, and at least we caught this before she went too far.” He places his hand over Autumn’s, before he leaves the room, leaving us with our girl. We all surround her bed, touching some part of her, ensuring ourselves she’s still here. None of us say anything though, we can’t.

“Chlo.” Autumn’s croaky voice breaks us out of our thoughts.

“Princess.” Zander clasps her hand in his, rubbing it against his cheek. She’s still pale, but she looks more alive than what she did a few hours ago.

“Muffin-Man?” she whispers. Her eyes flutter open, revealing her soft hazel eyes. Now that I’m looking, really looking I can see how sad she is. I seen it before, but I just assumed it was because of her loss. Not this.

“Hey Princess,” Zander soothes her “we’re all here.”

Autumn’s eyes fly open, panicked.

“Where?” her voice still croaky.

“Here Babygirl...” Tobias approaches her with a bottle of water “You’re at home, you are just in Doc’s medical room.”

“Why?”

“Do you remember anything from last night?” I ask.

“I...” she thinks “no.”

“We think you were sleepwalking; you ran outside in the middle of the storm, and we couldn’t find you for hours.”

“huh?”

“You were out there for nearly three hours Cupcake. Sebastian found you, knee deep in the mud with Bun in your hands. You had no clue what was going on around you. If we didn’t have the sensor alarms on those doors, we would never have known that you left.” Dominic recounts. “We could have lost you.”

“You didn’t though.”

“Did we not? Maybe not out there, but you hurt yourself, didn’t you?”

Autumn’s eyes grow wide in panic, looking at all of our solemn faces.

“Why Princess? Why didn’t you speak to us.” Tobias’s voice breaks.

“I...”

“Do you not feel like you can speak to us? Did we make you feel like you didn’t have any other choice?” Atlas asks, his voice breaking also. Tobias and Atlas are both a mess, feeling like they’ve let her down. Zander just wants to care her back to health, to try understand why and then fix the issue by being a mother hen, thinking if he cares enough that she’ll be cured. My brain is screaming similar, that if I care for her enough that she will open up to me, to us, ensuring that we can help. Dominic, while he’s distraught over this, he’s also the most understanding. He knows what those thoughts are like, how they take over. Knowing that she needs him more than all of us right now, I decide to try get the others to possibly understand while I try get them to leave.

“Guys, how about we let Dominic try talk to her for a bit? And we can go get her some food yeah?” I declare, not leaving it as a question, before I’m dragging Tobias’s arm up to leave the room. The others just kiss her on the forehead before they follow us. Autumn’s sobs following us.



# Chapter 26

## Dominic

The others leave the room, leaving me alone with my Cupcake. She's laid on the sterile white bed, crying, covered in scrapes and the bruise on her cheekbone has turned an angry purple colour. I can't stop my gaze from flicking to her arms, her once perfect arms covered in wounds, inflicted from herself.

"Why Autumn?" I ask her, clasping her hand in my own.

"I don't know."

"Can't bullshit me babe, you know why. I won't judge you."

"I..." her lip trembles "I just needed it to be quiet for a while."

Understanding hits me. The thoughts became unbearable, I've been there, I just wish she told us, leaned on us. Let us help her through this.

"You could have spoken to us." I tell her, unable to keep the bitterness from my voice. I'm not mad at her, but it hurts. I feel like we've somehow failed her. I failed my Cupcake. I wasn't approachable enough for her to come to us about this.

A crash echoes through the house from the kitchen, Kelvin's angry shouts following. Autumn flinches, her eyes filling with tears again.

"Not angry at you. *Never* at you." I tell her, wiping the tears from her face.

"I fucked up."

"You did. But not in a bad way, we all mess up sometimes."

"This was a bad mess up though."

"Nah Cupcake. This was an honest one. One you had to make, we know you are struggling now, more than what you were, and we're not going anywhere."

"You promise?"

“I pinky promise Cupcake. You can never get rid of me.” I link my pinky with hers, then kiss her little finger, sealing the deal.

“Do you think the others are mad?” she asks, her voice small. She keeps picking invisible lint from the cover that sits over her legs like it’s the most interesting thing in the world.

“I mean maybe. I am. Not mad at you before you get in that pretty head of yours. But mad at the circumstances that have led to this.” I kiss her knuckles “I think they want to help fix this but don’t know how to. We’re all lost here, but we won’t give up.”

“Thankyou.” She tells me, her eyes shining up at me.

“Anything for you Cupcake.” I sit on the bed next to her, laying her head on my chest, we sit like that for a while. Listening to her breathing, I will the darkness inside of me to calm, to lighten for her, not wanting to taint her.

“I love you Dominic.” She whispers into my chest.

“You mean that Cupcake?”

“Of course I do. You are my light. The last few months when the darkness would get too much, I would search you out, and you would make it go away for a while.”

“Can I tell you a secret?” I ask her, ready to cut myself open, take out my heart and give it to her.

“Uh huh.”

“You’re my light too. The years you were missing, when Atlas and Brenn would tell us stories about you, I’d listen fully captivated by the little girl in those stories so full of life. Young you, lightened the darkness inside of me enough that I could see to the end of the tunnel, enough to get myself to the other side, but since I’ve met you...” I kiss her before I continue “you bring so much light into my life, that I don’t just make it, I can linger there. You illuminate that tunnel; you banish that darkness away with just your smile and now that I know that you love me, I feel like I can finally take my first breath of fresh air in my life. I love you too Autumn, I am yours forever.”

Autumn raises her head to me, pulling me in for a deep kiss, her salty tears track down her face.

“Please don’t cry.” I beg her, wiping away her tears.

“I didn’t mean for any of this to happen Dominic, I swear.”

“I believe you. Now try get some sleep, we’ll all be here when you wake up.”

Autumn lays her head back on my chest, and I soothe her to sleep, twirling her hair in my fingers.

The others come back in while she sleeps, pulling up chairs close to the bed. Kelvin and Brenn join too.

“How she doing?” Kelvin asks.

“She’s tired. She’s struggling and she needs help.” I tell him honestly.

“I’ll make sure she gets it, I’ve already arrange a therapist, recommended by Doc.”

“Did she tell you anything?” Zander asks me.

“She told me that she just needed things to be quiet and that she didn’t mean for any of this to happen the way it did.”

“Quiet how?” Atlas questions.

“Like her mind was loud and busy. That hurting herself, even if this started as an accident, cleared away those messy thoughts even for a while.”

“Ok. So how do we help her?”

“We support her, we get her into therapy, and we don’t get mad at her for this. This couldn’t be helped. Should she have spoken to us? Sure. But that doesn’t change anything. We can’t ask her not to do it again, but we can be vigilant. We support her and we love her.” I tell them, making sure to look at everyone as I speak, needing them to understand how important our support is about to be for her.

Autumn writhes in my arms, whimpering like she’s in pain. Tobias is at her side in an instant, he’s been silent ever since we found out she was missing, stuck in his own head. We’ve

left him to his thoughts, knowing he'll come around when he sorts them out.

“Babygirl...” he pushes back her hair, running his fingers down her face, avoiding her bruise and scrapes “you are safe.” He repeats those words, until she calms then stirs awake. She smiles hesitantly at him, her eyes guarded. But he doesn't hold back and pulls her in for a kiss “I'm so glad you are ok.” he tells her before kissing her again. I should feel jealous, but I'm just glad she has the others to lean on. We all give her something different, something that she needs. We got complacent before, never again though.

# Chapter 27

## Autumn

*'How to save a life – Ruelle'*

I've been in this room for about two days now, Doc wanted to make sure I was hydrated enough and that I didn't get hypothermia from being out in the storm for so long. I apparently got lucky with just a mild chest infection, a few scrapes, one needed stitches, and I have a throbbing cheekbone from a lovely big bruise. The guys haven't left my side, apart from to give me one on one time with them all, sensing I needed to talk to them separately.

Tobias needed that talk the most, he's taken it upon himself to be my protector, and he felt like he had failed me. He hadn't and never could, but it took a long talk over a few hours for him to finally let those feelings go for now, and to come cuddle for a while.

Zander was great about it, he understood the most apart from Dominic, and he's taken to smothering me with food requests every hour to try get me to gain my weight back.

Sebastian has been amazing throughout it all, he promised that nothing has changed, and then helped me bathe, where he washed my hair for me and told me over and over again how beautiful I was.

Atlas, my sweet Atty was destroyed. He understands, but he hated that I left more marks on my body. The difference? These ones came from my hand. I told him why, that I never meant to, and he asked me to try to come to him if I ever felt the need to do it again. When I asked why he wouldn't asked me to promise, he told me that's not something I could honestly promise and mean it, that it's ok if I mess up again, that it's ok to make mistakes but that he hopes that I don't. I spent the rest of that night curled in his arms, needing my best friend close to me.

Nanook thankfully had slunk off to Brenn's room that night, after he had got up for a snack, Nanook's nose led him to the

chicken snack that he had and managed to beg a few scraps from him. Which led to Brenn getting a new bed buddy that night, which I'm so thankful for, if he had followed me out into that storm I would never have forgiven myself, even if it was an accident. I'm finally allowed to get out of this bed, something I'm incredibly happy about. Only being allowed to get up and pee or to shower is not fun and incredibly boring.

Sitting in the kitchen with Mrs McKay, helping her bake cookies, Zander comes through the doorway, a massive smile lighting up his face when he sees me perched at the counter, snacking on cookie dough.

"Hey there Princess." He kisses me on the lips, before lifting me off my stool to lift me on to his lap. "Have you thought anymore about therapy?"

"I have" I nod "I'm going to do it; it's been months and I obviously need to talk to someone about this. I don't want to do it again."

"I'm glad Princess. I hated seeing you like that."

"So did I Sugar" Mrs McKay pipes up from her spot at the cooker "you are a very loved girl Autumn, remember that." She tells me, before she turns back around. Not before I see the tears shining in her eyes. Patting Zanders forearm to let me down quickly, I round the counter and approach her. I pull her in for a quick hug and kiss her cheek, my eyes mirroring hers.

"I love you too." I tell her, pulling her in for another hug, before going back to Zanders lap and climbing up to sit on it without him needing to ask. I like being here, it feels safe.

The others join us not long after, all of us just sitting eating warm cookies as another storm rages overhead. I must drift off into thought as I stare out the window, the rain battering against it with the high winds. Lightning illuminating the sky every few minutes, getting closer with each clap of thunder. Weirdly enough, it doesn't bother me like it maybe should, but brings me a sense of peace. I hate what happened, but I feel lighter, I'm not carrying that awful secret anymore, they still love me regardless of me hurting myself, but they don't want me to do it obviously. If it weren't for what happened in that

storm, I don't know if I ever would have told them, and I don't know how far it could have gone. Spending the day with the guys is exactly what I need, and that night at dinner, surrounded by them, Brenn and my dad feels like a piece of me heals just a little.

"I made you an appointment with the therapist for Tuesday." Dad informs me.

"Thank you dad."

"If you need anything, you'll let me know won't you?"

"I will I promise."

After dinner, I'm shooed to the living room, while the others clear away the table. Sitting on the sofa, my thoughts drift, wondering what I'm going to need to discuss with my therapist.

"Princess?" Zander's voice snaps me out of my thoughts.

"Yeah?"

"Can you come with me? I want to show you something." He holds his hand out for me to take, and I place my hand in his with no hesitation. Zander leads me out of the living room, up the stairs and down the hall to my room.

"Close your eyes." He tells me.

"Why? Is this where you murder me?"

"Never. I only murder when they are looking at me." He responds completely serious. Deciding to just close my eyes, instead of reply to the insane man next to me, he takes my hand again and leads me through the doorway, to my bed, then helps me to lie down. Instructing me to keep my eyes shut the entire time. The bed dips next to me, his massive frame pressed against my side, warmth radiating from him.

"You can open your eyes now." His voice rumbles, a slight tone of hesitancy lacing it.

Turning my head to look at him, I open my eyes. Greeted by the sight of him already watching me, I quizzically furrow my brows, wondering what he's wanting to show me.

“It’s not your penis is it?”

He barks out a rumbling laugh, that makes me shiver. Ok so maybe I wouldn’t be mad if it were.

“No you idiot, it’s this.” His hand grasps my chin and turns my head to look at my bedroom ceiling. A gasp slips from my lips. My once plain white ceiling is now a galaxy. Painted black with a glowing purple and blue whirlpool galaxy, but what makes tears spring to my eyes is the glow in the dark stars.

“Me and Dominic did it together. He mentioned the stars when you were in the hospital, and after the last few days, we finally made this happen.”

Unable to say anything, I just hold his hand in mine, staring up at the galaxy that is now above my bed.

“Thankyou.” I finally manage to get out.

“If you ever want to lie here and talk, you come get me or any of the others and this is what we’ll do. We’ll make it dark, so your stars can glow, and you can tell them your secrets. Because the stars don’t judge Princess, they can’t tell anyone your secrets but in order to see them you need the darkness. You might be struggling with that darkness inside of you, but all I can see is the glowing light of a star, a beacon home.”

“I love it. Thank you.”

We fall asleep like that, staring up at the stars, our hands clasped together tightly, like if we let go we might drift apart.

I finally started therapy a few weeks ago and it’s going well. I like my therapist well enough, she’s nice and we’ve not covered anything too heavy. She prescribed me sleeping tablets though, so I don’t have another sleepwalking accident, I don’t like taking them since I feel so groggy, but they do make me sleep a solid eight hours, and my body already feels better because of it. I have another appointment today, Atlas has offered to drop me off on the way to something he has to do for my dad, then he’ll pick me up once I’m done. These sessions are draining, while we might not have covered anything big, we do cover stuff that makes me emotionally



exhausted the next day, and I normally need to be alone after so I can process without the others surrounding me. I haven't hurt myself since that night and have taken up drawing to distract myself when I get like that, it helps sometimes, other times I need to get Zander or one of the others to come lie under my stars with me so I can talk without the pressure of them looking at me.

"You ready Pumpkin?" Atlas asks from the doorway, as I'm putting on my converse.

"Yeah, let me just grab my phone. I'll meet you downstairs." I kiss him, then turn to get my phone. A loud slap echoes throughout my room, then a stinging sensation spreads over my ass.

"Ow!" I whirl around, where Atlas is stood, covering his mouth with his hand trying to suppress his laughter "I will get you back. Just you wait!"

"You're teeny hands, couldn't do shit." He laughs, before he runs from the room, his laughter trailing him.

Shaking my head at him, I just follow after him, happy to finally see him laugh more after what I put them all through. After a quick goodbye to my dad, and a long goodbye that involves lots of puppy kisses and treats, I leave the house, and approach Atlas's SUV. Zander is talking to him next to it about the job they need to do. I know they work for my dad, but I have no clue what they do. Something I have asked them, but they just say odd jobs that he needs done.

Atlas turns around and reaches into the backseat, bending over. Realising this is my chance for revenge, I slide up next to Zander and beckon him with a crook of my finger to lean down so I can whisper in his ear. He obliges me and when I whisper my plan to him, a smirk covers his face. Atlas lets out a high-pitched squeal when Zander's hand connects with his ass, making me and him burst into a fit of giggles.

"War. This means war." Atlas declares, pointing at us both.

"Bring it" I cross my arms "I'm not scared of you."

"You should be."

“Nah.”

“Get in the car Princess and stop winding your boyfriend up.” Zander declares, before lifting me into the passenger seat and fastening the seatbelt.

“Thankyou.” I smile sweetly at my gentle giant.

“I got you.” Something he has reminded me of constantly these last few weeks.

Arriving at my appointment just on time, I quickly kiss the guys goodbye before running in.

“Hi, I’m here for my appointment.” I check in at the desk with her secretary.

“Yes, yes. Autumn is it?”

“Yeah.”

“Just go ahead and go in, she’s waiting for you.”

“Thankyou.” I give her a polite smile, before heading up the hall to my therapists office. Knocking on the door before I open it, I turn the knob and enter. I get two steps in before the smile that was on my face slides right off my face. Sat at the desk isn’t my therapist but the woman who birthed me.

Jane sits at my therapists desk with a smug smile on her face, her once greasy brown hair with the grey roots is now a sleek brown that shines, looking vibrant and healthy. Her teeth are fixed, veneers in place giving her a perfectly white straight smile, instead of her rotten brown ones. I can still smell the alcohol wafting from her, but it’s not cheap anymore, she stinks of expensive whiskey and gin. Her brown eyes are narrowed in disdain, her sickly-sweet smile turns into a sneer.

I can’t do this; I don’t want to be anywhere near this woman. Backing up slowly, hoping to escape the room before she can catch up with me, I start to retreat but I’m stopped by a wall at my back. Shit, I must have shut the door by accident. Turning around I go to grab the handle, but instead of a door at the back of me, a man is. A man who must be about 6’3 and is a wall of muscle is stood between me and the door, blocking any chance I had at an exit. Blowing out a breath, I steel myself for

what's about to come, and turn around and face my bitch of a mother.

“What do you want Jane?”

“You didn't think you would be protected forever did you?”

“I don't know what you are talking about.” I tell her honestly. She's still batshit crazy then, even if her looks make her look more put together.

“Don't act dumb Autumn. It doesn't suit you. Surely you know what dear old daddy does?” her tone taunting.

“He has a few businesses.” I tell her with a shrug “I don't pay attention really.”

“God you are dense girl.” The voice behind me says “Your daddy is the Carraher family head.”

“No he isn't. He said that was just a coincidence.” Even when I say it, I know it's a lie. Deep down I guess I knew, but I never wanted to acknowledge it, what he's probably done, the businesses that he runs outside of the hotels and casinos.

“You know that though, don't you Autumn. You aren't that naïve; you just didn't want to acknowledge that daddy is a criminal.” Jane sneers at me.

“Why are you really here Jane? It isn't because of dad.”

“See you are a clever girl, aren't you.” She nods at the man behind me, and before I know what's happening, his hands are banded around my upper arms, holding me in place. Jane gets up from where she's sat and strides towards me, her heels clicking against the flooring.

Trying to free myself from this man's grasp, I thrash side to side, hoping to dislodge his grip but he just tightens his hands until it feels like he's going to break my bones. A sharp slap snaps my head to the side, making me stop my struggle.

Lifting my head, I glare at Jane. This woman is supposed to be my mom, but there isn't a maternal bone in her body.

“Listen here you little bitch, the more you struggle the more I'll make it hurt. No-one is coming to save you, not for another

hour. You're mine to do what I want with. If big man behind you wants to have his way with you, I'll let him. If I want to kill you, I will. Do you understand?"

Nodding my head, I keep my mouth shut, knowing if I try to reply I won't be able to keep what I want to say to her to myself.

"You really are a cockroach Autumn. Refusing to die, infesting my life, ruining everything like always."

"What are you on about you crazy bitch. I never did anything to you."

"You killed Chloe!" Jane screams at me, her spit flying at my face.

"I didn't kill her! The fire did!" I scream back.

"The fire that was meant for you. She was supposed to be in her own room that night. This is why you ruin everything." Jane paces in front of me.

"What are you talking about. Just tell me why you're here then leave."

"I'm talking about the fact you ruined it all. Chloe was supposed to be in her bed, the stupid brat had tucked her pillows under her covers, making it look like she was under them. That's why I set the fire against your door. You were supposed to alone in there. You were supposed to die in there, afraid, and alone, knowing no-one was coming to save you. Then I was going to grab Chloe on my way out of the house."

"You set the fire?" I croak out, if it weren't for the hold the man behind me had on my arms, my legs would have buckled from the information. I suspected it had something to do with Jane, but to have it confirmed from her own mouth makes me want to throw up.

I knew she hated me; I just didn't know it was enough to try kill me.

"Maybe you are stupid. Yes Autumn, I set the fire. To get rid of you."

"I did nothing to you! I just wanted my mom to love me!"

“I hated you. You took Kelvin from me. I already had to compete with that little brat of a son he had. Then you came along and all of a sudden he didn’t have time for me, and you just had to be daddy’s little princess didn’t you?”

“He is my dad. What did you expect that you would just pawn me off to a nanny and have him trapped with you forever because you had me?”

“That’s exactly what was supposed to happen, but Kelvin couldn’t help himself, wanting to be the perfect dad when he wasn’t at work and where did that leave me? Alone. Then I met his rival at one of his casino’s and he treated me like a queen. So I told him everything I knew about your daddy’s business, he caught me unfortunately, and found out I had been sleeping with him. Threatened to kill me, did he ever tell you that? So I ran with you, to ensure my survival, so I could hold you for ransom if he ever found me, not that he ever did.”

“So why try kill me?” I ask, needing the truth.

“I always planned to kill you Autumn. I hated you from the moment I gave birth to you, but then you took Kelvin from me. Then Charlie, and then Chloe.”

“I never took Chloe from you. She only ever wanted your love.”

“*C-c-can I call y-y-you m-m-mommy?*” Jane mocks, the exact words Chloe asked me that night.

“She asked because I was the only mother she ever knew. You berated her constantly, made her feel small, you let her starve and fed yourself instead. You never deserved her!” I scream, how dare she mock her, how dare she try ruin my last memory of her.

“She was *mine*! Not yours. You took her from me, you are the reason she is dead, you are what killed her. IT IS ALL YOUR FAULT!”

“*no.*”

I didn’t. I just wanted what was best for her. Is that what got her killed?

“Look at what you did Autumn. Look at what you caused.” Jane thrusts her phone into my face, the photo of Chloe in the morgue looks back at me. Unable to look at it, I turn my head away.

“Please no.” I beg. I can’t. I can’t look at it again, I can’t have that image stuck in my head, again.

“You did this Autumn. If you didn’t play *mommy* to my child, she would still be alive. This is all your fault. She is dead because of you.” Jane shouts in my face. Then she’s kicking me to the ground, the man holding me abruptly letting go of my arms, the only thing that was holding me up.

Jane kicks me in my ribs over and over again, until I hear a crack. I try to curl into a ball, like I used to, trying to protect myself from her wrath but it’s no use. She screams and kicks, until I can barely breathe, the tears slipping down my cheeks as I replay Chloe’s death in my head over and over again. Finally she stops kicking, Jane crouches down and grabs a handful of my hair, lifting my head so I can look at her.

“You’ll tell no-one I was here today Autumn. I gave you exactly what you deserved. Go back home to daddy and continue being a whore for those men. I’ll be seeing you soon.” With a final kick to my side, she swings open the door and strides out of the room.

I lay there on the floor, staring at the clock on the wall for 30 minutes. Atlas will be here to get me soon, so I make myself get up and try to make myself breathe through the pain. Pulling on whatever I used to use before, when I had to do it back when I lived with Jane, I stand a little taller instead of hunched over and wipe the tears away from my face. Coming up with a plan on how I’ll spin why I’m so upset to the guys. As I leave my therapists room for the last time, I walk down the hallway to the exit. My mind churning over everything Jane revealed. Dad’s a criminal, my guys are involved, all those small jobs make sense. Chloe’s death was my fault.

I get into the car in a daze, barely registering anything the guys are saying to me. When we get to the house and enter the kitchen, everyone is there including dad and Brenn. Nanook

bounds over to me, and I stroke his head subconsciously. Like my movements aren't my own right now.

"I'm going to just go straight to bed if that's ok? Today was a really tough session and I just need time to process it." I can hear how lifeless my voice sounds, but I can't seem to care.

Before I can leave the room, a hand clamps around my wrist.

"Are you ok babygirl?" Tobias's voice softly asks me.

Unable to meet his eyes, I stare at where he's touching me, trying not to recoil at the touch, trying not to let myself get thrown back into a flashback. Jane's beating has fucked with my head, any progress I made, is now gone. I just nod, then extract myself from his grip, making my way to my room and locking the door behind me. I lay on my bed, and look up at the ceiling, wishing I could go back in time and not attend the therapy appointment today, then I could be blissfully unaware. This ache in my chest wouldn't be there. The secrets, from all sides. My secrets, the messages, the thoughts that swirl in my head every day. Everyone else's secrets, what else haven't they told me? Unable to deal with it all, I spiral, and I can't stop it this time.

I run myself a bath, not caring about the temperature. Grabbing the sleeping tablets from the cabinet above the sink, I sink into the water. Unable to do this anymore. I can't keep going on like this, and I've put it off for too long. I promised Chloe I wouldn't leave her, and after today, I intend to keep that promise. It is my fault she's gone after all, and she shouldn't be alone, not anymore.

Swallowing the tablets one by one, I make sure I take enough that if what I'm about to do isn't enough, this will finish it. I must take nearly the whole bottle, feeling the effects almost immediately. With trembling hands, I pick up the razor I smashed to pieces in the sink before I got in the bath, I know how to do it properly now, no more hurting myself just to hurt, this time it's to make sure I'm not coming back, to make the hurting stop forever. I love my guys, but I don't deserve any of this, I don't deserve a future, or love or friends. Not when

Chloe doesn't get any of that. After all, she's dead because of me.

*Dead. Dead. Dead.*

*Cut.*

My fault.

*Cut.*

She's dead because of me.

*Cut.*

I was never good enough to be her mommy.

*Cut.*

I didn't save her.

Four cuts, one for each year she lived. Two on each wrist. Blood wells from the open wounds, not a trickle, but a flow. I know that there's no way for me to survive this. The sleeping tablets are starting to make me slip further into the water, my eyes slip closed as I slip further into the blood-tinged water, the tap still running ensuring it fills up, so if I do go under, I don't come back up. My body tries to fight it, but I give in, just like I should have before. Before I found love, before they made it harder for me to leave. I just hope they can forgive me for leaving them.

The abyss returns with open arms this time, and I walk into it willingly. Hoping to see Chlo on the other side, finally reuniting with her, even if I don't deserve to.



# Epilogue

## **Tobias**

“Doc will be here soon; I need to discuss some stuff with him for the upcoming fight.” Kelvin reminds us, a while after Autumn leaves the room, ensuring she was gone long enough that she wouldn’t overhear anything.

“No problem. I’m going to go check on her after we’re done talking, just to check if she needs anything, then I’ll leave her alone for the rest of the night.” I tell them, letting them know I plan to leave as soon as we are done with this talk.

The talk goes on for longer than I like, an itchy feeling under my skin, screaming for me to go check on my girl. As soon as Kelvin finishes and leaves the room with Doc, I walk from the room, and make my way up to hers. Knocking on her bedroom door, I listen for her to call out, but she doesn’t say anything. Cracking her room door open a bit, I peer in “Autumn?” I whisper, cracking the door more. When I can’t see her, I make my way into the room. Running water alerts me that she’s in the bathroom, so I head for the bathroom door, just to call through it to ensure she’s ok. Before I can knock, my feet hit something wet. Looking down, I can see water coming from under the door. Knocking on the bathroom door “Autumn!” I shout. No answer. I try to open the door, but it’s locked. Fuck this. Deciding to just break it down, and ask for forgiveness later, I ram my shoulder into the door until it flies open.

My gaze flies to the bathtub, where a lifeless Autumn is sunken in crimson water.

“No!” I scream, dashing for the bath to pull her out “No. No. You don’t get to do this babygirl. You don’t get to leave me!” I scream.

## **Zander**

Tobias’s shouting from Autumn’s room makes us all dash up the stairs to see what’s going on. I take the stairs two at a time, getting there before the others. Running into her room, I hear splashing from her bathroom and Tobias’s sobs. My feet freeze

at the doorway, a soaked wet Tobias desperately pulling Autumn's lifeless body from the bath. His white shirt stained with blood. Her blood.

"No." an anguished sob sounds from beside me but I can't tear my eyes away from the sight before me. My Princess lays motionless in my best friends arms, and I can't move.

"GET DOC!" Sebastian screams at me. Making me get into motion.

### **Atlas**

"No." I sob, rushing past a frozen Zander and hitting the tile next to Tobias, where he holds my girls limp body in his arms. Hovering my hands above her, I don't know where to touch, I don't want to hurt her.

"GET DOC!" I hear Sebastian scream, but I can't move from her side. I can't leave her. Sebastian comes to my side with towels and shoves one into my hands. "Put pressure on her wrist Atlas! Otherwise we're going to lose her." he orders me as he does the same to her other one. Blood soaks through the towel as I apply it to the wounds on her wrist.

"Why? Why would she do this?!" I sob. My heart shattering into a million pieces. I can't lose her. I just can't.

### **Sebastian**

Taking control of the situation even when I feel like my chest is caving in on itself, I know that we need to stop the bleeding and get Doc up here as fast as possible. Barking out orders to everyone, I apply pressure to her wrist, hoping it's enough to keep her alive for as long as we can. We won't survive it if she dies. None of us will. I can't lose my Sunshine, not now. I've fallen for her, hard. She's my girl, will always be my girl.

### **Dominic**

I stand at the doorway to the bathroom, watching the others surround my Cupcake's lifeless body. Is her heart even still beating? I wonder if I stabbed myself in the heart with my knife, would it hurt as much as this? She tried to leave. I can feel her light dimming from inside of me, as she tries to leave this world. Leave me. Leave us. I won't let her. If she does, I'll

follow. I refuse to live in the darkness again, I refuse to be without her ever again. Now I know what it's like to have her, to have all this love inside of me for her, I know there would never be anyone else, nobody else could take her place, or love me like she does. She see's me. She understands the darkness.

I will follow you Cupcake, if you leave, no matter where you go. In life or death.

### **Brenn**

A gasping Zander barges into dad's office, his eyes wild.

"Doc. We need Doc." He shouts, before he's taking off again. Doc grabs his medical bag that he always has, and takes off after him, me and dad following. Coming to her bedroom, a commotion from the bathroom, draws us there. My heart beating wildly in my chest. In a sobbing Tobias's arms, is my little sisters body, unmoving. Her chest is still, her lips parted and her lifeless eyes slightly open as her head lulls over Tobias's arms. Doc orders Tobias to place her flat on the ground, the water from the bath is still spilling over onto the floor, the tap still running. Doc begins CPR on her, while Atlas and Sebastian hold bloodied towels to her wrists. Dominic and Zander stand frozen at the doorway, watching on with wide eyes, as they watch the girl they love be resuscitated. What feels like hours, Doc continues to press on Autumn's chest, screaming at her to breathe.

A gasp has all of our gazes snapping to her face, as she struggles for air.

"Get her to the room now! I need my equipment if she's going to make it!" Doc orders. Tobias picks her up again, snarling at anyone who tries to take her from him as he rushes her out of the room down to the room Doc uses. As he disappears through the doorway, Doc shuts the door before any of us can enter, locking us out while he works, leaving us to wait, to see if she makes it through this.

"She's flatlining!" Doc's voice comes from the other side of the door. How much more can she take? Will I lose my Little Bear forever.

*To be continued.*

# Acknowledgements

I can't believe I've finally written my first book! After reading a lot of books last year, I finally took the plunge and wrote one myself, and I'm so incredibly happy that I did.

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If you find any mistakes, please highlight it and take a screenshot and send it to my email.

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This is my first time ever authoring a book so it may not be perfect, but I am so proud of it.

# Social Media

You can find me on the following social media platforms.  
Where I'm constantly posting updates, and just sharing the  
journey with everyone.

I also have really cute pets, that I am always posting photos of.

TikTok – nstevensonauthor

Instagram - @nstevensonauthor