



Wicked
QUEEN

IVY THORN

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PROLOGUE

ATHENA

I can't ever forget the day that my childhood home burned down.

We'd buried my father two days before. If I'd been older, I might have known something like this was coming. At sixteen, all I felt was the piercing loss of him, the ache of his betrayal, the resentment that he'd left us. My mother had said things like *he didn't have a choice*, but I didn't believe that shit.

Everyone has a choice.

All I'd been able to register through the fog of my grief was that my mother was acting strangely, double-checking locks, jumping when the phone rang, pulling the curtains closed before it even got dark. She was fidgety and constantly on edge, and at first I didn't realize the reason why.

Killing my father for ratting hadn't been enough for the gang that he'd once called his brothers. They were going to finish us off, too.

My mother didn't explain any of that to me, though, until the house was already on fire, the frame blackening and smoke curling up into the air, pretty much everything we owned burning up along with it. She'd been trying to protect me, I know that now, but at the time all I'd felt was a deep anger that she'd kept something like that from me. For two whole days, our lives had been in danger, and she hadn't even bothered to tell me.

I'd felt like there was nothing left in me but grief and anger. Like there never would be again.

The house had already been on fire when I came back from school. We'd seen the smoke from the bus, and I'd felt a sinking in the pit of my stomach well before my house came into view, as if I'd already known somehow. When I ran down the street, my backpack sliding off of one shoulder, a crowd had started to gather. Two of our neighbors were holding my mother back as she screamed, trying to keep her from running into the blaze.

"Our pictures—" I heard her scream as I ran, her voice broken and clogged with tears. "His clothes! It's all I have left of him, our wedding pictures—"

"It's not worth it," one of the neighbors holding her back had said, and she'd finally sagged backwards, sinking into the arms of the elderly lady who lived across the street from us. The lady—Mrs. Roseworth, I think her name was, had stroked my mother's hair like she was a child as the small crowd watched my childhood home turn to ashes.

My mother hadn't even seen me at first. I'd skidded to a stop, tripping and falling on the asphalt and scraping my hands and knees. It had taken a moment for what was happening to sink in, and I remember crying, pulling myself into a kneeling ball on the asphalt, not caring if someone ran me over.

I'd been brought home to that house as a baby. I'd grown up in it. I'd never known any other home. Everything I had—my clothes, my stuffed animals that I swore I'd outgrown but still kept in my closet, my pictures, my drawings, my books, the cards my dad had drawn me for Christmas every year, all the things he'd ever given me and every tangible memory of him that I had were going up in smoke, charred and crumbling like the exterior of our house.

Why? Why? I hadn't realized that I was screaming it until my mother finally tore herself loose from Mrs. Roseworth's arms and ran to me, kneeling down on the street to pull me into her arms.

"I'm so sorry, baby," she'd whispered, cradling me close. "I'm so sorry. We're not safe here anymore."

“Where?” I’d only managed the one word, but she’d known what I meant. She was my mother, after all.

“I don’t know,” she’d whispered into my hair, and I’d felt real, true fear for the first time. I hadn’t been afraid when my father died, just sad and resentful. I hadn’t known there was something *to* fear. But now, hearing my mother say that she didn’t know how to keep us safe, I learned what it felt like to really, truly be afraid.

If the only adult left who was supposed to protect me couldn’t, who on Earth could?

I knew then and there that it was up to me to keep myself safe, and maybe even her. I couldn’t rely on others. My father hadn’t been able to keep us safe, or even himself, and now my mother was failing too. Maybe I’d also fail, but I knew I had to stop relying on those around me to protect me.

There was the tentative sound of someone clearing their throat above me, and my mother and I both looked up at the same time. Mrs. Roseworth was standing there, her wrinkled face curving in a kind, sympathetic smile. “If you need someone to make sure nothing else happens,” she said quietly, as if imparting a secret, “I know Philip St. Vincent and his family quite well. And after all, with what his family and yours share—”

Her voice had trailed off, and I’d felt my mother stiffen. I’d forgotten about that sentence for a long time, too long, maybe. It hadn’t had any meaning to me until a long time from then. But on that day, that offer from Mrs. Roseworth changed everything.

What would have happened, if she hadn’t offered to convince Philip St. Vincent to give my mother a job, and take us in? Protect us from the Devil’s Sons, and everything they wanted to do to my mother and I in revenge for my father’s disloyalty?

Would we have left town that day, with nothing but the clothes on our backs, running for our lives? Would we have ended up on the other side of the country somewhere, maybe in the mountains of the Pacific Northwest, or the sunny

beaches of California, or the hot deserts of Texas, and lived a completely different life? A life that only belonged to us, and not the men who have always been responsible for every terrible thing that's ever befallen us?

I wouldn't have gone to Blackmoor Academy, that's for sure. I wouldn't have run into Cayde and Dean and Jaxon on those steps, or ended up drunk in a library, pissing off the heir to the St. Vincent family.

I might not have ended up waking in their manor house on the university campus, with no memory of how I got there.

So many things might have been different.

Do I wish that Mrs. Roseworth had never offered that to my mother, that we'd run away and that I'd had a different life?

Sometimes, yes. And then other times, when I'm in between Cayde and Dean, lost in pleasure, or when I'm curled up in their arms in bed, or like just now, when Jaxon had me up against his bedroom door—I don't wish it. I'm glad we stayed. I'm glad that I wound up their captive, so that they could set a part of me free that I never knew existed.

Some days, I'm glad I'm here, so that I can try to put an end to everyone who ever hurt us. So I can burn their patriarchal bullshit to the ground, just like they did my home.

And then, other times, like this exact moment as I hear Dean's voice ringing in my ears, I wish more than anything that my mother had scooped me up in her arms that day, and ran as far and fast from this fucking town as she could.

Or better yet, that none of us had ever come here at all.

If only wishing did anyone any fucking good.

ATHENA

“**A**thena. *It’s your mother. We have to go, now.*”

The words don’t sound real. They ring in my ears, telling me a truth that I don’t want to listen to. That I don’t want to know. I feel a sinking in my stomach, like the afternoon that bus rounded the corner and I saw smoke billowing into the sky without even knowing where it was coming from, and I want to fall to the floor like I did to the street that day.

I want to cry.

I want to scream.

But I don’t.

“What’s happened to her?” My voice sounds clearer than I would have expected, stronger. Beside me, I can feel Jaxon hovering, waiting to catch me if I start to fall. But if I were going to, it would have already happened.

“Athena, we just need to go. Come on, please.” Dean’s face is pale, his eyes pleading. “Get dressed.”

Something about the tone of his voice jolts me into action, a knee-jerk response now to him giving me an order. I nod dizzily, reaching for my clothes on the floor, kicking off my jeans so that I can slip my panties back on. I see Jaxon stuffing himself back into his jeans out of the corner of my eye, and it suddenly feels like a lifetime ago that he had me pinned up against his bedroom door, fucking me frantically, instead of just a few seconds ago.

I drag my jeans back over my hips, breaking a nail on the button as I try to do it with fingers that feel thick and numb, but it doesn't matter. All that matters is getting to my mother, before whatever terrible thing that's in Dean's face happens.

If it hasn't already.

"I've got the car out front," Dean says. "Come on, let's go."

I couldn't have said how long the drive takes. I sit in the back sandwiched between Jaxon and Cayde as Dean drives, and once I realize the direction we're going in, it's as if having them there is the only thing holding me upright.

We're going to the hospital, I know it. I can see the signs as we pass, and I feel like I might faint.

Not my mother. I can't. I can't lose her.

It feels like some kind of sick twist of fate that these three boys, the sons and descendants of the men responsible for every terrible thing that's ever happened in this town, are the ones by my side as we walk into the hospital. The clean, cold scent of it makes me feel sick, but I push forward to the reception desk, giving the tired-looking woman there my name and my mother's name.

"I think she's here," I say hurriedly. "I—"

The woman's expression changes almost immediately, softening to something sympathetic and sad that makes my guts twist. I know that look; it's the look people gave me and my mother right after we found out that my father was dead. It's the look my mother got when she found out that she couldn't see his body, that it was going to be a closed-casket funeral because of what they'd done to him.

That the last time she'd kissed him goodbye was going to be the last time she'd ever see his face, and she hadn't even known it.

What if the last time I saw my mom, when I dragged information out of her that she didn't really want to tell, is the last time I'll ever see her?

“She is here,” the woman—her nametag says *Deborah*, I notice dimly—“But you can’t see her, Miss Saint. I’m sorry. She’s not in any condition to receive visitors.”

“She’s with us,” Dean says sharply, stepping up next to me. I feel Cayde do the same on my other side, Jaxon bringing up the rear. “Don’t you know who we are?”

“I do,” Deborah says crisply. “At least you, Mr. Blackmoor and Mr. St. Vincent. But that doesn’t change anything. Her mother is in the burn ward. She’s in critical condition, and she can’t have visitors.” Her voice softens as she looks back at me. “You wouldn’t recognize her right now, Miss Saint. And she wouldn’t be able to respond to you, if she even knew you were there. It’s better that you don’t see her like this.”

My knees turn to water. They’re not knees anymore, they’re liquid, gelatin, something formless and unable to support me. I feel myself start to fall at the same moment that Dean and Cayde reach out to catch me simultaneously, and I feel like I’m going to be sick.

Burn ward. Critical condition. Burn ward.

I *am* sick, all over the spotless white floor that smells like lemon cleaning chemicals. I feel hands in my hair, pulling it back, the yelp of the woman behind the desk, a ringing as she presses some button probably, getting someone to come and clean up my mess. But I can’t even feel bad about it right now.

I’m instantly back *there*, back on the day when I saw my childhood home burning to the ground, except this time it isn’t my home that’s been burnt. It’s my *mother*, and as the nausea momentarily stops churning in my gut I have a sudden, visceral need to know what the *fuck* happened.

I mumble the question aloud, through lips that feel numb, and Dean lifts me up, helping me towards an empty seat in the row of chairs by the window.

“She’s not going to tell us anything,” Jaxon says disgustedly. “Since we’re not *family*.”

“I’ll call my father.” Cayde fishes his phone out of his pocket. “He’ll know something, I’m sure. He knows everything that happens in this town.”

Because he runs it, owns it, are the underlying words, but at least Cayde has the tact not to say it right now. Not to turn this awful, horrifying night into part of the dick-measuring contest the men of this town have been doing for centuries.

I don’t hear anything Cayde says. He steps away, still probably within earshot, but I’m too overwhelmed to try to listen in. Instead, I let Dean pull me against his chest, gently wiping at my mouth with a napkin as I lay my head against his shoulder. My eyes are burning, but I can’t seem to cry, probably because I know that if I start I’ll never stop.

“Here.” Jaxon kneels in front of me with a small paper cup of water. “Drink this. You need it.”

I shake my head, but he pushes the cup forward insistently. “You need it,” he repeats. “At least rinse your mouth out.” He hands me another empty paper cup. “I know it’s hard, but you’ll feel better.”

It’s the gentle insistence in his tone, the worry, that makes me give in. These three boys, who at one point were my captors, my tormentors, savage and cruel and merciless in the way they broke me and used me, are now my support. My friends. My lovers, even—*boyfriends* seems like too casual a word for what we’ve shared. Too ordinary.

There’s nothing ordinary about our relationship. And definitely nothing casual about it. *Casual* was never a word that could have been used for anything that’s happened among the four of us. And now—

I nearly choke on the water as I take the first sip after I rinse my mouth out. It takes everything in me to sit there with Dean’s arm around me, sipping water while Cayde makes a phone call, knowing that my mother is in a burn ward somewhere in the hospital, possibly dying. All I want to know is what happened, how things could possibly have spiraled out of control so quickly.

Cayde comes back to stand in front of us, and he suddenly has the same expression on his face that Dean did earlier, one that makes him look years older. He looks tired and grim, and my chest contracts, my stomach twisting until I think I might be sick again. I'm glad I already finished the water Jaxon handed me.

"What happened?" I ask in a small whisper, knowing that I don't want to know and have to know, all at the same time.

"There was a fire," Cayde says tiredly, his face so full of pain and worry for me that I feel that sick fear all over again, like I did the afternoon that my mother told me that she didn't know how to keep us safe.

I tried, mom, I think helplessly as I look up into Cayde's face. I really tried. I swear. I tried to keep us both safe.

Clearly I'd failed, on both counts. I'd almost died, and my mother—

"A fire?" I whisper the words, thinking of that other fire, the one that consumed my childhood home. I have a sudden awful vision of the Sons dragging my mother out into the middle of downtown Main Street and setting her ablaze, like some witch in the 1600s, but that can't possibly be what happened. And Cayde confirms it, just a few moments later.

"The house on Blackmoor Estate, where she lived, was attacked," Cayde says quietly. "They—" he breaks off suddenly. "Do you really want to hear this, Athena? Are you sure?"

I feel my stomach twist, but I nod anyway. "I have to know," I whisper, and I mean it. I do have to. If I don't, then I'll wonder all my life what really happened.

"They barricaded the house and set it on fire with her inside," Cayde says, clearly forcing himself to meet my eyes. "My father wasn't home, and no one else was able to get to her in time. By the time the culprits left and anyone could be called, it was too late. Your mother was already severely burned, and the house was beyond saving. She—" he breaks off again, but I know what he's not saying.

She's likely beyond saving, too.

"I'm so sorry, Athena," he murmurs. "I can't tell you how sorry I am. I don't know—we'll find out who did this."

"It must have been the Sons," I whisper, my hands balling into fists in my lap. "Who else would want my mother dead? They've wanted me and my mother both dead ever since my father—" I break off then, my throat clogged with tears. "It sounds like they're going to get at least half of their wish."

"You don't know—"

I don't hear the rest of what Cayde says. Deep down, I do know. And even if she could survive, as much as it hurts to think it, I don't even know if that's the best thing. I try to imagine a life after this, after she's been burned so terribly that I can't even see her. I can't let myself picture my beautiful mother like that, disfigured, living in pain for the rest of her life.

I wish I'd done so much differently, on my last visit. I wish I'd asked her all the questions first, so that our last memories of the visit could have been lunch out and antique shops and bad horror movies and ice cream, not her telling me things she'd hoped she'd never have to revisit, reliving my father's infidelity, his daughter that wasn't hers, the tangled web that his one mistake had woven for my whole family.

But that's just it, I think bitterly. His mistakes have been causing all of this from the very beginning. I'd loved my father so much, and it hurts to think it. But all of this is because of my father. Natalie, my childhood home, my servitude to the heirs, my kidnapping, my mother dying alone in a hospital bed, it's all because of mistakes he's made.

I don't want to hate him for it, and even now, I feel like hate is too strong a word. But I feel mired in misery, drowning in it, in resentment and grief and regret, and I pull away from Dean, because in this moment it feels wrong that he's the one comforting me.

"I want to see her," I whisper helplessly, knowing that won't change anything. Knowing that my last conversation with my

mother will always be the one about my half-sister, about lies and cheating and abandoned daughters and faithless men. Knowing that I won't ever see her again.

“Here comes a doctor,” Cayde says, stepping back. I hear the footsteps on the squeaky-clean tile, and I look up, hoping for one brief second that I'll see something on their face that will tell me the gut feeling churning in my stomach is wrong.

But I take one look at the doctor's face as he approaches, and I know that all my fears are about to come true.

ATHENA

Once again, the only possessions I have left are the ones I already had with me before the house burned down.

I'm glad that I'd convinced Mia to bring me some of my things, or I'd have nothing but the clothes and shoes and other items that the boys had picked out for me when I'd first been brought here. Fortunately, among those things there's a knee-length black dress, probably the same one I'd worn to my father's funeral. It's hanging in the closet, staring back at me as I sit forlornly on my bed in my underwear, trying to get up the nerve to put it on.

There's a knock at the door that makes me jump. For the past few days, in the time between the doctor telling me that my mother had passed away and today—the day of her funeral—Dean and Cayde and Jaxon have mostly left me alone. That's not to say they haven't been looking out for me, though.

I'd fallen to the floor when the doctor said those words. I'd slipped out of the seat I was in as if I'd been boneless, slithering to the tile like Jell-O, and the wail that had come out of my mouth hadn't been anything human. It had been like the scream I'd heard from my mother the day our house burned down, except so much worse. It had been so fierce, so raw, so full of unvarnished grief that even the doctor had stepped back as Cayde and Dean and Jaxon surrounded me like a wall, protecting me from what was just beyond them.

My mother, dead. Funeral arrangements that needed to be made. I was all that was left of our family, but I couldn't begin

to get my thoughts together or even speak, let alone decide on things like graveyard plots and coffins and floral arrangements.

They'd tried to insist that only I, as her next of kin, could do it. But occasionally, there's perks to fucking the sons of the heirs. Dean and Cayde both strong-armed their way into making the decisions, which is why I'm sitting on the bed right now with no real idea of what's going to happen today. I wouldn't even know where to go, except that there's only one funeral home and one cemetery in town.

Once they'd gotten me home, tucked warmly into bed, they'd taken turns sitting up with me just like the night they'd brought me back from my kidnappers. After that, they'd given me space, making sure meals were delivered up to my room and I was left alone. No phone calls, no visitors, just me and four walls and my grief. They hadn't made any attempt to touch me, which was both bad and good. I'd probably have ripped their balls off if they'd tried—but part of me craves a release too, just like I had after I'd healed from my abduction. A way to free all the clawing emotions inside of me, to ease the turbulence. A way to let go, just for a little while.

Soon, I'm going to ask them for that. But not yet. Today, I have to put one foot in front of the other, and make it through the service, and the funeral, and all the way to tonight.

Tonight, I can grieve. And tomorrow?

I don't know about tomorrow.

I have bereavement from class, which means I don't *have* to go, but I don't know if I want to take all of it. I'd fallen far enough behind after my abduction, and now this is just another way for me to slip even further. It won't affect my grades, of course, but I still stubbornly want to earn my grades, even if Cayde and Dean are happy to fix that for me.

The knock on the door comes again, and I get up a little weakly, walking slowly to the door to open it. I half expect it to be one of the guys, but instead it's Mia standing there in a black dress very like the one I'm trying to convince myself to

put on, her hair pulled neatly back into a braided bun and her blue eyes soft and worried.

“I thought you might need some help,” she ventures softly, and I nod, stepping back and opening the door a little bit wider so that she can walk in, blinking back tears.

I haven’t really cried yet. I’ve screamed and I’ve wailed and I’ve shaken until I thought my teeth might rattle out of my head, but I haven’t really cried. My eyes have been burning with how much I *want* to cry, but I can’t seem to manage it. It’s as if I’m subconsciously terrified of the floodgates that will open if I let a single tear fall.

Mia walks directly to the closet, pulling the black dress out and draping it over the bed. “Come on,” she says gently. “Let’s get you dressed. The funeral is starting soon.”

“Did the guys call you?” I ask numbly as I shrug off my oversized t-shirt, letting it fall to the floor and standing there in front of the mirror in just my black hip hugger panties, my small breasts bare and nipples hardening in the chill of the room.

“No.” Mia scoops the t-shirt up, throwing it in a nearby laundry hamper and wrinkling her nose. “Okay, maybe you need a shower first. Fifteen minutes, Athena. Wash your hair or don’t, but if you linger in there for too long I’m coming in after you.”

Anyone else might think that she sounds bossy—and this *is* bossy for Mia—but I know better. She’s my best friend in the world—has been, since the day I set foot on the campus of Blackmoor Academy—and she knows what I need right now. She knows that I need someone to push me, to get me through this, or I’ll crumble and fall apart.

I’ve always prided myself on being the strong one, the one who held my mother and I up even when things were awful, the one who didn’t just give in. But everyone has a breaking point. I’d thought that mine might have been the abduction, but I’d managed to come back even stronger from that nonetheless. But this—

This might be mine. I don't know how I'm going to keep going. A tiny part of my brain that still somehow manages to think is screaming that we want revenge, but I'm not even so sure about that anymore. What good is revenge, when people keep dying all around me? Who else are they going to take while I keep pushing through my quest to bring the Blackmoor men to their knees?

Mia? Dean? Cayde? Jaxon?

They're whittling away at the people who could mean anything to me. Natalie, gone long before I ever knew about her. Her death wasn't related to me in any way, couldn't have been, but then there was my father's, the death that started it all. They tried to kill me—I can't help but think it must have been them now, the Sons or the fathers of the three heirs, or both. They've killed my mother.

The list is getting far too short.

And I'm very afraid Mia will be next.

I want to linger in the shower. It's felt impossible to even think about getting in the last few days, but now that I'm under the hot water I want to stay here forever. It feels like a good place to hide, under the hot spray, soaking into my hair and running down my face and shoulders and arms and body. I want to disappear into the steam curling around me, sink to the shower floor and just hide here.

Hide away, forever.

Fifteen minutes, Mia had said. It doesn't feel like enough. I force myself to wash my hair, rubbing shampoo and then conditioner through it twice until it feels squeaky clean, and then I pour my berry-scented shower gel onto a bath pouf, scrubbing it over my skin until I'm pink from the effort. *I should be clean and presentable for her funeral, at least*, I scold myself. I can't turn up to my own mother's funeral looking like a street urchin.

The problem is that I don't want to turn up at all. I don't want to go.

If I don't go, maybe it won't feel real.

I haven't seen the house. I thought about trying to go, the first day after the news, but I knew none of the guys would have let me. And besides, deep down, I knew there was no point. That house was never my home, it was just a place we were allowed to stay after we lost our real one. I wouldn't have been grieving for the home, I would have been grieving for everything inside, all the remaining things my mother had that she'd cherished.

But worse still, it would have made the way she'd died, the horrific way that they'd killed her, all the more real.

No one has officially said it was the Sons who did it. No one saw the attackers, or at least no one will admit that they did. But deep in my gut, I know that's who it was. And it makes me think they were behind my abduction too.

That bitch that was at the fights, and the Sons.

It hadn't made sense before why they could come after me or my mother, when we had the protection of Philip St. Vincent—when I was the heirs' pet. But now that I know about Natalie and what happened on that awful night, it's starting to come together.

I need to talk to Jaxon about it, however painful it's going to be. I need to know what his relationship with her was like, if there was a reason his father—any of their fathers—might have wanted her dead.

Because if so, they might have been responsible for Natalie's death. *They* might have sicced the Sons on me, and my mother, because I didn't just let Dean win the game. Because I decided not to bow to their fucking rules, and make all three of these boys mine instead.

And if so, it's just another reason to burn this fucking town to the ground like they've done to so much of my life.

The anger bubbling up feels good as I get out of the shower and start to dry off. Anger can get me through, it can help me shove down the grief until I'm able to handle it. Because right now, I feel like if I give in to the grief even a little, I'll lose my mind.

Mia is waiting for me in the bedroom when I walk out, underwear and dress and shoes all laid out for me so that I can get dressed without having to think very much about it. I focus on the anger as I slip into my underwear, hooking my bra and numbly unzipping the dress so that I can step into it and turn around for Mia to zip me up.

“I’ll be right here with you the entire time,” she says gently. “I won’t leave your side, I promise. Whatever you need.”

I need my mother back, I think bitterly, my throat closing over with a sudden rush of grief and emotion that I have to shove roughly back down. I don’t say it aloud, because it’s cruel—she can’t give me that, of course. No one can.

I step into the heels, tottering a little as I look at my reflection in the mirror. I look pale, my eyes red-rimmed, and I wonder if the boys will have anything to say about my appearance. They’ve never really seen me like this. They’ve seen me beaten and injured, nearly dead, but they’ve never seen me grieving like this.

“Are you ready?” Mia asks gently, touching my arm, and I shake my head as I fight back the tears.

“I’m not ever going to be ready for this,” I say softly. “But I have to go, right?”

“I think if you don’t, you’ll regret it.” Mia looks at my reflection in the mirror, her face sympathetic. “I know this is hard, but just think of it as the last thing you can do for her. You can be there for her today.”

“I just can’t believe she’s gone.” I bite my lower lip hard, my eyes burning. *I can’t cry. Why can’t I cry? I shouldn’t cry. If I cry, I won’t stop.* “It was so sudden. And so violent. I’m not saying it wouldn’t have been hard no matter what, but if she’d been sick, or—”

“You would have had time to get used to the idea. To know she was going to be gone. And to say goodbye.” Mia’s arm slips around my waist, and she lays her head against my shoulder. “That makes perfect sense, Athena. There’s no reason to feel bad that you feel that way.”

“The last thing we talked about was Natalie.” I bite down on my lip harder, and I taste blood, but I don’t care. That thought, more than anything, keeps tearing at me until I feel as if I can’t stand it anymore. “I hate that that was our last conversation.”

“I know.” Mia looks at me sadly. “But you can’t change it now. And your mother loved you. She knew how much you loved her. That one conversation didn’t change any of that. Even if it brought up old painful memories, it didn’t change all the other wonderful times you had together.”

“I know.” I close my eyes briefly, trying to steady myself. “I didn’t think I’d have to do this for a long time. And I feel like it’s my fault. I—”

“Athena, no!” Mia straightens, turning to face me with shock written all over her face. “Why on earth would you think that?”

“Because I think it was revenge. Because I didn’t just give in and let Dean win the game. Because I kept fighting.” I explain to Mia my theory about Natalie, and how I think the Sons were responsible for my abduction and my mother’s murder. “I think it’s all connected. And I think they were able to attack us because Cayde and Dean and Jaxon’s fathers want me and my mother dead. They don’t want anything to change, and I’m threatening that now. So if I’d just given in, accepted that Dean won and I was his pet and let things go on as they always have, then my mother would still be alive.”

“No.” Mia shakes her head firmly. She reaches out, grabbing my shoulders so that I’m forced to look directly at her. “Athena, no. This is not your fault. What do you think your mother would have wanted you to do, if she’d known why you were really here? Do you think she’d have wanted you to give in? To be Dean’s sex toy or his maid for the rest of your life? These aren’t just your choices either, Athena.” Mia looks sterner than I’ve ever seen her, her voice more insistent than I’ve ever heard it. “Your mother chose to stay with your father, knowing he was in a biker gang, knowing about his infidelity, about his other daughter. She chose to stay in this town, to lean on Philip St. Vincent’s charity, knowing that the same gang that killed her husband wanted her and her daughter dead as

well. She could have taken you and run, and none of this would have ever happened.”

I nod silently. I’ve thought that too, of course. But I’ve never been able to admit it out loud.

“It’s not just your choices that have led to this, Athena. And your mother would never, ever have wanted you to give in to the game you were forced to play. She would never have wanted you to do that. No matter the consequences. You have to believe that, or you’re going to go insane.”

“I feel like I’m halfway there already.” My chin trembles, and I look at myself in the mirror again. I think I look as brittle as I feel, like all the pieces of me might start falling apart, and I’m not sure who will be there to pick them up.

I don’t know for sure yet if I can count on Cayde and Dean. I’m even less certain of Jaxon. And while I know that Mia will always be there for me, I don’t want to put everything on her. It’s too much of a burden for any one person.

It’s too much for *me*. The past few months have torn my entire world apart in so many different ways, and I feel so close to breaking.

But I want to break the people responsible for all of this instead.

“Alright.” I take one last look in the mirror, and then back at Mia. “Let’s go, before I lose my nerve.”

CAYDE

I'm almost shaking with anger as Dean, Jaxon and I wait in the living room for Athena. I've been on the verge of exploding for days now, my anger carefully held in to protect Athena until I could get to the gym and blow off some steam. I haven't wanted to let Athena see how affected I am by this—none of us have. She has enough on her mind.

But with the funeral being today, I'm having a hard time keeping it together. I know that's selfish—this is the hardest day of Athena's life, other than maybe the day her father died. But the same thoughts keep running through my head, over and over.

Someone murdered Athena's mother.

Someone hurt our girl. Again.

Someone is going to fucking pay.

"I want to know who fucking did this," I growl, looking at the other two. Dean is sitting stiffly on one side of the couch, his face set in hard lines, and Jaxon is slumped characteristically against one side, his expression bitter.

"You know who fucking did it," Jaxon snaps. He's been more surly than usual, probably because all of this happened the night he finally gave in and fucked Athena. Which—there's still a conversation that needs to be had about that, if he's going to become part of what we've got going on here, or whether he's going to try to still keep himself separate. The last won't fly—we're either all together on this, or Jaxon is going to have to keep his hands off.

“You don’t know that,” Dean says sharply. “That’s a dangerous accusation to make, considering what’s been happening.”

“Am I missing something?” I glare between the two of them. Clearly they’ve been talking when I haven’t been around. “What the fuck is going on?”

“Jaxon has a theory.” Dean sounds tired, leaning his head back against the couch. “He thinks the Sons are behind all of this.”

“Our family dogs?” I narrow my eyes. “We already looked into that, when Athena was abducted. They swore they had nothing to do with it—”

“They fucking lied,” Jaxon snarls. “When Athena and I went to that fight, she recognized a girl there. She said it was the girl who’s been stalking her, the one she remembers being there when she was abducted. That girl was with the fucking Sons. I’ve seen her at the fights before, she took me back to her place after one of them. Tried to fuck me.”

“And did she?” Dean’s smirking now, as if he’s caught Jaxon out doing something wrong. “I bet Athena would love to hear about that.”

“No, I didn’t fuck her,” Jaxon snaps. “And I told Athena everything, so wipe that fucking smile off your face. Fucking focus. Don’t you see what this means?”

“I see that you’re treading dangerous ground,” Dean says quietly, his voice dropping several octaves. “These aren’t accusations you make lightly.”

“Lay it out for me.” I grit my teeth, glaring at them both. “What exactly is it that you think is happening, Jaxon?”

“Our family’s guard dogs, the biker gang that answers to our fathers, were the ones who abducted Athena, if I’m right. And if I’m right, they’re also the ones who set that fire and murdered her mother. Athena is under our protection—she’s *our* pet. Which means if they did that—they did it with our fathers’ authorization.”

It takes a second for it to really sink in, what he's saying. "So you think—"

"Our fathers want Athena dead."

"That's insane. Why would they—"

"Why *wouldn't* they?" Jaxon shoves himself to his feet, shaking his head. "Open your fucking eyes, both of you! Dean was supposed to win this game. He took Athena's virginity. It should have been over. But Athena refused to give in. She got Cayde to fight back. Dean refused his betrothal to Winter. Our fathers aren't fucking stupid. They know things are being shaken up, and they know it's because of her. They tried to kill her, and they failed. So they went after her mother instead. They're hoping it'll scare her into stopping, or maybe that it'll just break her until she gives in. But what they don't realize is that you guys are fed up with it too. And so am I."

It's the longest speech I think I've ever heard Jaxon make. And he's angry too, I can see it in his eyes. As angry as I am— as angry as I'm sure Dean is, though he's doing a good job of not showing it.

The question is, do I think it has any merit?

I let myself think about a memory that I hardly ever allow myself to remember. The memory of my father in that attic with the man responsible for my brother's death, with the burly Son there who would do the dirty work of stringing the man up. I remember my father's face, the cold anger in it. The face of a man who could watch another man die in front of him because he'd been wronged, and be glad about it.

I remember something else, too—our fathers' faces the day that Jaxon, Dean and I went through the rite of passage, the day we shot those men in the warehouse. How little they cared for the lives of those men. Why would Athena, or her mother, matter any more to them?

Athena matters to *us*, but to our fathers, she's nothing but a tool. A means to decide the heir, and I'm pretty sure by now, a means to manipulate me.

There's no reason for them to care about her, or her mother. And as I ask myself the question, *if killing either of them would help them achieve their ends, would my father, Dean's, or Jaxon's do it?*

I know, deep down, what the answer is.

And I've never been more angry.

"We can't let them get away with this," I say viciously. "What they did to Athena was too far, but we didn't know then. This? This is too much."

"We don't know for sure—"

"You know it's true." I look at Dean, feeling myself almost trembling with fury. "You *know*."

"They're our fathers—"

"I don't care!" I snarl, and Jaxon nods, a rare smile spreading across his face at my reaction. "My father fucking beat me until I was scarred for life to make me into the man he wanted me to be. Your father has controlled everything you've ever done, down to who you would marry, in order to win this fucking game. And yours?" I look at Jaxon, my chest heaving. "Where does Natalie's death fit into this little theory of yours? Do you think they would have ever let the two of you leave, the way she wanted?"

I see the sudden horror in Jaxon's face, and I know then that he hadn't thought of that, or if he had, he hadn't really allowed himself to follow the thought to its natural conclusion.

"This has to end," I say, my voice low and dark. "We're going to let it lie today, because we need to be there for Athena. But this has gone too far. It's got to stop."

"Agreed." Jaxon says, his own voice hard and brittle. Dean says nothing, just watches me, but I can see something unreadable in his expression. *He'll come around*, I think, looking at him. He might just take a little more convincing.

Athena is ours. And no one is ever going to fucking hurt her, or anyone she cares about, ever again.

Not even if it's our own families.

ATHENA

I barely make it through the funeral.

The entire thing feels like a nightmare. There's no casket, only the urn, which makes it feel even more like a nightmare because I can't see my mother's face. It doesn't make sense that I'll never see it again, and I can't seem to fathom that she's in there, just a pile of ashes.

Like my childhood home. Like the life I'd imagined for myself. Like all the times I'd told myself that I could save us both. That what I was doing was to help her, as well as myself.

What am I even doing anymore?

Why am I here? Why should I go back to Blackmoor?

The obvious answer is because the boys will come after me. But I'm not even sure if I care anymore.

The answer that I don't want to admit is because I want to stay with them. Because I no longer entirely want to leave.

And I need them, if I want to change anything at all in this rotten fucking town.

I couldn't have told you who was in charge of the service. I just sat next to Mia, with Cayde and Dean and Jaxon on my other side, staring at the urn blankly as the funeral director spoke to an almost empty room. No one came, except for Mrs. Roseworth, and a few of our other neighbors from when we lived in the old house, the one I'd grown up in. It made me even sadder, somehow, that there were so few people here for

my mother's funeral. She'd been so good to everyone, but in the end, almost all of them had forgotten her.

Not even Philip St. Vincent could be bothered to show. *Of course*, I think bitterly as I stare at the urn. *He's probably part of the reason this happened at all.*

It's ironic that his son is the one on my left side, holding my hand tightly the same way Mia is holding my right. If you'd asked me not that long ago if Cayde St. Vincent would be holding my hand at my mother's funeral, I would have thought you were high. This is a side to him that I've never seen before. A side that I couldn't have imagined in high school, or even a few months ago, when I woke up in Blackmoor House.

I was told I could keep the urn, but I opted to bury it instead. My mother would have wanted to be buried next to my father, I'm sure. So when the short service is concluded, we all troop out into the rainy dark evening to stand in the wet grass next to the hole in the earth, Mia and Cayde still flanking me as Dean and Jaxon stand behind me, like a small army keeping me on my feet throughout this entire wretched experience.

I don't feel as if I can breathe again until we walk back into Blackmoor House, and not even really then. Mia hovers in the entryway, as if wondering whether she should stay or not.

"You don't have to," I tell her, picking up on how awkward and nervous she feels. I can see her glancing at the guys, trying not to stare, clearly thinking about all the things I've told her. If I were less overwhelmed with grief, I'd probably be embarrassed, but I'm too exhausted to feel anything other than the crushing sorrow that makes me feel as if I might be flattened under its weight at any moment.

Mia waffles for a moment, glancing at me, and then back at the three boys. "Okay—" she says hesitantly. "But if you need me, call me, okay? For any reason. Promise you'll call me."

"I will," I promise her. "But I'll be alright. I just need to sleep." *For a year, maybe. Or forever.*

“We’ll take good care of her,” Dean promises, touching my lower back. “I swear.”

Something passes between him and Mia, a look that I don’t fully understand, or at least can’t parse out right now. But Mia nods, giving me a quick, tight hug, and then she’s gone.

“Come on,” Dean says gently. “Let’s get you to bed.”

It’s tempting. But I shake my head, forcing myself to push through even though the conversation we need to have is the last thing in the world I want to talk about right now.

“We have to talk,” I say firmly, pushing away from the three of them and walking towards the living room.

“Athena, not tonight,” Jaxon says, grabbing my arm. “There’s plenty of time to talk about all of this. We don’t need to tonight.”

“We do.” I pull my arm away. “I’m done with this. I’m done playing these fucking games. My mother is dead, and we’re going to talk about why. Or why I think, anyway. And Jaxon—you’re part of this too.”

His jaw tightens, and I can see how badly he wants to not be a part of this. But I’m done. We’re going to lay it all out on the table tonight, and they’re either going to be with me or not. But one way or another, I’m going to end every fucking person who might have had a hand in my mother’s death.

“Just meet me in the living room,” I tell them, and then I go up to my room, and fish all of the articles out of my backpack. All of the research that Mia and I found.

When I walk back into the living room, they’re all seated there, just as I asked. It gives me a small spark of hope that this might go better than I’d thought it would. That maybe they won’t think I’m absolutely insane.

“Mia and I did some research into the founding of the town,” I tell them, spreading out the articles. I hold back the ones about Natalie, not wanting to bring that up yet. “And we found out all of this. How there used to be *real* sacrifices, and how later on it turned into the game you three played with me.” I

put the photographs on the table too. “I found these in the attic.”

There’s silence for a moment, while the boys shuffle through it all. Slowly, I can see their facial expressions changing, from shock to horror and back again.

“Fuck.” Cayde swears, holding up one of the photographs, the one that I had thought looked slightly familiar. “This is my fucking mom. She was a *pet*? A *sacrifice*?”

I feel a momentary resentment that he’s horrified at that, and not at the fact that the ritual exists at all. But I can understand the difference between someone he doesn’t know, and his own mother.

“So my father did all of this to my mother. Him—and others, too. Until he won.” Cayde looks sick. “Fuck, I don’t want to think about my mom like that, but *shit*. This is so fucked up.”

“I don’t see mine or Jaxon’s,” Dean says, shuffling through the photos. “But the rest of this—” he flips through the articles again, his face paler now, much like the night he told me about my mother being in the hospital. “We knew some of the town’s history. But not *this*.”

“There’s more.” I set down the articles about Natalie, hating what I know I’ll see in Jaxon’s face.

It’s there immediately, the moment he sees the papers. His jaw tightens, his dark eyes full of pain that I’ve seen there before, and not understood until very recently. “I’ve seen these before,” he says darkly, turning away. “I know how she died.”

“You don’t know everything, though.” I lick my lips, my heart pounding in my chest. I don’t want to say any of this aloud, because I know it’s going to change everything. He might hate me, for not telling him before we fucked—before we did anything, really, for not telling him the moment I knew. He might never want anything to do with me again. And it would be hard for me to blame him.

I explain everything. I tell them—but mostly Jaxon—about how Natalie was my half-sister, about my father’s infidelity, about Bryce St. Vincent and everything that happened

afterwards. I see Jaxon's face change, hardening, full of an anger that's almost frightening, and he pushes himself to his feet, glaring at Cayde.

"You know what Natalie and I were planning to do, the night she died? What I've never fucking said out loud to any of you? We were going to fucking leave this town. Just get the fuck out of Dodge, leave all this shit behind—the fucking game, the inheritance, all of this bullshit that our fathers have forced us into. We were going to run away—and then they fucking *killed her!*" He's shouting now, his voice high and almost a scream. "I know that's what happened, and I'm even more sure of it now. Because they could never let me go. I was never going to be allowed to leave." He's almost shaking now, looking at Dean and Cayde. "Do you believe me now? Do you?"

And then he spins on his heel, stalking out of the room.

A moment later, we hear the slam of the front door.

I run after him. I know I probably shouldn't, after what I just confessed, but I can't stop myself. I leave Dean and Cayde sitting there on the sofa, all those awful articles and photos spread over the coffee table and floor like a shrine to the rotten history of this town, and I run after Jaxon, yanking the heavy wooden front door open and bursting out into the night.

He's standing there in the driveway, as if he barely made it a few steps off of the porch, shoulders heaving. It's cold even for October and the rain is pouring down, plastering his dark hair to his head as Jaxon stands with his back to me, his hands clenched into fists at his sides.

"Jaxon!" I shout his name, running down the steps, and he whirls to face me. I can't tell if what's dripping down his face is rain or tears or a mixture of both, but I can see how twisted it is with pain, his eyes so dark that they look like black holes in his face.

"You fucking knew," he hisses, every muscle in his body wound tight.

I want to ask him what he means, but I already know, and I won't insult him by pretending otherwise. He's talking about

what I admitted tonight, that Natalie was my half-sister, and that I knew it when I came into his room. When I let him go down on me, when I sucked him off, when I let him fuck me up against his bedroom door. I knew all of it, and I didn't say a word, because I wanted him more than I wanted to be honest with him.

Or, if I'm *really* being honest, because I needed him. Because I needed to finish my plan.

"Yeah." I look at him, and I know he can see the grief in my face; multitudes of it. Grief for myself, and for him, for my mother and for Natalie, for every fucking woman this town has crushed under its heel and every dream it's ever killed. "I knew."

"And you didn't tell me. You let me—" A shudder goes through him, wracking his body as he takes two long strides towards me, and I could fight back if I wanted to. Jaxon and I train together, after all. I could try to get away. But I don't, either because I crave him so badly or because I deserve it, I don't know which. But when Jaxon's hand closes around my throat and lifts me up, shoving me back against the side of the porch like Cayde once threw me back against the lockers, I don't try to fight him.

My head hits the pillar a little, not hard enough to make me see stars, but hard enough to jolt me. Jaxon's hand is tight enough to hurt but not enough to choke, and I can still breathe, but I stare down at him, unable to mask the fear in my eyes. I might deserve this, but I'm still terrified.

"You knew, and you let me fuck you anyway," Jaxon snarls. "You little whore. *Slut.*" His hand tightens around my throat, shaking me, and I close my eyes. My hand comes up to his wrist automatically, closing around it, but there's no way I'll be able to get free of him now. It's impossible.

"I tried to protect you as much as I could, all this time." Jaxon's upper lip curls, and he surges forward, pinning the rest of me against pillar and porch as his hard body presses against mine. He's hard as rock, the thick line of his cock straining against his jeans as he grinds his hips into me painfully, his

hand still tight around my throat. “And that’s the thanks I get. You *knew* how I felt. You *knew* I still fucking *dreamed* about her, and you came into my bed anyway, let me fuck you anyway, knowing she was your *sister*? How the *fuck* did you think that would make me feel?”

He nearly screams it into my face, his lips pulled back to show the snarl of his teeth, his eyes dark and wide, eyes that could kill me, eyes that look like a demon’s. He’s half-mad with rage, and I know I should be more scared than I am, but all I can feel is the crushing weight of all my own emotions, and beneath it, that crawling need to come out of my own skin, to tear something apart, to purge all of this grief somehow.

Half-sister, I want to say, but I can’t speak, and it wouldn’t matter anyway. Jaxon shakes me again, his jaw clenched. “No one in this town gives a *shit* about me,” he hisses. “I thought maybe you did, but I guess I was fucking wrong.”

His free hand comes down, fumbles with his zipper, and I gasp as I feel him surge against me again, scrabbling at my skirt as he shoves it up, kicking my legs apart as I suddenly feel the hot, hard press of his cock against my entrance.

Jaxon thrusts into me hard, still holding me up with one hand as his other goes to my thigh, holding me in place as he drives himself into me. “This is what you wanted, isn’t it?” he growls into my ear, each word punctuated by a hard thrust. “Little fucking slut. You just wanted my cock for your Blackmoor bingo card. All three of us, the heir trifecta.” His hand loosens a little, enough for me to breathe at least, but his hard muscular body still has me pinned. “I can’t believe I still get fucking hard for you. The only reason I can think of is because you look enough like her for me to forget that you’re nothing but the trailer trash whore that our fathers gave us to play with.”

He drives himself into me again, hard, roughly enough for me to scream out weakly with what little breath I have, but I’m not entirely sure if it’s a scream of pain or pleasure. As he fucks me harder, my legs wrap around him without thinking, and Jaxon chuckles darkly.

“That’s right,” he growls, laughing through it. “Take my cock, you fucking slut. I bet you’d beg for it, if I stopped fucking you right now. You love this.”

I’m almost afraid he’s going to put that theory to the test, but to tell the truth, I don’t think he *can* stop. I can feel how hard he is, his thick pierced cock ramming as deeply as he can into me with every painful thrust, and despite the violence of it, I can feel my own pleasure rising to meet his.

“I bet you’re going to come on my cock,” he pants, the rain soaking us both now, streaming down his face and mine. It’s coming down harder now, making it hard to see, but Jaxon barely seems to notice that both of us are drenched and freezing. I can feel him rocking forward with every thrust, as if he’s trying to go even deeper, and the sudden shudder that ripples through his body tells me that he’s close.

“That’s right, Athena,” Jaxon hisses, his black eyes very close to mine, his lips hovering over my mouth that he’s refused to kiss this entire time. “Take every drop of my fucking cum.”

His mouth crashes down over mine, swallowing the scream that erupts from my lips as my orgasm hits, my body clamping down around his length as he starts to come too. He keeps fucking me, hard, as he pumps his cum into me, his cock rock-hard and spasming inside of me. I can almost feel the ripples of it, I’m clenched around him so hard, the hot rush of his cum as he fills me, his teeth sinking into my lower lip as if he wants to tear it off.

I’m still whimpering against his mouth as he thrusts once more, holding himself inside of me until every last tremor of his orgasm has passed, and then he yanks himself away from me abruptly.

I fall to the muddy ground like a sack of potatoes, my dress hiked up around my hips and cum dripping down my thighs as Jaxon stuffs himself back into his jeans, disgust written over every inch of his face.

“Fuck all of you,” he snarls.

And then he turns, and strides away again.

This time, the roar of his motorcycle tells me there's no point in going after him.

DEAN

“**T**hey’ve been out there for a long time.” I look towards the arched window on the other side of the living room, where I can see the rain coming down hard now. “It’s fucking pouring out there, what the hell are they doing?”

“We’ll give it five more minutes, and then I’ll go out and see,” Cayde says. There’s worry on his face, and I can’t help but think how much has changed. How did we go from Athena’s captors, her tormentors, her lord and her master, to her guard dogs? Her protectors?

I’m not mad about it, either. Somewhere down the line, something has shifted. I don’t even have to think that hard to try to figure out when—it was the night she was abducted. Seeing Athena like that, finding her, seeing those awful things that were done to her and then watching her bounce back from it even stronger, changed something. It changed her, and us, and the entire dynamic.

Athena’s not our pet anymore, even if we might enjoy calling her that for fun. She’s not our girlfriend either—that sounds too childish, too pedantic. Lover, maybe.

Whatever the right label for it is, she’s *ours*.

Ours to fuck and punish, yes.

But also ours to protect. Ours to defend. Ours to keep.

The minutes tick by as Cayde picks up some of the photos again, flipping through them with disgust on his face. Finally,

he throws them back down onto the coffee table, standing up so abruptly that he nearly knocks the whole thing over.

“I’ve had enough. I’m going to go see what the fuck is taking so long.”

I almost protest, but he’s right. We *should* know what’s going on, so I follow him, all the way out to the front porch, where the wet icy air lashes at our faces. The rain is coming down so hard that it’s difficult to see, but what’s clear is that Jaxon is nowhere out here. And neither of us see where Athena is either.

“Athena!” Cayde shouts her name, and then both of us turn when we hear a small sound next to the porch steps.

“Fuck!” Cayde runs down the steps with me close behind, the moment he sees her. She’s crumpled on the ground next to the pillar, her black funeral dress up around her thighs, shivering as if the wet cold has gone bone deep. It might have—it’s nearly freezing out, and the rain is only making it worse.

“Let’s get her inside.” I hover behind Cayde, but he doesn’t need any help lifting her. Instead, I grab the door, looking over my shoulder once more to see if there’s any sign of Jaxon before shoving it open so that Cayde can bring Athena into the warmth of the house. “Take her upstairs,” I tell him, shutting the door securely behind us. “We’ll get her in the bath—the big one in my suite—and warm her up.”

Cayde doesn’t argue, just nods and heads for the stairs. Athena is half-out of it, her head lolling against his shoulder, and I feel a tight, hot anger rising up in me at the thought of how long she might have been out there, soaking in the freezing rain.

“Did Jaxon do this?” I ask Cayde, who gives me a look that clearly says *how the fuck would I know?*

He keeps striding up the stairs, pushing open the door to my room with his shoulder and walking straight through to the bathroom. Cayde gently sets Athena down on the edge of it as I start to heat up the water, and as he undresses her, I can’t

help but think that one or both of us has done this too many times.

She's been hurt too many times. And deep down, I know it's at least partially our fault. She's here because of us. And slowly, as I start to come to terms more and more with our part in this, I can feel the guilt settling in.

"Fuck." Cayde swears loudly, and I see Athena's eyes flutter slightly in shock before sliding closed again.

"What?" I turn abruptly, looking at him as I let the tub fill. "What the fuck is it?"

"I'm going to fucking kill him." Cayde swears under his breath again, Athena's black dress crumpled in his fist before he throws it aside.

"Who? Why?" I sound like a fucking owl, but I don't care. "Jaxon?"

"Yeah." Cayde parts Athena's legs slightly, letting me see the thick residue on her skin, the way her panties are twisted up and shoved to one side. "From what I can tell, he fucked her and then just left her there to freeze."

"That's not like him." I frown. "I don't—"

"Well, it fucking was this time." Cayde's face is reddening with anger. "He was fucking pissed when he left, Dean. And it looks like he took it out on Athena."

"Is that true?" Athena's eyes are fluttering open again, and I look at her, feeling my own muscles tense with rising anger. "Did Jaxon do this to you?"

"Mm." Athena moans softly, and then makes a small whimpering noise as Cayde finishes stripping her bare and starts to lower her into the warm water.

"Careful. We don't want to shock her." I start stripping off my own shirt, and Cayde looks at me confusedly.

"What are you doing?"

"The tub is big enough for multiple people. I'm getting in there with her. You can come too, if you like, but I'm for sure

not leaving her to lay in there alone like this.”

“You want me to take a bath with you, bro?” Cayde’s mouth twists in a smirk as he settles Athena into the water.

I glare at him, unamused. “We’ve fucked her together, I think we can take care of her together. But you don’t have to.”

Cayde shrugs. “Keep an eye on her for a minute, then.”

I slip into the bath as soon as I’m naked, cradling Athena against me. She moans softly, leaning into my chest, and I grit my teeth against the wave of emotion. This might have started out with us hurting her, us being the ones to do terrible, painful, humiliating things—but it’s not like that anymore. And the fact that Jaxon did this, when he’s always been the one who’s looked down on us for behaving the way we have with Athena, grips me with an almost irresistible urge to rearrange his face for him when he comes home.

Cayde steps into the bath too, sliding down on the opposite side. He reaches for Athena’s feet, gently massaging them to try to return some of the circulation as I run my hands up and down her arms. She makes small noises as we touch her, and I can feel my pulse speed up at the sound. I’m trying my best not to get an erection—it’s hardly an appropriate time—but I can feel my cock swelling with each small moan and whimper she lets out at Cayde’s and my touch.

“Did Jaxon do this?” I ask again, now that she’s a little more alert. There’s a beat, and I’m not entirely sure if she heard me, but then she just nods, her head sinking against my chest again.

“I’m going to beat the shit out of him,” Cayde growls, his hands tightening slightly on Athena’s calves. “I swear to God —”

“We’ll deal with it together,” I tell him firmly. “But right now, we need to focus on Athena.”

“Man, shit really changed,” Cayde says, his voice softer now as he runs his hands along Athena’s legs. “We thought things were going to be a lot different than they are.”

“And they’re going to be even more different still,” I tell him warningly. “We can’t let any of this stand, Cayde. Not the things that have happened to Athena, or what happened to her mother, not what happened to Natalie, or anyone else. We’re supposed to take care of this town. That’s the point of one of us inheriting it, right? To protect it, and the people who live here. But it seems like along the way, our families forgot that. So we’re going to make it right.”

I’m still cradling Athena as I speak, and I feel her shift in my arms, as if confirming what I already feel. “We’re going to change this town forever,” I tell Cayde with conviction. “And our fathers will either get in line, or get the fuck out.”

For a moment, I’m not sure what Cayde is going to say. But then a slow smile spreads across his face, and he nods.

“Now you’re starting to sound like me.”

CAYDE

Dean and I don't sleep after we dry Athena off and help her into her bed. We cleaned her up, washing away all traces of what Jaxon did, making sure she was warm and in comfortable sleeping clothes, and then we left her in bed, going back downstairs to clean up there.

Neither of us really know what to do with the mess of photos and articles. Finally, we make a pile of each, and Dean finds a couple of manila files to stuff them in. The photos take up two; the articles, carefully folded, manage to fit in one. They look innocuous afterwards, sitting crisply on the coffee table, as if an entire history of horrors wasn't contained inside.

"Are you going to bed?" Dean asks me when we finally finish cleaning up. He looks exhausted, his face drawn and pale, but I shake my head.

"No," I tell him, feeling myself tense with anger all over again. "I'm going to fucking wait for Jaxon to come home."

"Well." Dean leans back, raising his arms above his head. "I guess I'll wait up with you."

It takes a long time. It's well after two in the morning when we hear the slam of the front door. Both Dean and I stand up at the same time, striding out into the foyer before Jaxon can make it to the stairs.

"Stop right fucking there." My voice carries across the room, but Jaxon doesn't stop. He hardly even hesitates, still walking towards the staircase, and I rush towards him, grabbing his shoulder and yanking him backwards.

If I'm being honest, I didn't mean for it to be as hard as it was. But my fingers dig into his shoulder, hauling him back so that he winds up sprawled on the hardwood floor with an undignified yelp as his ass hits the ground.

Jaxon almost immediately leaps back up, moving with the speed and surety of someone who spends a decent portion of his life in the gym, but I'm quick too. I spend a fuck ton of my time out on the rugby field, tackling men a lot fucking bigger than Jaxon, and he's completely unprepared for me to lunge forward, driving my shoulder into him as I throw him backwards towards the wall.

"Fuck! What the fuck, Cayde—" he snarls, but I'm already on him, shoving him back, pinning him to the wall as my fist connects with his chin and sends him slumping sideways. For a brief second, I think I might have succeeded in knocking him out with one punch, but then Jaxon throws his weight into me, shoving me backwards and managing to get in a blow of his own.

Dean rushes in, grabbing Jaxon in an effort to get him off of me, but all that succeeds in doing is turning a fight into a brawl. Jaxon wheels around, his fist going into Dean's stomach, and as I manage to get in another punch of my own on Jaxon, the three of us start going around and around, ducking and weaving and swinging in the foyer of our own home like three madmen.

Truthfully, I feel as if we've all gone a little crazy. And why not? This town seems made to make madmen out of us. Finding out everything we did tonight would be enough to push anyone over the edge, and I feel as if we're there.

I feel as if we've been headed here for a long time.

"What the fuck is going on?" Jaxon shouts through a bloodied mouth, dodging my next blow and getting me hard in the arm.

"You fucked Athena," I growl, lunging towards him again.

"So?" Jaxon sneers at me. "I've fucked her before. She's not your property, Cayde, not even yours and Dean's. We're all

sharing her now, isn't that right? Sharing the little slut of a pet that our fathers gave us."

"Don't fucking talk about her like that!" I barrel towards him, using all of my weight to catch him slightly off balance and bring him down to the floor. We crash down together, the force of us both hitting the hardwood sending a tremor through the floor, and then I rear back, smashing my fist into his face hard enough that I'm sure it must loosen some teeth. If not, they're well on their way.

"Cayde!" Dean's voice cuts through the fog of my rage, and the next moment I feel him pulling me backwards, off of Jaxon. I stumble back, and this time Jaxon doesn't immediately get up. His mouth and nose are bleeding, his jaw purpling where I struck him, and he looks a little dazed.

"Get him under fucking control," he snarls at Dean, and that's enough for me to lunge forward again, but Dean blocks me. I stagger back, and Dean squats down, reaching forward to grab a fistful of Jaxon's shirt and haul the other man's face up towards his.

"No one said you can't fuck Athena," Dean says coolly. "But you didn't just fuck her, did you? You fucked her hard, with your hand around her throat, enough to leave marks. You fucked her in a rage, and then you left her outside, half-passed out, to freeze to death. That's not how we treat what's been entrusted to us. And it's definitely not how we treat Athena." He shakes Jaxon, hard, his fist tightening in the fabric as he glares down at the other man. "You *know* what she's been through. And you still chose to treat her like that. How fucking *dare* you."

"She deserved it." Jaxon sneers, and there's a bitterness and resentful anger in his face that I haven't seen in a long time, not since Natalie died. "She seduced me knowing she was my ex's half-sister. Knowing Natalie died, knowing how I felt about it all. She knew *all* of it, and she still wormed her way into my bed, just so she could fulfil her little plan of getting all of us so that none of us could win. She didn't give a fuck about me, just like no one else in this fucking town ever has.

That's why we were going to leave, Natalie and I. But they took that away from me, too."

His jaw is clenched, staring up at Dean, and I can see how angry he is. How hurt. I can even empathize with it, a little. But I can't come to terms with how he treated Athena.

"You're going to make this right with her," Dean says, shaking him hard. "You're going to find it in yourself to admit that you fucked up, and you're going to fucking make it right. Do you understand me?"

Jaxon takes a deep breath, as if he's going to speak, and then he uses all of his strength to wrench himself away from Dean, pushing himself back on the hardwood so that he can get clumsily to his feet.

"Fuck you," he says distinctly, blood bubbling on his lower lip. "Fuck you both."

And then he strides up the stairs, leaving us both there.

ATHENA

I sleep way too long.

I guess I have plenty of excuses as to why. My mother's funeral yesterday, showing all of the research Mia and I collected to the guys, Jaxon's vicious handling of me outside. I don't really remember passing out, just slumping to the ground after he let go of me, and then a creeping sense of cold. I barely even recall the bath that Dean and Cayde got me into—just a vague, floating sense of warm water and an understanding that they were both there with me.

When I wake up, it's alone in my own bed, warm and dry but still feeling exhausted, as if I hadn't even really slept. A quick glance at my phone tells me that it's almost noon, but I roll over anyway, pulling the covers tighter around me and wincing at the soreness between my thighs.

I don't want to let this go for too long, though. The longer I think about what happened yesterday, the more the anger builds, that anger that I've been clinging to in order to help me stave off the grief. And Jaxon has only added to it.

Yes, I know what I did was wrong. I know I should have told him the truth, before we slept together. I should have told him everything as soon as I even suspected. I let my own desires and my own needs get in the way, and he's right to be pissed at me.

What isn't right, in any possible sense of the word, is how he treated me last night.

And I'm not about to let it slide.

I force myself out of bed, getting dressed slowly. To my surprise, when I make it down to the dining room, Cayde and Dean are at the table still—a late start for breakfast for them, even for a Sunday.

What’s even more shocking is the state of their faces.

Dean doesn’t look too bad, just a few bruises here and there and a slight split to one lip, but Cayde looks as if he went ten rounds with Muhammad Ali. His face is black and blue, his lips swollen, and it’s clear that he had one hell of a fight last night.

“What the fuck happened?” I blurt out, staring at them both, and Cayde and Dean look up simultaneously. I can tell from the way they glance at each other that they’re considering not telling me the truth, but before I can say anything about it Cayde shrugs and looks directly at me.

“We had a little—talk with Jaxon last night, when he came home.”

I stare at them both, dumbfounded. It makes sense, then, why Jaxon isn’t at the table with them—but what I can’t wrap my head around is why. Jaxon is their best friend, practically their brother, and the idea of them getting into a fight that violent with him is almost unimaginable. “Why?” I manage, blinking rapidly. “What on earth—”

“After what he did to you?” There’s something dark and deadly in Dean’s voice that startles me. “Is that really a question you even need to ask?”

“You got into a fight with him because of me?”

“That’s what he said.” Cayde looks at me steadily, and it’s hard for me to look back—the longer I stare at his face, the worse it seems. “He hurt you, Athena. He fucked you and left you outside to freeze. We wouldn’t let anyone else treat you that way, we’re certainly not going to let *Jaxon* get away with it.”

“So where is he?” I blurt out, glancing back and forth between the two of them. “He’s not like—beaten up and dumped somewhere, is he?” Truthfully, I don’t *think* they

would do that, but I'm so shocked that it got this far at all that I don't feel like I can be a hundred percent sure.

Cayde shrugs. "At the gym, I think. Taking out his internalized rage in an appropriate place. Why?"

"I'm going to go talk to him."

"I don't think—" Dean starts to say, but I shake my head hard.

"No. Oh, no." I cross my arms, staring them both down. "You can try to fight my battles for me all you want, but some of this I have to handle myself. I'm not planning to let Jaxon just get away with what he did either, but I'm going to confront him about it myself."

"What if he—"

"Hurts me?" I don't bother letting Cayde finish. "He trained me, remember? I've kicked his ass before and I'll do it again."

I sit down at the table then, reaching for a piece of toast. "I'm at the end of my rope, guys," I tell them bluntly. "After everything that's happened—I don't know how much more I can take. But I'm not going to just lay down and let this kill me. I have to handle some of this myself. And I'm going to start with finding out exactly why the fuck Jaxon thought he could touch me like that."

When I look up, I see something like a new respect in Dean's eyes, and a grudging acceptance in Cayde's. It's starting to feel almost as if we're working like a team, which is strange. I don't think of them as my adversaries so much, and I don't entirely know how to feel about that, either. They started as my captors, as enemies, and now they're something else entirely.

I feel that twinge again, that need for what they can give me that no one else can. An outlet, a way to release all the pent-up rage and grief in a different way than I can do on my own. I can go to the gym and punch bags all day, fight Jaxon, sweat out as much of it as I can, but nothing can compare to the release I get from letting them punish and pleasure me until every ounce of emotion is wrung out of me.

But not yet. First, I have something else to deal with.

And I'm pretty sure I know exactly where to find him.

—

Unsurprisingly, Jaxon is exactly where I'd thought he would be. I catch a glimpse of him going through shadow boxing moves in the ring, his eyes focused somewhere beyond me as I walk in, not even noticing me at first. I don't give him a second to do so; I stride directly towards the ring instead, dropping my bag at the door and walking all the way to the ropes.

I slip between them, and Jaxon swivels, startled as he catches sight of me. His eyes darken almost immediately, his face hardening.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” he growls, anger written over every line of his face, and I just smile coldly back at him.

“I want to find out why the fuck you thought you could leave me passed out in the cold yesterday.” I tip my chin up so he can get a better look at the necklace of bruises he left on my throat, not purple yet, but a faint dark shadowing across my throat. “Why you thought you could put your hands on me like this.” I circle him slowly, rocking on my toes, ready for anything.

“You know why,” Jaxon growls. I can see the evidence of what Cayde and Dean did to him on his face too—the bruises on his jaw, the swollen lip, the bruising beneath his eyes. The three of them all did a number on each other, but I'm not here to worry about that.

I'm here to make sure Jaxon and I work out our shit before it can go any farther.

“Why?” I challenge, glaring at him. “Because of Natalie?”

“Don't you fucking say her name.” Jaxon lunges towards me, swinging, but I block him. “Don't fucking talk about her.”

“She was my half-sister.” I rock forward, throwing a punch that he easily dodges. “I can talk about her if I like.”

“You didn’t even know her.” He swings again, and I block, going for the headlock right after. He slips away easily—the two of us could do this dance for a long time, probably, considering how hard he worked to train me. “You can’t call her that. She was nothing to you, and everything to me. And you didn’t even bother telling me—”

“I’m sorry for that.” I put my fists up in a guard, watching for him to make another move. “I should have told you, I know that. But it doesn’t make what you did okay—”

“You wanted to hurt me,” Jaxon growls, balancing in his own stance as we circle around one another. “Fucking own up to it.”

I shake my head fiercely. “No, Jaxon. I didn’t want to hurt you. That’s why I didn’t—”

“Fucking *liar!*” He almost shouts it, coming for me again. We trade punches, his fist glancing off of my arm, and I wince as I steady myself. “You don’t give a shit about me. You just wanted to collect me for your little plan to keep anyone in the house from winning. None of this ever had anything to do with *me.*”

“That’s not true.” I shake my head again, backing up. “And it wasn’t all about the game. I wanted you, Jaxon, I’ve wanted you since I first came here, even when I felt like I shouldn’t want *any* of you. You’re the only one that I’ve felt has tried to have my back since the start—”

“And look what I fucking got for it. You fucking disgust me.”

Jaxon lunges for me again, and this time, there’s no chance of us talking as we trade blows. This isn’t a training fight, it’s a *real* fight, and I can tell that he’s not worried about the chance of hurting me. In fact, I almost think he might want to, and I shove all thoughts of how to respond to his accusations out of my head as I focus on just fighting back, blocking his blows and throwing strikes of my own, the two of us circling each other like cobras waiting to strike as we throw every ounce of anger and resentment we’re both holding into the fight.

For a moment, I think I'm going to lose, and for the first time I'm afraid of what might happen if I do. Jaxon's anger is real and palpable, and I feel a rush of fear as he nearly takes me down. There's no one here to stop him from going further than he did last night, no one to stop him from fully taking his anger out on me. Whatever he blames me for, we won't get a chance to work it out if he kills me first. I've never really been afraid of Jaxon before—but there's a first time for everything, I guess.

The only thing I can do is take him down instead. Which is exactly what I do, redoubling my efforts to block his strikes and punches and grappling with him until I nearly have him in a headlock. That move is a hard one to execute well on Jaxon—he's stronger and bigger than I am, and I might not be able to hold onto him for long. So instead while he's focused on avoiding that, I go for sweeping the leg at the same time, hoping to catch him off guard.

It works. He goes down with a yell, hitting the mats as I follow him down, straddling him as I grab his shoulders with my hands and his hips with my thighs, wrestling him onto his back.

Fuck. The moment I wind up astride him I can feel him through his gym shorts, hard as hell and pressing hotly against me through the thin spandex of my own workout leggings. He's still glaring up at me, his jaw clenched, and I can't resist. The moment of power over him is too much, especially after what he did to me yesterday, and I rock down onto him, grinding myself against him as he groans suddenly, twisting to try to get out from under me.

I don't let him, though. I rock all of my weight down onto him, holding him with my hips and pinning him down as I feel him, solid and throbbing through the two layers of clothing, and I grin almost viciously down at him as I writhe atop his tensed body.

“Fuck—get off of me!” Jaxon snarls, but I just laugh.

“Like you got off of me yesterday?” I keep grinding against him, feeling him swell and pulse against me. “Ooh, it feels like

you like that. I don't think you want me to stop. I think you want me to keep going—just...like...this...”

Jaxon groans again, twisting underneath me, but I can feel his resistance slowing. I can tell it feels good, that he wants more of it, and I keep rocking my hips, rubbing along the thick length of him. His shorts are so thin that I can feel the lump of his piercing each time I slide up to the tip, and he twitches beneath me as I focus on that for a moment, wriggling against the head of his cock and that bump of his piercing. The temptation to let myself go is strong—it feels good, pressing against my pussy and clit as I wiggle there, but I force myself to focus. This isn't about my own pleasure, it's about making Jaxon lose control, about making him realize that I'm the one in charge now. That he can't just fucking treat me any way he wants.

“Oh—fuck—” he groans, that anger and control slipping away as he starts to fall prey to the pleasure rippling through his body. “I can't—oh—fuck—”

I let it go until the very last second, until I can feel his thighs tensing, his struggle stopped as his cock nears the point of no return, until I know that if I keep going for just a few more seconds he'll finish, sticky cum all over his shorts and thighs. I could make him, could humiliate him like that, just like he's done to me. Just like they all have.

It's tempting. But the idea of denying him his pleasure is even better.

At the last second, I swing off of him, climbing to my feet and backing up. He just lays there for a moment, panting, his erection painfully obvious through his shorts.

“Fuck!” he yells, and I can see it lurching, pushing against the fabric as it strains for touch, for friction, for something to push him that last little bit over the edge.

“I wasn't trying to hurt you,” I tell him flatly, staring down at him. He starts to push himself up, but I don't go back into a fighting stance, or back away. “I get that it's painful for you, Jaxon. I get that you lost something that can't ever be replaced. I have too—twice now. I know how that grief can

tear at you, can threaten to make you into a person you never thought you'd be. But I can tell you something else, too." I narrow my eyes, my gaze never wavering away from his. "Don't ever try to do what you did yesterday again. If you do, we'll fight again, for real. And I'll cut your fucking cock off instead of grinding on it. Got it?"

Jaxon stares at me, his mouth opening slightly in disbelief. "You're going to fucking leave me like this?" he manages, and I laugh.

"Yeah, I am. And don't worry. I won't fuck you again until you ask me to. Or better yet, until you fucking beg." I glare down at him. "But don't even think of taking it from me, either. Because that won't go any better for you than trying to be violent with me will."

I don't give him the opportunity to say something back. Instead I just turn on my heel, leaving him there as I stride away, slipping back through the ropes and leaving the gym—and Jaxon—behind.

I want him, still. My body is throbbing with desire for him, but I'm not going to let him rule me. He can treat me like I'm worth, just like Dean and Cayde have learned to.

Or he can never touch me again.

ATHENA

I thought my Monday was going to go uneventfully. I haven't really seen a glimpse of Jaxon since our encounter at the gym yesterday—he's been making himself scarce apparently, around me at least. Which is fine, I'm in no mood to deal with him. We all have class on Monday, and for just a little while, I start to think that maybe nothing unusual will happen today. Maybe I can come home, do my homework, and get a decent night's sleep.

I'm not all that surprised to hear a knock on my door around nine that evening though. What *does surprise* me is seeing Dean of all people standing there in a black hoodie and black sweatpants, a determined smirk on his face.

"Come on, Athena," he says, his eyes narrowed and dark. "I've got a surprise for you."

Something about the expression on his face makes me more than a little unsure as to whether I want to know what it is. But he hovers in the doorway, his blue eyes as intense as I've ever seen them, and I let out a sigh.

"I have homework," I tell him lamely, and Dean laughs.

"Homework? That's what you're worried about right now? After what you showed us last night?" He shakes his head. "I think your grades are the least of your—or our—worries."

"So you believe me." I lean back in my chair, looking at him. "You think this is all real."

“Yeah. And it’s made Cayde and I see all of this in a different light for sure.” Dean rubs a hand over his face. “I know we haven’t always been good to you, Athena. We’ve tried to make up for that since we brought you back here. And I think you know that. But now—” he shakes his head. “Now we’re going to help you get your revenge. Because this has gone too fucking far.”

Something in his tone lights a fire inside of me. I stand up before I realize it, nodding. “I’ll grab my jacket,” I say, my reservations suddenly fading. “Let’s fucking go.”

Dean’s car is already parked out front, and he opens the door for me, going around to slide in on the driver’s side immediately.

“Is Cayde coming?” I ask, looking around, and Dean shakes his head sharply as he puts the car into gear.

“No,” he says firmly. “And we’re not going to tell him anything about this, either.”

“Where are we going?”

“You’ll see.” Dean presses down on the gas, pulling out onto the highway as I look out of the window towards the darkened campus.

It doesn’t take long for it to become clear that we’re going a decent ways away. Dean stays tight-lipped throughout the drive, his hands clenched on the steering wheel, driving well over the speed limit as we head away through campus and through the town. As we drive, I realize for the first time that I’m actually coming to trust Dean. He’s driving me out to who-knows-where on a dark night, but I don’t feel afraid of him, or worried that he might have something planned to do *to* me, instead of with me, that I won’t like.

I don’t know exactly when I went from fearing Cayde and Dean to trusting them, but I’m not entirely sure it’s a bad thing. Right now, I think I can use all the allies I can get.

We drive all the way through town, out towards the highway that leads to the coast. *Where the hell are we going?* I wonder as I see the trees flying by, the memory of Dean and I parked

out in the forest coming back in a rush that leaves a fizzy tingle in my blood.

Before long, he turns down the road that leads to the country club, and I look at him in surprise. “What the fuck are we doing?” I ask, startled. “Dean, why are we here—”

“You’ll see.” He turns into the circular driveway facing the country club, and leaves the engine running as he opens the door. “Come around to the trunk.”

He already has the trunk of the Maserati open when I walk around, and it takes me a moment to register what’s inside. When I do, I stare at it, unable to quite believe my eyes for a second.

There’s three cans of gasoline, lighter fluid, and at least a dozen bottles with rags stuffed inside. I might not have ever seen one in person before, but I know very well what those are.

Molotov cocktails.

“Dean—” I whisper his name, feeling a tremor of fear and excitement run through me all at once. “What is all of this doing in your trunk?”

“We’re going to set fire to it,” he says, his tone vicious as he turns towards me. “We’re going to burn their fucking country club down, just like they burned down both of your homes. We’re going to take something away from them that matters. What do you think, Athena? I *know* you want to burn this fucking town to the ground, after what they’ve done to your family. Want to start here?”

Deep down, I know that of course this is a bad idea. It could never be anything but. I’m willing to bet that Cayde knows nothing about this, and I’m not sure he’d be on board with it if he did. I’m shocked that *Dean*, of all people, is the one suggesting it. I’m afraid of what the retaliation will be, of what will happen next if we actually do this.

But most of all, I really fucking want to burn this country club to ash.

I remember the day that Dean brought me here for lunch, the way his father and the other men had treated me, the way Winter had behaved. I remember their disrespect, their dismissal, the way they'd seen me as so much less than because I'd been given to the heirs as a pet.

I turn back to face Dean.

"Yeah," I tell him, that same viciousness in my voice as I hold out my hand for one of the bottles. "Let's fucking burn it down."

"First things first." He pulls one of the cans of gasoline out of the trunk, handing it to me. "Let's start with this."

Together, we make a design in the front lawn with the gasoline, tracing out the shape of a skull with a circle around it. I don't believe for a second that anyone will actually think the Sons are responsible for this, but it's more symbolic than anything else, to let them know that we're on to them, to show that we can destroy things too. That we can fight fire with fire, so to speak.

When that's done, Dean adds lighter fluid to the same path that we just poured the gasoline over, and then we retreat back to the car, where the Molotov cocktails are waiting.

I've never so much as seen one before, let alone held it. But Dean strides towards the front of the country club with me, lighting his bottle first and then mine.

And then together, we hurl them through the lower windows of the club.

Something about it triggers something in me. It's a rush like I've never felt, the realization that I've just done something technically wrong, definitely illegal, and yet I want to keep doing it. I've made the first step towards accomplishing my goal, and as Dean and I go back for pair after pair of the bottles, lighting them and tossing them through windows, I feel that rush start to consume me as I see the building start to catch fire.

"Fuck!" Dean shouts as he throws another. "Fuck you! Fucking take this! Fuck you!"

There's something crazed in his voice, all of his repressed anger coming out as we hurl the bottles. I scream too, howling curses like a wolf at the moon as the crash of breaking glass fills the air, and the crackling of flames starts to join it. When the last of the Molotov cocktails is gone, Dean lights a match, throwing it onto the lawn as he grabs my hand and we run for the car. I feel his fingers wrapped around mine, gripping hard, and the heat at our back.

As we reach the car, he grabs me suddenly, hauling me into his arms with his hand in my hair as he drags my mouth up to his. His hand makes a fist, tugging at my scalp as his lips slant over mine, his tongue plunging into my mouth roughly, possessively, making my blood burn as hot as the fire at our backs.

"Fuck, I want you," he growls against my mouth, and I can feel how hard he is, the ridge of his cock pressing against my jean-clad thigh through his sweatpants. His other hand roams down to my ass, squeezing, his fingers digging in as his hips grind against mine.

I moan as he grips me, unable to help myself. I can feel the adrenaline rush changing into something else, the heat of Dean's body burning against me as he pushes me back against the car, his mouth devouring mine.

"I want to fuck you right here," he groans, and I reach down to slide my hand over the throbbing ridge of his cock, feeling him pressing against my palm.

Someone could find us at any moment. Somehow the thought only turns me on more, and I slip my hand into Dean's pants before I can stop myself, wrapping my fingers around him as he moans and surges against me, thrusting into my hand as he kisses me harder.

"Fuck, I need you now." He grabs at the button of my jeans, yanking at the zipper as he shoves them down over my hips, grabbing me roughly and turning me around. "Hands on the window."

I obey without thinking, palms pressed against the cold glass, and in the next instant I feel Dean thrusting into me

hard, his cock filling my slick, aching pussy in an instant. I throw back my head, moaning as I thrust back against him, and his growl of pleasure is almost a roar as he grabs onto my hips, pumping into me with a ferocity that nearly slams me forward into the car.

Behind us we can hear the building burning, the crash of beams and smell the smoke rising into the air, burning wood and gasoline and lighter fluid, and I know any moment someone will see the smoke, call for help, and we'll be caught. But I don't care. Dean feels so fucking good, filling me up, his cock plunging into me again and again, and I'm so fucking close to coming. I feel myself clenching around him, thrusting back as he holds onto my hip, one hand reaching up to fist into my hair as he fucks me harder still. I'm going to be sore tomorrow—I was already sore from Jaxon—but I don't fucking care. I don't care about anything except the intense pleasure of his cock and the way he's making me feel right now, wild and free and as if nothing else in the world matters except for him and I and him inside of me, and the revenge we're taking against every fucking person who has ever hurt us.

For the first time, it feels really truly as if we're on the same side. I don't know how I feel about that, if I trust it completely, but in this moment I don't care. I just want to lose myself in it.

“Fuck!” I scream as I feel the orgasm hit, throwing my head back as Dean's hand tightens in my hair, and I feel his hips crashing against the soft curves of my ass, fucking me so hard that I know I'm going to be sore tomorrow as I clench down around him. It feels so fucking good, we could be on fire and I don't think I'd care as long as I kept coming like this. I almost feel like I *am*, my blood rushing hot and violent through my veins, and when I hear Dean growl behind me I can feel my body clenching in a second orgasm on the heels of the first.

“Fuck, I'm gonna come,” he groans, his hips thrusting erratically, and I press my hands against the cold glass,

pushing back against his hardening cock as I feel him shudder and start to come.

“Fucking *yes*,” I moan, and I swear I see stars that aren’t just the ones above me as my body tightens around him, the hot rush of his cum filling me as he thrusts into me once more, hard, and holds himself there as his cock throbs with the powerful force of his release.

He slumps forward, his chest pressed against my back and his breath warm against my ear as I feel him shudder again, his cock twitching inside of me as he starts to soften. “Fuck,” Dean breathes out, staying there for just a moment. And then he pulls back, shaking himself as if to bring himself back to the present moment, and slips out of me.

“Hurry up,” he murmurs, glancing nervously towards the burning country club. “We gotta go, Athena. Someone is going to be here soon.” He pushes the button to unlock the car, stuffing himself back into his sweatpants and hurrying around to the driver’s side as he looks nervously down the driveway.

There’s no one coming right now, but I don’t doubt there will be soon. Dean doesn’t get back on the highway, opting for the surface roads to cut down on the chance of anyone seeing us leaving the scene of the crime, and no sooner are we less than a half a mile away on the back road leading away from the country club when we hear sirens in the distance, heading in that direction.

“Too fucking late!” Dean crows, and I burst into laughter, feeling half-insane after what we just did. We pass the turnoff for the clearing where we fucked that day in the car, after that horrid lunch at the club that’s currently turning to ash, and for a brief second I think he’s going to pull in and fuck me again.

We need to get away though, and Dean knows that as well as I do. He speeds down the dark back roads, taking the turns tightly as my heart races in my chest, and for the first time in a very long time, I feel almost free.

I feel like myself again—strong, brave, unstoppable. Like I can do anything. Like I can put an end to all of this, somehow, simply because I’m determined to.

As we approach the manor house, Dean swears under his breath, and it takes me a second to figure out why. There's a bunch of cars in the driveway, and people spilling out onto the lawn, music coming from inside the house.

"What's going on?" For a brief second I thought we'd been found out and that the cars were someone waiting for us, but it's clear that there's something else happening.

"I forgot Cayde had a rugby team party here tonight. A bunch of the other frats and sports teams will be here too. Not what I wanted to come back to."

My stomach clenches. There hasn't been a party at the house since the one where I fucked Cayde, and then was abducted out in the maze. I can feel a tremor of anxiety starting to run through me, the hazy memories of that night coming back in waves that push back the euphoria of my earlier arson with Dean.

"It's alright," Dean says quietly, breaking through the fearful fog that's started to wrap around me. He reaches over to touch my hands where they're clenched together in my lap, and I jump, startled both by his touch and the fact that he's realized what's wrong at all.

"It's just the rugby guys and the other sports teams," he says reassuringly. "There's no reason to think that anyone who wants to hurt you will be here. It's just jocks and bros, that's all."

Something about hearing that phrase coming out of Dean's mouth makes me laugh, breaking up a little of the anxiety. "I know," I say quietly. "And I know the Halloween party is coming up too. So maybe this can ease me back into it a little. It's just hard not to remember what happened and feel scared, you know?"

It's the most emotionally honest thing I might have ever said to him, and it startles me to hear myself say it. But Dean just tightens his hand over mine.

"You'll be alright," he tells me gently. "Things are different now, Athena. I know you haven't been able to trust us in the

past, and I know you can take care of yourself, too. But Cayde and I have your back. We'll look out for you."

"I know," I say softly, and as I say it I realize that I really am starting to believe it. The shift has been gradual, but this morning especially, seeing him and Cayde bruised from the fight with Jaxon. I've never been a "defend my honor" kind of girl, but there was something about the fact that they stood up for me against their own friend that made me see things differently.

Dean parks the car, getting out and coming around to open my door, and I take a deep breath as I step out. "I hope we don't smell like smoke," I say with a short laugh as we walk towards the door.

Cayde catches sight of us almost as soon as we walk in, but it's not any lingering smoke smell that sets off alarm bells for him. His eyebrows shoot up into his hairline as he catches sight of Dean, and it looks as if he nearly chokes on his drink.

"Dean, what the *fuck* are you wearing?"

I glance over at Dean, who shrugs nonchalantly. I've definitely never seen Dean in sweatpants before, and the expression on Cayde's face is similar to what I think it would be if Dean had suddenly grown three heads.

"Well you wear this shit all the time," Dean says with a smirk. "Figured I'd give it a try."

"Not the best look on you bro," Cayde snorts. "Did you forget there was a party tonight?"

"Nope," Dean says smoothly, although he *definitely* had. "Thought I'd try to fit in."

"You couldn't be a jock if your life depended on it." Cayde jerks his head towards the kitchen. "Drinks are in there." He glances at me, and I notice the bruises starting to deepen on his face "Are you alright, Athena?"

"I'm fine," I tell him bravely, although I'm not entirely sure. The music feels too loud, the chatter filtering through the rooms overwhelming, and I have the sudden urge to go and lie down somewhere, rather than socialize. I'm not entirely sure

that that's not an option, and I'm on the verge of telling Dean and Cayde to just enjoy the party when there's a sudden shout from the kitchen, and two bodies come barreling out through the doorway.

"Hey, fuck you!" Jaxon's voice rings out, and I flinch, glancing over at Cayde with surprise. I hadn't expected to see Jaxon here—a frat and rugby party isn't exactly his speed. But I see him being shoved backwards through a doorway, a guy twice his size with a square jaw and shoulders almost as wide as the doorway swinging at him.

"What the fuck?" I gasp, and Cayde shakes his head, his own jaw clenching. Dean takes a step back, and I can see the crowd parting, a murmur rippling through as they watch the fight that's happening for some fucking reason.

"Don't fucking talk about Athena like that," Jaxon snarls, his voice rising above the collective din of the crowd and music, and my eyes go wide.

"Oh fuck no." *He's going to fucking defend me from something, after what he did?* Jaxon and I haven't squared what he did to me, far from it, and the thought that he might be fighting someone over a stray comment when there's still so much unresolved between us pisses me off more than I'd realized it would. "I'm going to fucking handle this myself."

"Athena!" Cayde's voice almost cuts through the fog that seems to have settled over my brain, but not enough to stop me. Someone pushes something cold and damp into my hand—a shot glass, I realize through the buzz of anger that seems to have settled over me. "Thanks, Dean," I mumble, assuming that it was him that handed it to me, and throw back the shot before dropping it on a side table and striding towards the fight, which has escalated in the seconds since Jaxon and the other guy burst into the living room.

The vodka that was in the shot glass burns down my throat, making my eyes water as I charge towards the two of them. If I was thinking straight, I'd never have gone into the fight—the guy who is currently backing Jaxon towards a table is bigger than anyone I could reasonably fight. But I'm too angry to

think rationally, and I rush towards them both, shoving myself in between the two men just as the bigger guy is about to bring his fist down towards Jaxon again.

I take the hit hard, right on the shoulder, but Jaxon trained me well. I duck under the next punch as the man screams “Get out of the fucking way, bitch!” and bring my knee up into his groin, throwing my weight forward as he staggers backwards. I manage to get a punch in, weaving under his next swing and then bringing my fist up into his nose.

He lets out an angry shout, blood spurting from his nose as his hand comes up to cover it, and I stand there panting, my fists still up and my shoulder burning as I wait to see if he’s going to recover.

“Fucking bitch,” he spits, glaring at me. “Slut.” He rears back, spitting a wad of blood and mucus onto the floor, and then turns away.

I see Cayde and Dean start to move towards him, likely with intent to eject him from the party, but I’m already turning towards Jaxon. “What the fuck was that?” I demand as he stands up, and he shakes his head, his lip split again and bleeding.

“Fucker called you a whore,” he growls, his eyes narrowed. “Said he was at the party where you—” Jaxon gestures towards Cayde, his mouth tightening as if he doesn’t entirely like remembering it either. “He said—”

“You said the same thing to me,” I snap at him, my arms crossed over my chest. “That night you left me out in the cold. Remember? You called me—”

“I remember.” Jaxon looks away, and I see a flicker of shame cross his face, but it’s not enough to make me forgive him. Not yet. “But a fucking stranger doesn’t get to talk about you like that. You’re fucking ours. And I—”

“You, nothing.” I grit my teeth. “I’m not yours, Jaxon, because you lost that right when you nearly killed me because you were pissed I made a decision and it wasn’t the one you wanted me to make. I kept something from you, and however

wrong that was, it didn't warrant the way you handled it. So no, you don't get to 'defend my honor' or whatever the fuck to some asshole who saw me fuck Cayde at that party. You and I? We're nothing right now. We're—"

I swallow hard as Jaxon suddenly splits into two in front of me, the two separate Jaxons wobbling and swerving as I feel myself suddenly tilting to one side.

Fuck! What the fuck is happening? I feel suddenly like I can't breathe, my throat closing up, and the room is spinning, the two Jaxons splitting into more, shifting colors as my vision darkens a little at the edges.

No! Fuck! All I can think is that it's happening again, that once again I'm at a party and somehow I've been drugged, that I'm hallucinating, that any second now I'll feel hands on me, dragging me out of here and into the hard bed of a pickup truck, out somewhere to be hurt and abused again.

I *do* feel hands on me then, and I try to scream, but my throat feels too tight. I can't make a sound, not even when those hands lift me into the air. I want to fight, to scratch, to get out of whatever is happening to me, but I can't seem to move. I don't even feel as if I can breathe.

Vaguely, I hear voices that sound familiar, and I feel as if I'm floating through the air. The sensations that remind me of being abducted war with the familiarity of the voices I hear, and I don't know whether to be terrified or comforted, if I'm in danger or not.

"Athena!" Something that sounds like Cayde's voice echoes in my ear, followed by what sounds like Jaxon shouting my name as well. I feel hard tile underneath my knees, and more vaguely disembodied voices floating around me.

"Something was in whatever she drank," one of them says, and then there's an angry growl from my other side.

"She just took a drink? From who?"

"I don't know, it was in her hand."

"Fuck! That needs to be out of her system, now. Fucking now!"

“What the fuck do you want me to do about it?”

“She needs to throw up.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

“You don’t know what was in it. Do you want her to die maybe? There’s no telling—”

“Fuck, alright. I’ll do it—”

I have no idea what they’re talking about. It sounds like Dean and Cayde and Jaxon, but I don’t know where I am or how I got here, or what they’re doing. I’m glad that I’m not alone, if it really is them, but part of me is terrified that I’m hallucinating, and it’s not them at all.

When I feel fingers prying my lips open, sliding into my mouth and towards the back of my throat, I panic. I twist in the grip of the hands holding me, trying to get free, but they’re too strong. I try to bite down, but other fingers are holding my mouth open, letting the fingers inside slide towards the back of my throat, and I can’t stop what happens next.

My entire body seems to revolt, vomiting everything up as I lurch towards what I hope is a toilet, or a sink, or a bathtub, although I can’t really see. My vision is a swirl of blurred white and colors, like paint swirled on a canvas, and even if the fingers in my throat weren’t making me throw up I think I’d want to anyway.

I don’t know how long it goes on. “Get it all up, come on. There’s a good girl, you’re almost there, I know it hurts—” There’s a voice in my ear, whispering something encouraging, trying to help, but all I want is for it to stop.

“I think that’s enough,” another rough voice that sounds like Cayde’s says, and then the fingers slide out of my mouth.

“Get her a washcloth. Something to clean her up—”

I don’t know if anyone does. I don’t know anything at all, because in the next second, my vision narrows sharply, and everything that was blurry turns suddenly black.

The last thing I feel are hands catching me as I pass out.

JAXON

I fucked up.

Christ, I fucked up.

I don't know what came over me that night. Natalie's death has been like a poison since the day it happened, turning me bitter and cruel and angry, merciless towards anyone that I feel might have had the slightest hand in her death or been connected to it in any way. Anyone that I feel might be better off because she's dead.

Athena couldn't have had anything to do with her death, and I wouldn't say that she'd benefited from it, but she'd withheld a piece of information that might have—no, *would* have changed things between us. Or at least that's what I'm telling myself.

As I pace outside of her room, I tell myself that I wouldn't have fucked her if I'd known she was Natalie's half-sister. If she'd told me before that night that she crawled into my bed, I wouldn't have gone down on her, I wouldn't have let her suck me off again the way she had. I wouldn't have pinned her up against my door, fucking her harder than I've fucked anyone in recent memory.

I keep telling myself that, but a small part of me whispers that it's not true. That I would have fucked her no matter what, regardless of who she'd been to Natalie or any connection she'd had to any of it. And above that, a louder voice keeps screaming the same thing in my head, over and over again.

It's your fault.

Your fault.

Your fucking fault.

She'd taken that drink before she'd charged into a fight to help me. She'd been in the middle of that because she'd been pissed at me for fighting over her in the first place, and because she was angry at the way I'd treated her.

And rightfully so.

I'd already wanted to find a way to apologize to her, to make it up somehow, but I hadn't had time. When that hulking fuck of a man had caught sight of her coming in and made a comment about how he'd "enjoyed watching that slut get railed at the last party," I'd seen red. And I hadn't been able to catch myself before losing my temper.

I've already been far too much on edge.

And now I might not have a chance to make it up to her. Cayde and Dean seem to think that she's going to be fine, but I can't help but be terrified that won't be the case. I can feel all the old grief rising up to the surface—it's never far away anyway, always just waiting for something to bring it up again. And this—a girl that I care about lying hurt—is way too close to that grief for my comfort.

There's not a single day that I haven't thought about Natalie, and not a single day that I haven't thought about how she died. Not a single day that I don't ache for her, grieve for her, and blame myself for all of it. Now more than ever, because I'm absolutely certain that if I'd never loved her, if I'd never enticed her to run away with me, if she'd never been the one to convince me to try to leave all of this, she'd still be alive.

And now I'm terrified that we've done the same thing to Athena. That by bringing her into this, even inadvertently, we've condemned her to die too, to be harassed and hurt and abused until she's finally taken out of the picture altogether. All because she'd dared to not bow to what the Blackmoor families wanted from her.

Not just that—but because once again, a girl is trying to break the traditions that have been in place for hundreds of

years, and lead the heirs astray.

It's almost poetic that Natalie and Athena are half-sisters.

Dean and Cayde are downstairs, dealing with the party, and so I slip into Athena's room where she's sleeping, shutting the door carefully behind her. My heart is pounding in my chest as I walk towards the bed, and I look down at her where she's lying there, pale and peaceful, her long lashes against her cheek as her chest rises and falls.

She looks like something out of a fairytale, a princess waiting to be awoken by a prince's kiss, but I don't think she's going to want a kiss from me. Maybe not ever again.

And the truth is that I still want her more than anything. I regret that night outside more than I can say, but if she wakes up, I'm going to find the words to explain it. Because I can't lose her.

She might not be mine now, but I want her to be.

And I want to help her destroy all of this.

Starting with whoever handed her that fucking drink.

I want to slide into bed next to her, but I sink into the nearby chair instead. I know she'll panic if she wakes up in my arms, and that hurts all on its own. But I know I've earned that. I might have to grovel to earn her back, but Dean and Cayde have managed it. Somehow, I hope that I can do the same.

Our fathers didn't know what they were doing when they handed us Athena Saint to be our pet.

But I'm fucking glad they did.

ATHENA

When I wake up, my mouth feels dry. It feels all too much like when I woke up in this bed after the kidnapping, and my heart starts to race the minute my eyes snap open, my hands clutching at the sheets. My first thought is to figure out what I'm wearing—a tank top and panties, from what I can tell, and I blink as I try to focus, to make sure that I'm really in my own room and not in some other place like that awful remote cabin where the kidnappers took me.

But it feels like my bed. It smells like my room. And as I blink slowly, everything coming into focus, I feel a rush of relief as I realize that it is, in fact, my room at the manor house.

It's strange how oddly relieving it's become to wake up in this room that was once the bane of my entire existence.

But then, as I glance around, I see something that *doesn't* make me feel relieved at all.

Jaxon, slumped in the wing chair, sleeping.

“What the *fuck* are you doing in here?” I'd been afraid my voice would crack when I spoke, but it rings clearly through the room, sharp like the snap of a whip. “Watching me sleep?”

Jaxon jerks awake with a grunt, sitting up. “Fuck, Athena! You're awake, thank fucking god.”

“Yeah, I'm awake,” I growl, glaring at him. “And I want to know what you're doing in my fucking room.”

“I was keeping an eye on you, making sure you were okay.”

“While you slept?”

“I dozed off for a minute. I’m sorry, I just—”

“Where’s Dean? Or Cayde?” I never would have thought I’d prefer them over Jaxon, but here we are. How the mighty have fallen and all of that.

“Asleep, I think. They had a hell of a time clearing out the party last night. Everyone couldn’t stop talking about—” Jaxon shrugs. “Well, you know.”

“You getting into a fucking fight and then me passing out in front of everyone? Yeah, I figured.” I wrap my arms around myself, suddenly exhausted all over again. “I don’t care about any of it. Are you going to tell me what happened, or do I need to go find them? And you still haven’t answered my first question.”

“I’m in here because I wanted to make sure you were okay. I mean that. Just like you really meant it when you said you came into my room that night because you heard me having a nightmare.” Jaxon says the last pointedly, and I frown at him.

“And the rest?”

“There was something in that drink. Who handed it to you?”

“I thought Dean did.” I rub a hand over my face, trying to remember the moment I’d taken the drink, but it all feels fuzzy. That in and of itself makes me feel like panicking—it’s all too close to how fuzzy my memories of that other night are, the one after the party. “But I guess not, if there was something in it. He wouldn’t have done that.” The certainty in my voice surprises me, but I know Dean that well now. And besides, he’d have had no reason to.

“It definitely wasn’t Dean. So you don’t know who it was?”

I shake my head. “No. Of course not. If I’d thought it was someone other than Dean, I wouldn’t have taken it. Not after

—” I feel my throat close up just at the thought, and I can’t speak.

“I know.” Jaxon leans forward, watching me with eyes that look almost sad. “Nothing bad happened this time, Athena. Not really. You started to pass out and I caught you. And then we got you upstairs, and Cayde and Dean made sure that you got all of it out of your system. They made you throw up,” he clarifies, just in case I hadn’t completely understood what he meant.

A bit of the memory comes back then, the hard tile under my knees and the sensation of fingers in my mouth, my entire body cramping as I’d vomited up the drink. It’s a hazy memory still, but I can remember the sounds of the familiar voices too, and I wince as I realize what that means.

“Fuck,” I mutter under my breath, and then louder. “So which one of you made me throw up?”

“Dean did the honors. I didn’t think you’d want me to do it. And Cayde was holding you.”

“Oh god.” I bury my face in my hands, not sure which is worse suddenly—the fact that I’d been drugged again at a party and the physical and emotional aftereffects of that, or that one of the guys I’m sleeping with had had to make me throw up while the other two held me and watched.

Some things are too humiliating to stand, and I’d thought that I’d come close to that already, with some of the things that the guys had done to me. But this might officially have crossed that line.

“They were worried about you, Athena,” Jaxon says softly. “*We* were all worried about you.”

I glare at him, my embarrassment receding in the face of the reminder of what he very recently did to me. “I just want you to go, Jaxon. We’re done. I don’t want to see you. I don’t want to do any of this—whatever it is with you. I know I should have told you about Natalie before anything happened between us. I know that was wrong. But so was your reaction

and I just—” I shiver, looking away from him. “I can’t take any more of this.”

When I glance back, I can see a series of emotions crossing Jaxon’s face—and none of them are the anger that I’d somehow expected. There’s sorrow, grief, fear, but none of the lashing, sharp fury that I’d experienced that awful evening when he’d fucked me up against the porch.

Very slowly, he stands up, and I can see the pain in his dark eyes as he looks at me. “If you really want me to go, Athena,” Jaxon says softly, “I’ll go. I know I’ve fucked up. I’ve fucked up a *lot*. I promised you I wouldn’t ever hurt you for my pleasure, and I’ve done it more than once. I’ve hurt you and gotten off on it, and I’ve hurt you as a release for my anger, and I know how fucking wrong that is. I know if Natalie had any idea what I’ve become, she’d be ashamed of me. And that fucking hurts.”

He pauses, and I can tell that he’s waiting for me to yell at him, to tell him to just get out, and the temptation is there. To not listen to this apology, because out of the three of them, watching Jaxon try to tell me he’s sorry is the hardest. I’ve wanted him on some level since the day I locked eyes with him, and while Dean and Cayde and I have formed our own relationships, Jaxon’s betrayals have hurt the most. They’ve hit me the hardest, because as much as he’d warned me not to rely on him, I’d trusted him the most.

But I don’t tell him to leave. Part of me, a part that I hate as much as I hate him right now, doesn’t want him to.

Of all my relationships in this house, the one with Jaxon is the most complex. Looking at him right now, with his bruised jaw and purpling lip, I both want to add another bruise to his collection and kiss them all away. And I don’t fucking know what to do with those emotions.

I don’t know what to do with any of this.

Especially not when Jaxon walks towards the bed in two quick, short strides, and sinks down onto his knees in front of it.

“I’m so fucking sorry, Athena,” he says quietly, his voice hoarse and gravelly. “What I did to you was unforgivable. It wasn’t me, but it *was*, and after all you’ve been through, you have every right to hate me for it. I don’t have words for how badly I fucked up. I’ll walk right out of this room and stay away from you forever if it’s what you want, I’ll never touch you again. But I want you to know that will kill me a little inside, every fucking day. Because I wanted you the moment you came down those stairs, and I still do, even if I’ve been a piece of shit half the time.”

I’ve never seen him like this. His jaw is clenched, the muscle in the side of it jumping, and his face is awash with pain.

“I wanted to keep you safe, Athena. I’ve been so terrified this entire time of the same thing happening to you that happened to Natalie, and it very nearly did. If I could have taken you away from all of this, away from this whole damn town, I would have—but that’s what killed her, and I thought if I just fucking stayed away from you—but I can’t. I fucking can’t. I still can’t, and I don’t care if you were her half-sister, I don’t care what that means. I just know that if you tell me you never want to see me again, it’s going to crush something inside of me, and you have every right to do that. But you should know.”

I have a sudden, wild urge to do exactly that. He hurt me, and neither of us can ever change that. I could hurt him right now, I could tell him to get the fuck out, to never speak to me again. I could take every feeling we’ve ever had for each other and crush it in my fist, and the power of that feeling is almost overwhelming.

Slowly, I slide off of the bed, standing on legs that feel weak still, my knees wobbly. But I manage to hold myself upright, looking down at him, and I once again don’t know if I want to hit him or kiss him.

These boys were supposed to crush me, to make me subservient, their pet and slave.

But instead, they've made something else. And in this moment, with Jaxon, I can feel it unfurling inside of me, blooming wide and wild, and I feel a heady sort of euphoria rush through me at the power I hold over him in this moment.

He stares at me as I sink down to my knees in front of him, and I feel almost as if I'm in a dream as I grab his face with both hands, my fingers digging into his cheeks as I drag his mouth to mine. It feels like my blood is burning in my veins, desire and anger all wrapped up together, and I take every emotion I've felt in the past months, every bit of shame and fear and anger and hurt and confused desire, and I shove it into that kiss, into the way I bite down on his lower lip, my tongue sliding over the split where someone struck him until I taste blood and Jaxon groans aloud.

He doesn't move, as if he's helpless under my hands, when I know he's anything but. He lets me kiss him, lets me bite down on the place on his mouth where he's hurt until he cries out, but he doesn't stop me. It's as if he's willing to let me take it all out on him, to pour my pain and anguish into his body, and I feel something primal welling up inside of my body as I slide my hands back, tangling them in his dark hair as I crawl atop him, my thighs straddling his where he's kneeling on the floor.

"Athena—" he chokes out against my lips, but I bite down again hard, and he moans.

I've never done this before. Every single one of the guys has taken their emotions out on me physically at some point, used me as an outlet, and it feels so fucking good to give it back. It feels like being in the boxing ring with Jaxon, except even better, and I grind my hips down onto him, reveling in the sound of his helpless moan as I devour his mouth, feeling his cock stiff and rigid between my thighs.

I'm not going to be the one getting fucked anymore. The thought burns in my head as I fist my hand in Jaxon's hair, pushing him back onto the floor with my other hand, and I run my tongue over his lower lip, tasting the blood welling there as I grind down into his lap.

He's motionless, panting beneath me as I feel his cock throb, and I reach down, yanking at his zipper as I shove my hand into his jeans. I wrap my hand around his length, feeling the heat of it burn into my palm, and Jaxon moans again, writhing beneath me as I stroke him roughly, enjoying the feeling of being the one in charge, the one with the power.

"You want me?" I whisper against his mouth, squeezing my hand around his cockhead. He's already dripping pre-cum, the tip slick against my palm, and he nods wordlessly against my mouth.

"Fuck, Athena, please—" he murmurs, and I feel his hand come up to touch my waist, slide up under my tank top, but I slap it away.

"I'm the one fucking you this time," I growl, and then I yank my panties aside, shoving myself down onto his rigid, throbbing length in one long, hot slide of flesh on flesh that leaves me breathless with the sudden pleasure of it.

Maybe this is why they do it, I think to myself as I start to ride him, my hips rocking atop him as I slide up and down, hard and fast, and it feels so fucking cathartic. I let go of his hair, shoving his t-shirt up and pressing my palms against his chest until my nails are digging into the skin there, and Jaxon groans, his head tipping back as he lets me fuck him. *Maybe this is how they feel when they're using me. Like they can pour every terrible thing that's ever happened into me and I'll heal it somehow.*

I feel the orgasm rising up, sharp and sudden, and my thighs tighten around his hips as I grind down onto him harder. I can feel his piercing rubbing against that spot deep inside of me, his thick cock filling me entirely, and I throw my head back, my nails clawing into his chest as the pleasure suddenly hits.

"Fuck!" I scream aloud as I start to shake, my thighs tensing as wave after wave of it rolls through me, and I can hear Jaxon groaning, murmuring my name as his hands come up to my hips, and this time I don't slap them away. I let him touch me, let his rough fingertips slide over my skin, under the

edge of my panties, let him start to thrust upwards as he nears his own climax.

“Tell me I can come, Athena,” Jaxon moans, his eyes opening so that he can look into mine. “I won’t come unless you want me to. You can just fuck me if you want, but *fuck*, I wanna come so bad—”

Oh god. I feel that nearly primal, heady sense of power again, and I press my hands down into his chest, seeing the scratch marks where I clawed him, the reddened flesh where my nails dragged through his skin. “Not yet,” I tell him, my voice taut with the pleasure still rippling through me, and I feel him shudder, the effort it takes for him to hold back.

His cock swells, throbbing inside of me, and I slide up the length of him, squeezing around him as I watch the tortured expression of pleasure on his face as I come back down inch by inch. He feels so fucking good filling me up, but it feels even better to be the one in charge, to be the one calling all the shots.

To make him beg for it, instead of the other way around.

“Fuck, Athena—” Jaxon’s hands tighten on my hips, and I can feel the effort that it’s taking for him not to just pound into me, to fuck me hard and fast until he comes the way I know he’s dying to right now.

I do it twice more, sliding up and down his length long and slow, until he’s gasping and trembling and I know he’s at the very limit of his control. And then I open my eyes, on the verge of another orgasm myself, and look down at him as I drag my nails across the claw marks on his chest again.

“Alright, Jaxon,” I whisper, sliding down the length of his cock and holding myself there. “You can come for me now.”

I start to ride him again, but he’s already shuddering. “Fuck!” he cries out, his entire body convulsing as he grabs my ass, his cock throbbing violently as his orgasm erupts. I can feel him coming hard, the hot rush of it filling me as his head tips back, his mouth dropping open as he groans helplessly.

The feeling of him coming sets off another climax for me, too, and I arch my back, grinding down onto him as I cry out. I tip forward, burying my hands in his hair as I kiss him hard, sucking his wounded lip into my mouth as the sounds coming from his mouth turn nearly pained, his hips still jerking with each shudder of his orgasm.

For a moment, the two of us just lay like that, trembling together with the physical and emotional release of what just happened. I can feel that something has shifted between us, a new and uncharted territory opening up.

And I have no idea what's going to happen next.

JAXON

It feels like something had ended and begun all at the same time. As I lay there with Athena trembling in my arms, my cock still half-hard inside of her and twitching with the aftermath of my pleasure, I don't know what comes next.

I just know that I'm fucking glad she didn't tell me to leave.

She'd taken everything out on me, every bit of rage and hurt, and it had felt fucking good for her, I could tell. Good in a way that no number of rounds in the boxing ring could have matched. She gave back as good as she's been getting all this time that she's been in the house, and in a twisted way, I'm glad that I was the one she was able to do that with.

It felt *right* somehow. My skin is stinging under her hands where she clawed me, my lip swollen and still trickling blood, my cock aching with the force of the orgasm I just had, and yet I feel as if some kind of weight has been lifted off of me.

With her still in my arms, the two of us still on the floor, I roll to one side while still inside of her, hooking one leg over hers to pull her closer.

"Do you forgive me?" I whisper, my voice rough and hoarse in the sudden silence of the room. "You don't have to, Athena. And I'll spend the rest of my days trying to make up for it if need be."

The words come out suddenly, before I can stop them, and they hang in the air between us for a moment. Her eyes widen, and I use that moment to roll her onto her back, hovering over

her as my cock twitches again deep inside of her, hardening already just from the feeling of having her so close to me.

The rest of my days is not a concept I've thought of very often. This town is a jail cell, everything about my life a prison, and I've never believed that there was anything to look forward to in my future. It's a strange feeling, for your life to have barely begun and to feel like there's nothing left.

Athena doesn't belong to me. But I'm not so sure that she belongs to Cayde or Dean, either.

I think, maybe, that we're starting to belong to her.

"How many days do we have?" Athena whispers, and for the first time in a long time, I see the anger and hurt in her face start to lift, and a glimmer of humor behind it all.

"I don't know," I tell her truthfully, and I risk raising one hand up to her face, running my fingers over her cheek. She doesn't pull away, and I feel my heart thump in my chest, some dangerous emotion taking root that I haven't felt in such a long time I've started to forget what to call it at all.

I don't want to say that I love her. I don't even want to think about it, as if just the thought could summon all of the ways this town could take her away from me.

I'm not sure that I want to love anyone, ever again.

It hurts too much when they're gone.

Her lips part as I trail my fingers down to her jaw, feeling how smooth and soft she is under the rough pads of my fingertips, and I feel her soft indrawn breath as she squirms just a little underneath me. That's enough to make me rock hard again, my cock stiffening inside of her and making her gasp, and I rock my hips against her just a little, enough to hear that sweet small gasp again.

"I've wanted you since the first day," I murmur, bending down to kiss Athena's lips. "I just don't want any part of this fucking town, and I didn't think I could have one without the other. But now—"

Her legs come up around my hips, wrapping around me and pulling me in, deeper than before. I groan with the sudden pleasure of it, my hips jerking as I lose control for a moment, the wet hot grip of her so intensely good that it's all I can do to not just throw all self-control to the wind and start fucking her wildly.

“I wanted you too.” Athena’s voice is very close to my ear, her breath warm against it as her hands slide over my shoulders. “You said to stay away, but it was so hard. I wanted you to be the first—”

I feel myself jerk again at that, my body shuddering against her as pleasure and pain ripple through me all at once. I’ve got a handful of regrets already, more than someone my age really should, and one of them will forever be that I let someone else take Athena to bed first. I know that no matter what happens, I’ll wonder ‘til the day I die if things might have been different if I’d done just that, if I’d been the one to “win” instead of Dean.

But I can’t change any of that now. And if the way things happened means that all of this is going to come crumbling down—this town, our families, all of the horrid history that’s plagued this place for so long—then maybe it’s for the best.

All I know is that I feel right now as if I could spend a lifetime right here on this floor, buried inside of Athena while she arches against me, her fingers digging into my shoulders as her sharp indrawn breaths turn to moans.

This feels different, somehow, than the other times. With the sharp, still-bleeding catharsis of the way she just fucked me, this feels softer somehow, more intimate. It’s different from having her up against my wall, fast and desperate, and it’s definitely nothing like that horrible night when I violated her trust in a way that I’m not sure I can ever do enough to make up for.

I want this to last. I still have no idea what will happen between us when the moment is over, when we walk out of this room, and I want to remember this. I want to remember her small breasts against my chest through her tank top and the

heat of her skin against mine, the slippery hot wetness of her, the grip of her thighs around me, the taste of her mouth. I want all of it, and for the first time since Natalie, I let myself go, just a little.

I let myself feel something besides pain and grief and anger and desperation.

Athena breathes in, her lips brushing over mine, and I feel her arch up against me. I want to take it slow, but it's nearly impossible. She feels too fucking good, and I can feel myself speeding up, wanting to thrust into her again and again.

She pulls me down, her arms winding around my neck and her lips tilted up to mine, and I groan, the sudden intimacy of it almost too much to bear. *She feels so fucking good*, I think to myself, the refrain repeating over and over in my head as I slide my hand down, holding onto her hip as I slide in all the way and rock deeply against her. I want to stay here, buried inside of her, feeling her move against me, and in this moment, I never ever want it to end.

I don't know what the future can possibly look like for us, and I know that whatever happens, it's probably going to involve Dean and Cayde. I'd never pictured myself sharing a girl that I have the kind of feelings for that I do with Athena with anyone, let alone Dean and Cayde. We'd shared girls back in high school, but that was just fucking, a three-way power trip with one girl in the middle of all of it. And we've certainly shared Athena sexually—but I can feel it becoming more than that, with all of us.

Can I share a girl I'm in love with? The thought comes into my head out of nowhere as I lean down to kiss her again, and the feeling of adrenaline that follows it is enough to make me groan aloud, my body shuddering with that and the pleasure of the way she feels now that I've slowed down again, my thrusts in and out of her body measured and letting me feel every bit of sensation between the two of us.

I can't be in love with Athena. I know how that ends—and there's no reason to believe there's a future for any of us, let alone the four of us together.

But if there was—

Don't think about it. It doesn't matter right now.

I close my eyes, slanting my mouth over hers, tasting her and breathing her in as I start to thrust harder. She's moaning now against my lips, her body tightening around mine, and I can feel that she's on the edge. I want to feel her come apart around me, to lose control, and I reach up, cupping the side of her face in my hand as I kiss her as if I could devour her from the mouth down. I can feel myself getting close too, on the edge for the second time in a matter of minutes, but I don't want to come yet.

“Jaxon!”

And then Athena cries out my name against my mouth as she comes, her body wrapping around mine like a clinging vine as she starts to shudder and come apart, her moans vibrating against my lips and making what little self control I had left crumble to dust.

I can't stop it. I feel her clench around me, her back arching and pressing herself against my chest, and my orgasm rushes up in a wave of pleasure that takes me completely off guard. I let out a sound that's somewhere between pain and pleasure, thrusting into her hard and holding myself there as I feel her pulse and flutter around my length, the sensation so overwhelming that my vision blurs a little at the edges.

“Athena—” I moan her name, the sound breaking as the next throb of my climax ripples through me, and I feel her tighten around me, clinging to me as we come together.

I don't want it to end. I want to keep feeling like this, for as long as I possibly can.

Maybe it's not real. Maybe this is all a fantasy, and I'm going to wake up from it and things will go back to the way they were before. But for now, it *is* real. I have Athena in my arms, and she wants me again, even just for now.

And I'm not going to take that for granted.

ATHENA

When I was young, I loved the beach.

My mom would take me to the coast sometimes, past the country club and all of the fancy places we'd never be good enough to go into, and we'd walk along the rocky stretch of beach, letting the waves lap at our feet and picking up the smooth stones and sea glass as we went.

There's been so many times when I've closed my eyes and tried to take myself back to that place. It doesn't always work—sometimes I can't remember what it felt like to be that happy, that carefree.

But when I fall asleep beside Jaxon, after we've climbed back into my bed and wound ourselves around each other again, I dream about that beach. I dream about being very young, maybe eight or ten, my hand wrapped tightly in my mother's as we walked down the beach together, the sound of the waves crashing in the background.

I dream of sand between my toes and the scratching of sea glass against the soles of my feet, how cold the ocean was when it touched my skin and how my mother grabbed me and pulled me back when she thought I might actually wade in.

All of the little things come back—the way her hair shone in the cool New England sun, the smell of the sweet perfume she always wore. It was cheap perfume, some vanilla sugar thing from the drugstore, but I'd always loved it. My mother smelled like cupcakes and sunshine, and even when I was older, that's what I always associated with her.

In the dream, she's not gone. I don't feel grief as if I'm seeing her again knowing that she's dead, or longing as if I know that I'll never really see her again. All I feel is that old familiar peace, the comfort that came from being next to her, and it makes me want to stay in the dream, to stay back then when I was young and safe and I didn't know everything that would come for me in the future.

I can smell salt and vanilla, and I close my eyes, tipping my head back so that I can feel what sunshine is peeking through the clouds on my face. The waves are rushing around my feet, cold piercing my skin as the water splashes over my skin, and I want to stay there forever, with sun on my face and sugar and salt in my nostrils and cold water on my skin, in this place where I feel happy and alive and free.

I can feel the waves tugging at my ankles, pulling me backwards, and something in the dream makes me want to let them. They could pull me under, and then I could stay in this place forever, and I feel myself wobbling, my toes sinking into the sand as I start to fall into the water, giving myself over to the inexorable pull of the ocean and the way it makes me feel.

And then suddenly, there's arms around me, and when I open my eyes it's my mother sweeping me up out of the water, clutching me to her chest, her eyes and voice full of fear. "You have to be more careful, Athena!" she cries out, walking quickly away from the tide, and I don't have the words to tell her why I wanted to stay, to let it pull me under, because if not, if we walk away from this beach, one day I'll have to hold an urn of her ashes in my hands and set it in the earth, in a plot of land far away from the ocean. That one day our house will burn up and so will she, and I'll be left with nothing but the memory of sunshine and salt and vanilla on a day so long ago that eventually I'll forget it altogether.

"Promise me," she whispers, setting me down and kneeling in front of me in the sand, her soft delicate hands pressed on either side of my face. "Promise me you'll be more careful, Athena."

I look into her eyes, wide and pleading, so full of fear for me, and I don't know how to tell her what's coming for me,

that there's so much worse out there, things that will drag me down and hold me under for longer than a riptide ever could.

But instead I just nod, and when I tell her that yes, of course I will, I promise, I'm speaking as a child, small and defenseless, playing too close to the edge of the water. Not the Athena watching all of this, knowing what's to come, but the one who played on a beach with her mother and had no idea.

"Okay." My mother smooths my hair away from my face, kissing me on the forehead. "I couldn't stand it if anything happened to you, my little love. You're so very precious to me."

I close my eyes, wanting to memorize the feeling of her lips on my skin forever, the way it felt for my mother to kiss me on the forehead and tell me how much she loved me. But then the feeling is gone, and when I open my eyes, I gasp aloud, a sound that turns into a scream.

"Athena? Athena?" My mother cries out my name, dissolving in front of me, her hands and face and everything else dissolving into ash in front of me, and I reach for her, trying to hold on, to piece her back together, but I can't. She's already floating away on the wind, and I'm screaming, crying, begging for her to come back—

My eyes snap open, and I lurch half upright in bed, tears streaming down my face as I gasp aloud, feeling as if I can't breathe. I'm reaching for something that isn't there, in the open air of my bedroom, and next to me Jaxon sits up too, his face taut and worried as he reaches for my hand.

"Athena?" His voice is gentle when it says my name, and it's all it takes to make me dissolve. I collapse against his chest in tears, my hands pressed against the scratches I left in his flesh, and I can feel myself starting to sob helplessly, my shoulders shaking with a force that spreads through my entire body as I feel his arms go around me. He rocks me gently in his arms, his chin atop my head as he holds me while I cry, not bothering to ask why just yet. It's as if he knows that I couldn't speak if I wanted to, that I just need a solid place to let it all go, and I can feel all of the emotions of the past

months rising up like a geyser, pouring out of me as I cry for the first time in what feels like forever.

I'd known it would be like a torrent when it came, but I hadn't anticipated how much it would hurt, how my chest would feel like it was cracking open as I cried, shuddering and shaking in Jaxon's arms, and it's a long time before I feel him shaking too and I realize he's crying along with me.

"I'm sorry, Athena," he murmurs into my hair, still holding me. "I'm so sorry for everything—"

He lays me down on the bed then, stretched out alongside me, both of us still naked, the way we fell asleep after the second time. I can feel all of his hard solid muscle pressed against me, telling me that it's okay, that he'll protect me, and I don't know why I believe that—that he's sorry, that he won't hurt me again, but I do. I believe all three of them, and I know that there's no leaving now. There's only whatever the four of us can do against the powers that have turned this town into hell, and we'll either succeed or go down in flames together.

"I'm sorry," he whispers again, his forehead pressed against mine, and I nod, tilting my chin up to kiss him with lips drenched and salty with tears. He takes my face in his hands, long fingers pressed against my cheekbones as he kisses me back, and it's not a kiss of lust so much as one of comfort, a promise to use his body for me in every way that he can—to protect, to pleasure, to hold, to defend. He doesn't have to say it aloud, I know it by the way he's kissing me, by the way his lips move over mine, slow and soft and gentle. This is the Jaxon I remember, the one that I wanted long before I thought I should, the one I kissed out on the cliffside, the one who said he wouldn't hurt me. The one that I wanted to give my virginity to.

His hand slides over my body slowly, from my shoulder down to the curve of my breast, tracing it with a finger before sweeping his palm over the dip of my waist and the slender swell of my hip, and it feels good to have him touch me like this, slowly, learning the paths and valleys of my landscape instead of taking me hard and fast. This isn't about lust, it's about comfort, and I find that he does that as well as the other.

“You can stop me anytime you want,” he whispers as his hand trails over the top of my thigh, as if he wants to make up for what happened before, reassure me that it won’t ever happen again.

“I know,” I tell him, tilting my chin up to kiss him again. “I wouldn’t let you if I didn’t want it. Not anymore.”

Jaxon chuckles against my mouth, his hand slipping between my legs. “I believe that,” he says, and he groans when his fingers dip between my folds and he feels that I’m growing wet for him. “You want me, baby?” he asks, his voice deepening as he kisses me again softly, running his tongue over my lower lip.

I don’t say anything, only reach for him, my thumb teasing the piercing at the tip of his cock as my fingers wrap around his length, and Jaxon moans against my mouth. “You have to say it out loud,” he says, his fingers still barely touching me. “You have to tell me you want it, Athena. Or I won’t give it to you.”

He always calls me by my name. Not *pet*, or *little Saint*, just my name. *Athena*.

The name of a warrior. A goddess. A woman who never let a man touch her. I’ve failed on that last count, but I intend to never let another man lay his hands on me again unless I want him to, not without consequences.

And I want Jaxon. I want him slow and careful, I want him to remind me that there’s something else in this world beyond pain and hurting and sickness and flames that consume everything you love. I don’t want him to burn me up, I want him to heal me.

“I want you,” I whisper. “Just like this. Slow.” I run my fingers down his length just like that as an example, slowly, and I feel him harden even more under my touch, his hips arching into the caress.

“I want to taste you,” he murmurs, his fingers sliding upwards, pressing against my clit and making slow circles, and I shake my head.

“I just need you inside of me. I need to not think right now, Jaxon please—” I arch up into his touch, feeling the tendrils of pleasure spreading through my body, through veins and blood and bones and over my skin, and I want more, want to feel him fill me up.

He’s over me in an instant, his muscled body pressing me back into the pillows, down into the bed, and I gasp at the feeling of him, big and hard and ready for me, slipping between my thighs. “Slow,” he murmurs, and he does just that, the head of his cock parting me and barely entering me at first, just rubbing against my slick, sensitive flesh until I moan, my arms wrapping around his neck as the sensation washes over me.

“More,” I whisper. “More.”

Jaxon grins, his expression almost boyish as he tilts his hips forward, his cockhead slipping inside of me and making me gasp again, a shock of pleasure arcing through me at the sensation of him stretching me, filling me. His dark hair falls over his face, into his eyes, and I can’t stop myself from brushing it away as I lean up to kiss him again, my tongue teasing the edge of his lower lip, slipping into his mouth as he groans aloud and pushes forward another inch.

He keeps going like that, slow and steady, sliding into me inch by inch so that I feel every bit of him, drawing it out until finally he thrusts forward with a grunt, seating himself fully inside of me. Jaxon runs his hand down my thigh, reaching for my leg to wrap it around his hips, and I cling to him, moaning as the pleasure builds. He feels so good buried inside of me, moving in slow thrusts that slide his body against mine, all of that hard muscle pressed against my soft skin, and I know that *this* is what I wanted since I first met him, for him to hold me like this. For the two of us to come together without fighting or punishments or games, just us in a bed alone, two bodies seeking out pleasure and forgetfulness together.

“I—” The word hangs in the air between us, and Jaxon breathes in, pressing his forehead to mine as he pushes deeper inside of me, our bodies moving together in sync. “God, Athena, I can’t say it.”

“I know.” I arch against him, moving with him, both of us in rhythm with each other. “I know.”

“It feels like—” he gasps, his hips rocking against me, a shudder going through him as he closes his eyes. “I’ve only ever said it once. A long time ago—”

To Natalie. He won’t say it aloud, won’t say her name aloud, because it would be wrong here, in bed with me, inside of me. But I know that’s what he’s thinking. I wonder how long her shadow will hang between us, hover over us, how long I’ll be her half-sister that he loves too and not just Athena, not just the woman that he loves now.

It doesn’t matter, though. Leaving Dean and Cayde at this point would be hard enough, but leaving Jaxon is unthinkable. We’ve been through so much already, and the moment he went down on his knees to beg for my forgiveness, the moment he let me punish him the way the boys have been punishing me, the way *he* punished me, was the moment that I knew that he understands me better than anyone else.

“I feel it too,” I whisper, arching against him, feeling my nipples press against his chest, brushing over his skin. “I can say it first, if you want. But you have to say it back.”

Jaxon surges inside of me, thrusting until he’s all the way in again, buried inside of me. He holds himself there and nods, breathless with pleasure. “Yes,” he groans. “Help me, Athena. Help me—”

Help me move on.

I reach behind his head, threading my fingers through the long hair there, and I pull his mouth back down to mine, pressing my lips to his. I wrap my legs around his hips, holding him like a vine wrapped around his body, and when he breaks the kiss with a shuddering gasp, I whisper the words that I know he needs to hear against his lips.

“I love you, Jaxon.” I breathe in, feeling the force of it reverberate through me, the wall that I’ve just broken through. “You might not have been the first man in my bed, but you’re

the first one I ever said that to. You're the first man I've ever said that I loved out loud."

Jaxon squeezes his eyes shut, his forehead still pressed to mine. "I can't give you that," he whispers. "I've said it before. I can't give you anything for the first time—"

"Have you ever asked someone to forgive you for the things you've done before?" I run my fingers over his cheeks. "Have you ever done what you did for me? To make up for it?"

"I begged *her*," Jaxon whispers. "But she was already gone."

"Well I'm not." I kiss him fiercely, wrapping my arms around him, holding him against me. "I'm still here. You can have all of the forgiveness I can give you, for both of us. Forgiveness, and love. And when this is over—"

"What if I'm not good enough?" Jaxon has gone very still now, everything forgotten except the emotions running through him, until he's nearly shaking with it. "I'm not good enough for you Athena, I've never been enough for anyone—"

"You're enough for me." I press my hands to either side of his face.

"Along with Cayde, and Dean—" he swallows hard. "I've shared women with them before. But never one that I—"

"Say it." I tilt my chin up, looking into his eyes. "You promised you would, if I did."

He pauses. A beat passes between us, a long, trembling moment, and then he reaches up, cupping my face in his palm.

"Never one that I loved."

He kisses me then, hot and fierce, his body surging against mine. He's only half-hard now, some of his arousal lost in our conversation, but he's still inside of me, and I can feel him hardening again, his body sliding over mine. His tongue plunges into my mouth, his hands in my hair, and he whispers it against my lips, breathlessly.

“I love you, Athena. I love you, I love you—” the words tumble out, over and over, as if now that he’s said it he can’t stop. “I love you—”

He’s moving faster now, harder, and I meet him with every thrust, words forgotten as we cling to each other, driving each other towards the peak of pleasure. He feels so good, as if he was meant to fit inside of me, and I clutch the back of his head, kissing him wildly as I feel the orgasm swell inside of me, like a bubble expanding until I know that any second it’s going to burst over me. I want it, *need* it, like nothing I’ve ever needed before. It seems to pale in comparison to all the times the boys have teased me, edged me, because suddenly I want to come with Jaxon more than anything in the entire world.

When it does, it feels like electricity, like fireworks, different from anything else I’ve felt. I press myself against him, wanting every bit of skin against his, and I hear Jaxon groan aloud as I clench around him, his hands fisting in the pillows on either side of my head as he drives into me hard and fast, panting breathlessly as he approaches his own climax. I feel almost dizzy with pleasure, light bursting behind my eyes as I squeeze them shut, my nails digging into his shoulders as I cry out. “Jaxon! Oh god, Jaxon—”

“Athena—” he gasps out my name, and I feel him go rock-solid inside of me, his entire body shuddering as pleasure ripples through him, and I feel the hot rush of him inside of me, his cock thick and stretching me, his piercing rubbing against my most sensitive spot, and I arch my back hard, a second wave of intense, almost unbearable pleasure following the first.

He rocks against me, grinding, groaning as he moans my name again and again, and when he collapses on top of me he buries his face in my neck, breathing me in as the last shudders of pleasure wash through him.

I don’t want to move, or breathe, or think, or do anything to break this moment. We lay there for what feels like several long minutes, glued together, Jaxon still inside of me as we try to catch our breath.

When he finally rolls off of me, laying on his back with his muscled chest heaving, I look over at the alarm clock on the nightstand. It's nearing dusk, and I look out of the window, remembering my dream. The weight of it comes back, settling in my chest like a boulder, but I don't start to cry again. Instead, I have a sudden thought, and I know what I need to do.

Jaxon rolls towards me, his eyes narrowed. "You look like you've just thought of something," he says, and I nod.

"Well?" He pushes a piece of hair out of my face, a gesture so sweet and intimate that it makes my chest clench.

"There's something I need to do," I say softly. "And I'd like you to come with me."

"Okay," he says without hesitation, and something about the way he says it, quickly and eagerly, as if he'd do anything for me without knowing what it is, makes the tension in my chest loosen, replaced with a sudden bloom of warmth.

"It's illegal," I say slowly. "Very. At least, I'm pretty sure it is."

Jaxon grins, and leans over to kiss me.

"Even better."

ATHENA

I throw on something similar to when Dean took me to the country club—all black. Black jeans, black long-sleeved shirt, my black Docs that have been everywhere with me, black knit beanie. “Can we take the bike?” I ask Jaxon, and he nods, looking at me curiously. I can see a glittering excitement in his eyes, almost anticipation, and it makes me feel even more that I love him, because he’s here for me no matter what. Dean might be, after taking me to burn down the club, but I’m not sure. And Cayde might, but I can’t be certain of either of them. They have their own agendas, their own ideas about when it’s appropriate to break the rules and when it’s not. But all Jaxon cares about are two things—revenge for Natalie, and me. He’ll break any rule, do anything I ask, if it means telling the Blackmoor kings to fuck off or makes me happy.

I don’t know that *happy* is how I’d describe my feelings about what I need to do right now, but I know that it’s right. I know that it’s what needs to be done. I know that it will make me feel better, maybe even give me a little closure. And I’ll take as much of that as I can get, because I know the days to come will only be harder than before, in a lot of ways. Even if sometimes I can’t imagine how it could still get more difficult, I know it will. None of this is over.

We slip downstairs, watching to see if anyone is around before heading for the front door. Jaxon pulls out his motorcycle, handing me a helmet before swinging on and firing up the engine. “Where are we going?” he asks, and I can see his smirk faintly underneath the visor.

“The cemetery,” I tell him, and I see his expression falter.

“Athena, are you sure? Do you think you can handle it, so soon—”

“I need to do this,” I tell him firmly. “I’ll explain once we get there. But I just know—I have to do this.”

Jaxon hesitates for just a second, and then he nods. “Okay.” He doesn’t say another word after that, and my heart swells in my chest, because he didn’t argue with me. He didn’t try to convince me otherwise, or tell me what he thought I *should* do. He just trusted me to know what was best for myself.

I didn’t know how much I needed that until right this second.

There’s something different that I get from each of the men, and I’m coming to love Cayde and Dean for their own reasons. Dean is stoic, a rock that I can depend on to not falter when a situation needs logic reason, and someone who has proven that he’ll care for me when I need it most. Cayde is pure fury, anger that feeds my anger, someone who will encourage me when I need to lash out against the world and who can take every bit of rage that I might have inside of myself. Jaxon can do that too, to some extent, but no one does fury like Cayde. When it was directed at me it was terrifying, but directing it outwards together, we could burn the world down as one.

Jaxon—Jaxon is something else. Jaxon feels like a part of my soul that was missing, and though I still can’t entirely forget what he did to me, I can understand it. I can understand the grief and rage and hurt, the feeling of betrayal and the desire to lash out and destroy the person he saw as being responsible for that betrayal—even if it was me.

And he let me punish him. He let me give it back. And now we’re even.

Now we can start fresh.

These boys, all three of them, once saw me as something beneath them. Something to own or torment or ignore. But now they’re seeing who I really am. Their equal in intelligence, in rage, in fighting spirit. They’re seeing that I can hold my own, that I’m not someone to be bullied.

That I'm not a sacrifice. I'm not a pawn.

But if they'll let me, I'll be their goddess.

I'll be their fucking queen.

And we can rule over the ashes of this place together.

Jaxon drives me straight to the cemetery as I cling to him, feeling the wind whip through my hair and sting my cheeks. It's cold, almost too cold to be out on the bike really, but I don't care and I know neither does he. It lifts my spirits to be out here with him, to see the ribbon of empty road unwinding in front of us. It makes it feel, just for a little while, as if the world belongs to us. As if there's nothing and no one else, and all of our problems fall away, leaving only this. Only us and the asphalt speeding by.

When he drives through the gate, heading slowly up the twisting road that goes up the hill to where my mother's grave is, the cemetery is equally empty, quiet and dark and still. Jaxon doesn't ask me for directions, and I notice that—that he remembers where the grave is. He took note of it, probably because it meant something to me, and that makes my heart clench, warmth spreading through me as I press my cheek to the leather of his jacket. It smells good, like him, and I breathe it in, steadying myself for what's still to come.

Jaxon kills the engine as we reach the area where my mother's plot is, and he pulls off his helmet, his hair clinging to one side of his face as he looks at me. "Alright, Athena," he says, his gaze calm and curious. "We're here. What are we doing?"

There's no judgement in his voice, no censure, no indication that he's going to tell me whether he thinks my plan is a good idea or not. He simply wants to know what's next, so I tell him.

"I need to dig up my mother's urn."

Jaxon blinks, as if that's not at all what he was expecting, but he just nods again. "Alright," he says slowly. "Do you want to explain more than that? Because I'll go along with

whatever it is that you've got in your head, Athena, but it might be good if I had the full picture. Just so I can help you."

Something about those words cracks something loose in me, and I stare at him for a long second, almost unable to breathe with how much I suddenly feel that I love him. I hadn't expected—*this*, exactly. This unwavering acceptance of whatever I've decided, on the spur of the moment, makes me more certain than ever that I made the right choice to forgive him.

"There was this place that my mother used to take me to, when I was younger," I tell him slowly. "On the coast, past the country club. One of the parts of the beach where all the richer people didn't really go, there wasn't a lot of sand, it was mostly rocks and the waves came in faster there, although there was a small strip of beach. But it was our spot, so I loved it. It was our favorite spot, it was—" I break off, my voice catching in my throat.

"It was yours," Jaxon says quietly. "Yours and hers."

"Yes." I nod, swallowing past the lump in my throat. "Exactly that. It was ours." I lick my lips, trying to breathe past the threatening tears, trying not to cry as I look at the raw earth where my mother's urn is buried, without a headstone yet, without anything other than the overturned dirt to mark all that's left of her.

I take a deep breath, forcing myself not to cry. "When they asked me if I wanted the urn or wanted to bury it, I didn't know what to say. I was so in shock. I couldn't even think as far as the end of the day, let alone what to do with my mother's ashes, and I couldn't picture bringing them back to the house—I'm sorry, but that place isn't my home. It's not—"

"Good and bad things have happened to you there," Jaxon says quietly. "Things that you couldn't tell her, good or bad. It's not your home, and it's not ours either, honestly. I can't wait to leave there." He presses his lips together, watching me. "I can understand why you wouldn't want to bring her back there."

I nod, fighting back tears even harder from hearing him say that, feeling understood so completely. “It felt so strange to just sit it in my room, just—there. It didn’t feel right, but burying it didn’t either. I didn’t see any other choice, though. So I just picked burying it, because I knew I couldn’t take it with me.”

“And you have a better idea now.” The way Jaxon says it makes me think that he’s already figured out what I want to do, but I tell him anyway.

“I want to dig up that urn, and I want to take it to our spot on the beach, tonight, and scatter her ashes there.” I feel my eyes burning, and I squeeze them tightly shut, blinking away the tears. “That’s what I dreamed about earlier, when I woke up crying. Not the ashes—but my mom. On the beach with me, when I was a child. Except it felt like I was there now, too—both of us, me back then and me now.” I feel like I’m blabbering now, the words tumbling out of my mouth in a rush, but Jaxon is just watching me patiently, listening. “She asked me to promise to be more careful. This isn’t careful but—I need to. I need to know that she’s there, not here.”

Jaxon is quiet for a long moment, and then he looks at me. “She’s next to your father here, at least,” he offers. “I don’t know if that makes you feel differently about it, but I figured that was why you chose to bury it here.”

“I—” I don’t know if I should try to explain it to Jaxon, especially considering how raw I know the wound still is from Natalie. But if we’re going to make this work, we’re going to have to be honest with each other. We can’t hide things, because now more than ever, miscommunication could be the death of everything.

“I loved my father,” I say quietly, crossing my arms tightly over my chest and leaning so that my hip is pressed against the seat of the motorcycle. “I loved him so much. But there’s things that I’ve learned about him, and things that I’ve come to see—he put us in so much danger. All of these things that have happened to me, and to my mother, to our family, happened because he chose to be unfaithful. Because he chose to be a part of an organization that he knew would prioritize his

loyalty to them over anything else, *anyone* else. He knew the danger he was putting us all in, but he either was so arrogant that he thought it would never happen to him, or he cared more about what he wanted than keeping us safe.” I stop, breathless as I squeeze my arms around myself, trying desperately not to cry—angry tears now too, as well as sad ones. “I loved him,” I repeat, as if saying it again can wipe away the disloyalty I feel for saying all of this aloud, and it’s true.

I did love him, and I do. I remember all the good things, the tobacco scent of him when he picked me up and swung me around as a child, the cards he wrote me at holidays and the scent of leather and grease and gasoline when he took me on his motorcycle. “He taught me to be fearless, and brave, and not to take shit from anyone. But so did my mother. She loved him too, and now she’s there.” I gesture to the plot of earth, feeling the tears rise up, hot and angry and blurring my vision. “He could have taken us and tried to run. He could have been faithful to my mother. I know that means that—that Natalie would never have existed, but she wouldn’t have died like that either. You wouldn’t have been hurt. And I—I don’t know if in the end—” I gasp for the words, almost feeling as if I can’t say it aloud. The words burn in my throat, but I have to. I have to say it, to get it all out.

“I don’t know if he deserves to have her next to him for eternity, after all of that,” I whisper. “I don’t know what she would have wanted. We never talked about that. Maybe I should have asked—but there was too much death. Too much fear, for us to be in a place to talk about those things. Maybe we could have later on but—” I swallow hard. “I want her to be free. Free of all of this, in the place where I know we were happy.”

Jaxon nods, and then he takes a few steps forwards, reaching for me and pulling me into his arms. His broad, rough palm cups my face, brushing a tear away from my cheek, and he looks down at me, his eyes dark and fathomless in the growing night.

“I can’t say that I wish your father had been a better man,” he says thickly. “Because I loved Natalie, deeply. I loved her

in that way that you can only ever love when you're seventeen and the world is against you and there's one other person who feels the same way, and it's the two of you against the world. When you believe that the first one you love will be the one you love forever. I can't give you that, Athena, and I'm sorry. I know that it might hurt to hear that I loved someone else that way, but I can't change it—and I wouldn't, even if I could." He takes a deep breath, his hand still on my face, his fingers still brushing away the tears that are still rolling down my cheeks.

"And I can't say that I wish he'd been a better man," he continues, "because all of those choices brought you to me too, Athena. It's been a hard, dark road to get here, and if I could go back and smooth it over, take all the pain and grief away and still wind up with you, then I would. If I could bring your parents back, hell, even just your mother—if I could undo all the terrible things that we've all done to you, if I could undo the kidnapping—all of it, and still have you in my arms when it was all unraveled, loving me and loving you, I would. I lost Natalie, and the hardest fucking thing in the world, Athena, the reason I hated you in that moment as much as I loved you, the reason I hurt you—and I'm not saying it was justified—" he adds quickly. "I'll spend the rest of my life making up for that mistake. But what kills me the most, and still does—"

He presses his lips together hard, and to my shock, I see tears shimmering there, his eyes glossy and bright suddenly in the faint light from the lamps along the road. "What kills me," he repeats in a choked voice, his hands tightening on my waist, "is that I don't even know if I'd bring her back anymore, if I could. Because I loved her—I love her—but we were children. We didn't know anything about how the world works. We believed things that would never have really happened. Who knows if it would have worked out? Who knows if I would have loved her forever? What we had is gone, and—" he takes a deep, shuddering breath, his fingers clinging to me so hard that it's almost painful, but I don't care. This is the most he's ever said to me, the most he's ever shared, and I know how important it is.

“You’re *here*, Athena. You’re real. You’re mine—or at least partially mine—and I’m yours. I gave you everything when I asked you to forgive me for what I did. You’ve seen the absolute worst of me and now—now I’m trying to show you the best. I’m trying to turn myself inside out for you so that you can see—I don’t know if I’d bring back the one woman I loved more than anything in the world because I love you, and I know that this is real. This has a future, if we do this right. You and me and Dean and Cayde—we can change it. We can stop this, and take our lives back. I don’t know what would have happened with Natalie but *this*?” He swallows hard, looking down at me with those dark eyes, so dark they’re nearly black. “I can see where this goes, Athena. And I feel like *shit* because I’m leaving her behind for you, and she *died*. She’d be so fucking broken to know I loved someone else, wanted someone else as much or more than I loved and wanted her—”

Jaxon breaks off, his shoulders shaking, and he lets go of me as he sinks to his knees in the grass, shaking his bowed head. “Shit, Athena,” he mutters. “You brought me out here to help you, and I’m talking about myself—”

“It’s okay.” I sink down to the grass in front of him, taking his face in my hands and tilting it up so that he’s looking at me. He’s crying in earnest now, tears dripping down his cheeks, and he looks so vulnerable, younger than I’ve ever seen him. I can feel my broken heart cracking open anew for him, and I clutch his face in my hands, holding his gaze.

“It’s okay, Jaxon,” I whisper again. “We’re both grieving. We’re both hurt. This is the way we share that hurt that doesn’t break either one of us even more. This isn’t about you or me individually, it’s about what they’ve done to *us*. And what we’re going to do to take that back.”

He nods wordlessly, leaning into my touch, and in that moment, I know that he and I have more of each other than anyone else. I want Dean and Cayde, and there’s things that we share, but Jaxon knows me. In time, I think he’ll know me better than anyone, down to my core. And now I can see him, too.

It doesn't make me love him any less, hearing all of this, seeing all of the raw, bleeding places laid open to me.

It makes me love him more.

"I think she would want you to be happy," I whisper, looking into his eyes. "I didn't know her, I know that. And I know it's hard to speak for the dead. I can't say for sure that what I'm about to do is what my mother would have wanted. Maybe she would have wanted to stay here, next to him, despite everything. But all I can do is what I *think* is best, based on what I know. And *you* knew Natalie, Jaxon. You loved her, and she loved you. Fiercely, devotedly, completely. I don't mind saying that out loud or knowing it."

He blinks at me, his dark eyes still running over with tears. "You don't?"

"No. It's the truth, and it's part of what made you who you are. And I *love* you." I look at him with fierce, wild eyes, holding him there. "What do you think, Jaxon? Do you think Natalie would have wanted you to grieve for her forever, living in nightmares, cracked open with pain every day, never loving anyone else, never being happy again, never feeling real joy because you were so eaten up with guilt?"

He swallows hard. "No," he whispers thickly. "No, I don't think so. She was—she was so bright. So full of life. She knew what it meant to be *alive*, and that's why it's so unfair that she died. If anyone should have died, it should have been me. I was born into a life I don't even want, given a key to a birthright that I don't want to fight for. She could have been *anything*, and she chose me, and she *died* for it. She should have lived, Athena, she should have—"

Jaxon starts to cry again, great, gulping, shuddering sobs of guilt and pain, and I stroke his hair, pressing my forehead to his. "I know," I whisper. "But you didn't die. You're still here. So fucking *live*." I grip his hair in my fist, pulling his head back so that he's looking up at me. "Fucking *live* Jaxon, just like I am, just like we all are. I've wanted to lay down and die a hundred times since my father died, since I saw my house burn to the ground, since Cayde and Dean made my life a

living hell in high school, since I woke up in that manor, since I was abducted, since I lost my mother. But I've gotten back up every time. And so have you. Now do it again. And this time, remember who the fuck you are."

"I'm not sure I know who that is anymore," Jaxon murmurs. "I've been fighting just to stay afloat for so long that I don't know if I remember."

"You're Jaxon King," I whisper. "And I'm Athena Saint. And we're going to make every motherfucker in this town who ever hurt us pay for it in blood."

He's quiet for a long moment, his shoulders still trembling. And then he swallows hard, nodding. "You're right," he says quietly. "We're not going to let them get away with any of this. And you're right about Natalie too. I think—" he takes a deep breath, looking away, out over the cemetery, and I know she's out there somewhere. Somewhere in the direction he's staring, there's a grave with her name on it, and he's thinking of her. It doesn't hurt, though. She deserves that much—to be on his mind. To not be forgotten.

But he needs to live for himself, too. Just like I do.

"I think she wouldn't mind, that it's you," he says finally. "I think she might even find it funny, in a way. She had that kind of—irreverent humor, sometimes. And if she'd had the chance to meet you, I think she'd have liked you. She'd have been glad that you're the one I found, after it all."

"I'm glad too," I say softly. "I really am. Even if the road to get here was fucked. We'll do our best to unfuck it, from here on out."

Jaxon pushes himself up then, taking my hands and pulling me up to my feet with him. "Let's do this," he says firmly.

I frown, looking at the patch of dirt. "I didn't think far enough ahead to how we'd dig it up—"

"There's a toolshed for keeping the grounds clean," Jaxon says. "I know where it is. I'll find something and come back. You stay here. You could probably—" he clears his throat,

looking over at my mother's grave. "You could probably use a moment alone here, anyway."

I nod, sniffing back the last of the tears. As I watch him walk away, I wipe away what's left of them, and I turn towards my mother's grave, sinking back down onto my knees in the grass in front of it.

"I hope this is what you'd want," I whisper softly, the air around me suddenly feeling very silent and still, without Jaxon there. "I hope that I'm right, and that I'm not just reading too much into a dream. But I *feel* like this is right, and you always said I should listen to my feelings better. That I shouldn't be so angry and closed off. So this is me doing exactly that." I sigh, rubbing my palms over my jeans. "I don't know what you'd think of the decisions I'm making these days, or who I've chosen to love, or what I've chosen to forgive and who I've chosen to hate and focus that anger on. Maybe you wouldn't understand how I can still want Cayde and Dean and Jaxon, after everything. Maybe you'd tell me to do what you didn't, run away and leave this all behind and let them come after me if they want to. But I just—"

I let out a long breath, and I reach out, pressing my hands against the cool damp earth. "I can't leave now. I can't leave *them*. We're all in this together and they—they've all suffered too. I know they have. We're going to come out of this different on the other side. And I hope—I hope that you'd be proud of me, when it's all over. I hope that you'd see that I made the choices that I thought were best, even if they might seem strange to anyone else. That I did what I thought I needed for myself, for the first time in my life."

"You asked me to be careful," I continue, clearing my throat, wanting to say all of the things that I want to get out before Jaxon comes back. "I don't think a lot of this will fall under being *careful*. But you also taught me to be brave, and strong, just like dad did. I've done my best, but I know it's time now for me to do better. And I'm starting with this. I'm choosing how this plays out, from now on. And I'm going to believe that at the end of it, I'll come out on top, and that if you can see me, you'll be proud of me. Both of you."

I pick up a fistful of dirt, letting it trickle out through my fingers, just like it did when we stood around the open grave. I don't know anymore if it was the hardest day of my life. There's been too many of them lately. But I'm determined to keep going.

And now I have help. Someone at my back.

Three someones.

I never would have thought that when it came down to this, it would be the Blackmoor heirs who had my back. It's almost fucking poetic.

I stand up stiffly when I hear Jaxon's footsteps. He's found a shovel, and together in silence we go about the task of unearthing my mother's urn as quickly as possible, cognizant of the fact that someone else could come along at any time. We've already wasted too much time, but things needed to be said.

They needed to be out in the open, so we could move forward.

Jaxon gives me his jacket to wrap the urn in, as we walk back towards the bike. "Won't you be cold?" I ask, looking up at him concernedly, but he shrugs.

"More important to keep that safe," Jaxon says gruffly. "Come on. It'll take us a bit to get to the coast, not going as fast as I usually do."

I clutch the urn, wrapped in the jacket, to my chest with one arm as Jaxon starts the bike, the other wrapped around his waist. As we speed down the highway I press my cheek to his back, wanting to remember tonight. It's the most *right* I've felt in a long time, as if everything is finally coming together. As if the world isn't as horrible as it's seemed sometimes, in the past months.

I know grief comes in waves, and that it won't always be this way. I know I'll feel drowned by it again, and I'll surface again too. But for tonight, I feel like I can breathe. I feel like I can think again, make my own choices again, and choose correctly.

And that makes everything else seem so much more possible.

ATHENA

Jaxon slows as we drive past the ruins of the country club, cordoned off with yellow tape now. He glances at it, and I know he's wondering about what happened there, just like I'm sure everyone else is. I wonder if he'll say something about it when we stop, but by the time we park the bike near the entrance to the beach closest to where I want to go, all of his focus is on us getting there.

It's colder here, out by the water, the wind whipping my hair around my face as we walk down the beach. I hold on tightly to the urn as we walk, Jaxon's big body buffeting some of the wind, and we navigate our way around the rocks, all the way until we reach the small patch of beach that meant so much to me and my mother.

It looks exactly the way I remember it from the last time we were here, exactly the way I saw it in my dream. Jaxon stops next to me, looking at the rippling black water, and then down at me.

"This is it?" he asks, his voice deep and quiet, and I nod, my throat suddenly too tight to speak. I wish I'd come back here with her sooner—it's been since before my dad died that we were last here together. I wish we'd come back the last time I visited, but the time for wishing is over. I can't change any of it now.

"This is it." I unwrap the jacket from around the urn, my hand over the lid. The wind is kicking up, and I know once I start, the ashes will be gone in an instant. I want to do this

right, to remember it, and I hold out the urn, looking at Jaxon. “Take this for me for a minute?”

His eyes widen, but he just nods, taking the urn out of my hands and holding it tightly, like something precious that he’s afraid to drop. I bend down, unlacing my boots, and I hear Jaxon make a sound of alarm behind me.

“Athena, what are you doing? You’re not going to walk into the water—it’s freezing cold. You’ll catch pneumonia—”

“That won’t be the worst thing that’s happened to me the last few weeks,” I tell him dryly, still unlacing them. I know it’s not the smartest idea in the world, but I want to feel the water on my feet, the way I had in my dream. I want to feel everything.

The sand is cold between my toes as I take the urn back from him, and I stride forward, into the lapping waves surging up onto the sand. I gasp when the water touches my bare feet, the cold sucking all of the air out of me, but I keep going forward, until the water is swirling around my calves, and I close my eyes.

Athena. Athena!

I can almost hear my mother calling out to me, the way she did in my dream, and I try to call that memory back to myself, the way she’d picked my child self up, swinging me up into her arms and holding me tightly. Protecting me. Keeping me safe.

I wish more than anything that I could go back to the time when I believed that would never change.

Slowly, I take the lid off of the urn, tossing it aside. I don’t care what happens to it, I’m not taking it back with me. It means nothing to me—just what’s inside of it.

I tilt it, letting the ashes run out over my fingers, just like the grave dirt had not that long ago. The wind catches them as they pour into my palm, blowing them out across the water, and I feel tears rise in my throat hot and thick, and spill out over my cheeks.

“I love you, mom,” I whisper, my voice broken as I watch all that’s left of her float away, scattered across the water. “I’m sorry I couldn’t protect you. I’m sorry it wasn’t enough.”

That’s why I’d agreed to all of it in the first place, anyway. To protect her. I hadn’t cared about myself.

But that’s all I have left now. Just myself, and the three men who have decided to ally themselves with me. I can’t live for anyone else now. And if there’s anything I’ve learned from all of this, it’s that I’m not the kind of girl to just lay down and die.

“You named me after a goddess,” I whisper, watching the last of the ashes float out and blow away. “I’ll try to live up to it.”

And then, when there’s nothing left inside, I let the urn fall out of my hands, splashing into the water as I look out across the seemingly endless stretch of rippling black waves, tears running down my face silently. I don’t cry aloud, I just stand there, my hands at my sides as I look out over the water and let the tears come, until I hear the splash of boots in water and I feel Jaxon’s hand at my back.

“You can’t stay out here forever,” he says gently. “You really will get sick.”

“She’s gone,” I whisper, the words coming out choked and broken. “She’s really gone.”

“You still have things to hold onto.” Jaxon presses his lips against my hair, his arm sliding around my waist. “You know that. It’s not enough, I know. But not everything is gone.”

“I know.” I turn then, pressing my face against his chest. “I didn’t think this would happen. I really didn’t—” My shoulders start to tremble. “I don’t want to think about how she died—”

“Don’t.” Jaxon’s voice is firm, almost rough. He reaches for my shoulders, pushing me back a little so that I can see his face. “Don’t do that to yourself, Athena. Take it from me, you don’t want to go down that road. You came out here to honor her, to remember good things, to give her a peaceful and

fitting burial. To leave her in the place where you were both happiest. Don't leave bad memories here. Only good ones." He leans forward, kissing my forehead as he squeezes my shoulders, bringing me back to the here and now with the pressure of his hands. "Tell me about them."

So I do. I let Jaxon lead me back up out of the water to the beach, and I put my boots back on so that my feet don't freeze. He pulls me down onto the sand next to him, and we sit there, looking out across the water as I tell him the things I remember. I tell him about picnics on the beach just her and I, about swimming in the summer and walking out here bundled up in the cold like tonight. I tell him about sunshine and salt, about her vanilla perfume, about sandcastles and games of tic tac toe drawn in the sand, and he sits there and listens. I wouldn't have imagined Jaxon to be a man who would sit and listen to childhood stories of cupcakes and sandcastles, but he does, every word. He listens to all of it, and when I finally go silent, with nothing left to say, he reaches out to take my hand.

"There," he says quietly. "Now they're all here. All of those memories, here on this beach like the ashes. And if you miss her, and you need to remember, you can come back here."

I nod quietly, leaning against his shoulder, feeling tired and drained. "Do you want to talk about Natalie?" I ask softly, and he goes very still, silent for a few moments.

"Not now," he says finally. "Maybe some other time. It might be good for me to—to share it, if you're willing to listen. But not here. Not now."

"Okay." I close my eyes, willing myself to think only of the good, and not of the things that hurt. Not the things that make me cringe and shudder and want to scream. Only the good. So that I never come back here and think of anything else.

It feels like we sit out on the beach for a very long time. Finally, we gather ourselves and head back to where we left the bike, and Jaxon shrugs his jacket back on before donning his helmet and firing up the engine. "You ready to go back?" he asks, and I nod wordlessly.

I'm not sure that I'm ready, really. But I know that it's time.

The ride back is sobering. The sense of adventure and purpose is gone, replaced with a reminder that tomorrow I'll wake up, and my mother will still be gone, and I'll still be living in a town where there's those who want to see me dead too, with only myself and the three boys I'm living with as a bulwark between me and them.

Jaxon parks the bike and follows me inside, and we both immediately hear the sound of voices coming from the living room. The moment the front door shuts, they go quiet, and barely a second later Cayde appears in the doorway to the living room, his face grim.

“Both of you, in here, now.”

I blink at him, instantly feeling the hot flush of rebellion. “I'm tired,” I tell him curtly. “I was going to head up and go to bed—”

“We need to talk,” Cayde says sharply. “And I want us all here for it.”

Jaxon lets out a long-suffering sigh and Cayde gives him a look that could blister paint. “Now,” Cayde growls, and I flinch a little, even though by now I'm far from being as afraid of him as I once was.

At first I think that Cayde is angry at Jaxon and I for going off on our own, and I'm on the verge of chewing him out for it, because if he thinks I'm going to have to ask permission to go somewhere with Jaxon—or anyone—we're going to fight. At this point I'm well past asking permission for the most basic things—I'm not their pet anymore. We're equals, or we're nothing. If I submit to them, it'll be my own choice.

But then I see Dean's face, tense and angry, and I know it's something else altogether.

“Now that we're all here,” Cayde says curtly. “Do you and Dean want to tell me what you snuck out and did the other night, Athena? Either of you can go first, it doesn't matter to me. And don't bother lying, because I already have a decent idea of what happened.”

“It’s none of your business,” Dean snaps. “I don’t answer to you, Cayde. By all rights, I won the fucking game, so if anyone in this house doesn’t answer to you, it’s most certainly me—”

“There is no fucking game anymore,” Cayde snarls. “I think, after everything Athena showed us, we’ve established that. So don’t bother throwing that out. We’re not playing the game anymore.”

“You’re absolutely right, we’re fucking not.” I look at him, already bristling. “Which means I don’t have to answer to you either. We’re in this together, not me as your little sex slave, but as your ally. All four of us—allies. And that means I have just as much agency as any of you, and Dean certainly does, to do whatever we think is best.”

“Sure.” Cayde rolls his eyes. “So when it comes to plotting how to go about taking down the powers that be around here, don’t you think some synchronization might be in order? Maybe a little group planning? Maybe—oh, I don’t know—not *fucking burning down a country club on a whim?*”

He says the last through his teeth, and I see even Jaxon flinch next to me, turning to look at me with startled eyes.

“Don’t look at me,” I mumble. “It was Dean’s idea.”

“Oh, great.” Dean glares at me. “Throw me under the fucking bus, why don’t you?”

“So that was you?” Jaxon is still staring at us both, me and then Dean and back again. “I wondered what the fuck happened, especially when we passed it tonight—”

“You and everyone else,” Cayde says snappishly.

“You don’t have to look so surprised.” I glare at Jaxon. “Are you so shocked that Dean and I could have burned it down?”

Jaxon laughs. “You, Athena? Hell no. I one hundred percent believe you’d burn it down. But Dean?” He shakes his head. “Man, the pussy really changed you.”

Dean shoots him a look not unlike the one Cayde gave him earlier. “I care about Athena,” he says through gritted teeth. “I

wanted to help her get some revenge.”

“Just her?” Jaxon raises an eyebrow. “I think you’ve got a bit of a bone to pick with them these days too, Dean. In fact, I think we all do.” He shrugs, turning back to Cayde. “I honestly don’t see what the problem is. We all hated having to go there. It’s a stuffy place for stuffy fucking rich men like our fathers. So what if they burned it down?”

Cayde stares at him. “Are you fucking serious?”

Jaxon shrugs again. “What do you think?”

“Oh for fuck’s sake.” Cayde throws his hands up. “You’ve all lost your fucking minds. Do you really think they’re going to take that lying down? That they’re not going to want to figure out who burned down their *country club*? Do you think they’re not going to try to involve us in it somehow, or worse, immediately suspect us or at the very least, Athena of having had something to do with it?”

“You agreed we needed to do something,” Dean says sharply. “I was just getting the ball rolling. And Athena needed to blow off some steam.”

“*Blowing off steam* is what you do at the fucking gym. Or just plain fucking.” Cayde glares at him. “Not burning down one of the preeminent buildings in Blackmoor for funsies.”

“So what?” Dean crosses his arms, turning to face Cayde fully. “You’re in charge of this whole thing now? You want us to run it past you every time we want to make a move? Do something? We need your *permission*?”

Cayde rolls his eyes. “Jesus Christ, Dean, pull your head out of your ass and think. I already said it once. We need to do this as a group effort. We need to *plan ahead*, and figure out the best way to go about this. Uncoordinated guerrilla attacks like the one you and Athena pulled off are a great way for our fathers to see us coming a dozen miles off. And then we’ll be fucked. And not in the fun way.”

“Fine.” Dean grinds the word out through his teeth. “We’ll do this as a *group*. But you’re not in charge, Cayde.”

“I didn’t ask to be.” Cayde turns his glare back to me. “Don’t you have anything to say?”

“I’m not sorry we did it.” I return his stare evenly. “I agree that group planning is a good idea. But I’m not going to apologize.”

“I didn’t expect you to.” Cayde narrows his eyes at me. “Do I even want to know what you and Jaxon went off and did tonight?”

“We didn’t burn anything down,” I say sweetly. “That’s as much as I think I need to say.”

“You know, there was a time when you wouldn’t get away with talking to me like that.” Cayde strides forwards, his gaze pinning me, and something about it makes the heat rise in my veins despite how exhausted I am. “That mouth of yours—”

“Has better uses...yes, I know.” I look up at him, matching his gaze with my own. “What, Cayde? Are you going to *punish* me?” Even as I say it, I can feel the fizzy sensation in my blood, the anticipation of a battle with Cayde that will inevitably end in me stripped and spanked, forced to orgasm far past my body’s limits, making me flush from my chest to my hairline.

“Don’t pretend like you don’t want it.” Cayde is much closer now, his muscled bulk almost looming over me. “I know you do. You’re probably wet already, just from the mention of me—of *us*—punishing you.”

A shiver goes through me at that, but I do my best not to show it. He’s right, of course. I can already feel the first tendrils of arousal spreading through me, making me start to ache for him, for all of them. But this is the game, and I’ve come to understand that in the darkest, most depraved parts of myself, I love it. I love the push and pull, the resistance, the way they force me to overcome it. The way they drag the pleasure out of me, transmuting pain to ecstasy, and the way it makes me feel afterwards.

If I just gave in and begged for it, it wouldn’t be nearly as fun.

“Don’t worry,” he says, his voice dropping an octave as he leans over me, those sea-green eyes capturing mine. “I set up something just for you. Dean isn’t exactly the type to take punishment for his actions, but you can take extra for him, I’m sure. And I’ll make him wait until last to be inside of you, as his price to pay. He’ll watch while Jaxon and I enjoy you for a little while, until we let him join in. How does that sound, little Saint?” His voice is almost purring now, like a predator toying with its prey, and it sends shivers of pleasure licking down my spine, my knees feeling weak.

It’s been too long. This is what I wanted, what I craved, what I knew I would need from them soon. I need this release, to let them do what they want to me, to take and take until they finally give, to feel all of it. To stop thinking, choosing, making decisions, and let them do what they wish.

It would feel so good. It’s what I need. And Cayde knows it.

He’s always known this part of me best, even better than Dean.

He reaches down, one finger trailing along my chin, and this time I can’t hide the shudder that runs through me. “I know what you want,” he murmurs, his voice dropping so that it feels like it’s just the two of us talking now. “I know what you *need*. You’ve needed it since the day you woke up here, it just had to be awoken in you. I can feel you trembling, little Saint. I know what you crave. But you’re not our pet anymore, even if we still like to call you that, now are you? You’re ours, but we’re yours too.”

That admission, from Cayde of all people, makes me feel as if my bones have turned to water. I can feel my heartbeat speeding up, my pulse fluttering in my throat, and I can feel myself shifting over to that place where I *want* more than anything, where everything fades away except for the aching need.

He holds my chin tilted up with one finger, and I know that he can see it in my eyes. “You have to ask now, little Saint,” he says, his voice rippling over my skin, dark and hungry. I can feel Dean and Jaxon’s eyes on me too, the atmosphere in the

room thickening, and I feel like prey, like the three men are waiting to pounce, to eat me alive.

I fucking love it.

I love this, the racing heartbeat, the anticipation, the feeling of being stalked and hunted and knowing that being caught will be every bit as delicious as I could possibly imagine. And it's even better now that I'm playing the game too, now that they're no longer doing it *to* me, but with me.

"You have to ask for your punishment, like a good girl." Cayde's green eyes are dark as they search mine, hungry, and I know he's been waiting for this. "If you beg, maybe we'll make it even better for you."

I swallow hard, my mouth suddenly dry, my hands shaking as I clench them together in front of me. Everything else slips away, so that there's only Cayde's eyes on mine, and the two men waiting in the wings, waiting to devour me along with him.

Waiting to make me *theirs*. But this time, more than any other, I'll possess them too.

This time will be different. It's the beginning of something, and I can see in Cayde's face that he knows it as well as I do.

He *wants* it.

I lick my lips, raising my chin so that my eyes meet his, wide and pleading, but my voice is steady when I speak. I know what I'm doing, the darkness that I'm stepping into, and I'm welcoming it with open arms.

I'm welcoming *them*.

"Please," I murmur, and I can feel the shudder that goes through Cayde at the word, see the way his eyes heat. I know he's hard as hell right now, that he wants me desperately, and I know that I have as much power over him as he does over me.

I always have.

"I want you to punish me," I say softly. "All of you. I need it."

“Are you sure, little Saint?” Cayde asks. “We won’t touch you anymore without your consent. That matters now. So one more chance to turn back. Because after this, everything changes.”

“I know.” I swallow hard, feeling the tremor that runs along my skin when he smiles down at me, cold and cruel, and I know that he’s going to make this one a night to remember. So I say it again, so that there’s no doubt.

“Please.”

ATHENA

We've never done it like this, all four of us. Never with Jaxon as an active participant. The one time he was a part of it, it was unwillingly, because Cayde ordered him to.

Not this time. He hovers briefly at the door as the three men walk into the study, finding me where Cayde ordered me to go, kneeling on the rug with my hands in my lap. I've changed out of the sandy clothing that I'd worn to the beach, and I'm wearing exactly what Cayde instructed me to—that is, nothing at all.

"I don't want to bother with stripping you down," Cayde had said when he'd accepted my plea. "Kneel in the study, completely naked. Hair braided. Wait for us to come in."

Cayde and Dean stride in first, as at ease as ever. They've never hesitated when it comes to my punishment, and I can see the tense lines in Dean's face, irritation that he's going to be made to wait. "Only you would dare tell me when I can fuck the girl that belongs to me, too," he growls at Cayde as they walk in. "I should deck you for even trying."

"Are you saying that only Athena should be punished for that little stunt that the two of you pulled?" Cayde raises an eyebrow, looking at him. "Either we're all in this together or we're not. I'm not going to fucking take a belt to your bare ass, so that's all I've got, Dean. You wait your turn, and you go last. Consider yourself lucky that I'm going to let you fuck

her while we're all still going at it, and not make you wait until she's already full of both of our cum."

A ripple of heat goes through me at that, just at the thought of it, and I squirm a little on the carpet. Cayde notices, and chuckles.

"So eager, little Saint. Don't worry, you'll get your *fill*." He emphasizes the last word, and my pulse throbs, my skin tingling with needy anticipation.

Jaxon is the last to walk in, and I see him hesitate at the door. I can see the concern in his face, and I know what he's thinking, that I won't want him to join in, after what he did to me. That it will be too fresh for him to be a part of this.

I know I'm not supposed to speak yet, now that we've started the scene. But I look at him, meeting his eyes and trying to tell him what I can't say aloud.

I forgave him. Tonight is a new beginning, for all of us. And that includes him.

Something flickers in his eyes, and I can see them heat as his gaze flicks down my body, taking in my bare skin, the braid hanging over my shoulder, my breasts hidden behind my arms in front of me and my hands clasped in my lap.

He walks into the room then, shutting the door firmly behind him, and a shiver runs through me at the sound of the door clicking into place, the lock turning.

I know that sound. It's almost a pavlovian reaction at this point, the sound of that heavy door closing and the lock turning. I know what it means, that when it opens again and I leave this room, it will be sore, bruised, full of cum, and spent from orgasms.

I would never have thought that it would bring me so much pleasure.

Dean flops into one of the chairs, his arrogant face still lined with irritation. "Can I at least fucking touch myself while I watch?" he asks, and then shakes his head. "Christ, I can't believe I'm asking one of you dickholes permission to fucking

touch my own cock. It's a good thing torching that place was fucking worth it."

Cayde smirks at him. "You know what? I'm going to enjoy this one opportunity. No. You sit there and watch, until I tell you otherwise."

Dean grunts, but a part of me thinks he's almost enjoying it. No one has ever denied Dean Blackmoor anything. Certainly not pleasure. I came the closest, and not even I could do it. A part of him, I think, is maybe even a little aroused by having to wait, by the novelty of it.

I know when it's his turn to have me, he won't be gentle about it. And just the thought of that is enough to make my already wet pussy all the more drenched, arousal dripping down the inside of my clenched thighs as I look up at Cayde as he walks towards me.

"We're going to do something new tonight, little Saint," he says with a smirk. "We're going to have some fun." He nods behind me. "Do you know what that is?"

I turn my head, and see an X shaped object behind me, larger than me, with cuffs at each point. I shake my head mutely, and Cayde chuckles.

"That's a St. Andrews cross. And you're going to get flogged, caned, and spanked on it, before we take turns fucking you. But first—"

He reaches for the edge of his t-shirt, pulling it over his head. "Might as well join in, Jaxon. We're going to warm her up before the real fun starts."

I can see Jaxon's brief hesitation, and I remember what he'd said to me earlier, that he'd shared women with Dean and Cayde before but never one he loved. I know that Cayde and Dean have no idea that those words have passed between us, and I want to keep it that way for right now. I'm sure that he does, too. But I also know that if he can't share me with them, this won't work.

My heart speeds up in my chest, my pulse almost choking me. *If he walks out of the room, what am I going to do?* More

than anything, I want him to stay. I want him to do this for me, to be a part of this. I can't be with Dean and Cayde, and then Jaxon on our own. I know that the other two won't stand for it, and I know that Jaxon can't keep himself apart forever. Whatever struggles he's having with the other two men, they're going to have to be set aside if we're going to win. We have to all work together.

And that begins now, tonight. In this room.

"Fuck it," Jaxon says finally, aloud. "I guess we're all in this together, right? So that means me being a part of these games, too."

Cayde nods, glancing at the other man. I let my gaze rake over Cayde as he does, taking in the broad muscle of his shoulders and chest, stockier than the other two men, muscle built in the weight room and on the rugby field. I know the power in those arms, that body, the way he can pin me down, hold me in place, do anything he wants to me. It sends another ripple of anticipation through me, and I bite down on a moan of need, wanting them to hurry up and touch me. To give me *something*.

Jaxon reaches for his own shirt then, ripping it over his head in one quick motion as if he's getting it over with, and I know this is making him as uncomfortable as it did that first time, uncomfortable and aroused all at once. In a way I'm glad, because it reminds me that the Jaxon who pinned me up against the porch and hurt me, violated me, isn't the real Jaxon. It was some other version of him, poisoned by rage and grief, and this is the real him, the man that I love.

When he and Cayde start to strip off their pants at the same time, I don't know where to look first. Cayde's joggers sliding over his hips makes my mouth go dry all over again, his thick, fat cock springing out already hard, just as I'd known it would be. I feel an answering pulse between my thighs, my fingers clenching together with the urge to reach for him, but then there's Jaxon, stripping off his jeans.

Jaxon, lean and handsome, his hipbones appearing as the jeans slide over his slim hips, and his cock appears too, half-

hard, the piercing glinting in the light. He stiffens the moment he notices my eyes on him, his cock lurching as it thickens and rises, and I can't stop the moan that slips from my mouth this time, a shiver rippling down my spine as I look at the two men standing in front of me. And there's still one left, sitting petulantly to my left, waiting his turn.

"You're going to suck both of us, to start," Cayde says, his voice dark and thickening with desire. "And if you do a good enough job, little Saint, if you're a very good girl, then we'll move on to your punishment and we'll make sure there's some pleasure in there for you, too."

"As much as you can take," Jaxon adds, and I can hear the desire in his voice too, see him slipping into his role. It doesn't come as naturally to him as it does to the other two, but it's there, and as his arousal grows so does his ability to dominate me. "I want you coming until you can't take anymore, Athena."

"Eventually," Cayde adds darkly, smirking as he steps towards me. "First, you're going to show us what that smart mouth of yours is really meant for."

Outside of this room, I would have had something to say about that. But in here, all of that slips away. I don't have to fight back, don't have to hold my own, because these three guys already know what I'm capable of. They know that I'll give them back as good as I get, when we're done and we step back outside. In here, there's nothing for me to prove.

All I have to do is submit, and accept the pain and pleasure in turn that they can offer me.

Cayde wraps his hand around his hard cock, his feet spread apart as he stops in front of me, his cockhead nearly brushing my lips. "Open that pretty mouth for me, little Saint. I want to feel it on my cock."

I obey, parting my lips and leaning forward, brushing them over the velvet tip of him. I can taste the salty tang of his pre-cum already, beading on the tip, and I run my tongue along the ridge just beneath it, feeling the shudder that ripples through him. I've been with him long enough that I know what he

likes, the spots that give him the most pleasure, the touches and rhythms that he likes. I know it well enough to tease him, too, and I do that now, rubbing the flat of my tongue over that ridge and the small soft divot of flesh just beneath his cockhead, knowing that it drives him insane.

Cayde knows exactly what I'm doing, too, which makes it all the better, the push and pull between us. His eyes darken as the pleasure of it hits him, his hand tightening around his erection, and he grins, his hips arching forward as he shoves himself between my lips, forcing me to take more of him into my mouth. I have to work to accommodate him, my lips pressing tightly against his swollen flesh as he stuffs himself deeper into my mouth, grunting with pleasure as he feels the wet heat engulfing him, my saliva dripping down his flesh as I struggle to take more of it.

“Good girl,” he murmurs, his hand sliding around the back of my head as he steps closer. “Take it all. That’s right, little Saint. Take more of my fat cock...down your fucking throat... ah!” He grunts again as he slips into the back of my throat and I choke, my muscles clamping down around him as I struggle not to panic, the sensation of being unable to breathe almost too much. I’ve been here before, I know that I’m not actually suffocating, and I know what will please Cayde. Out of the corner of my eye I can see Jaxon stroking himself slowly, his desire overtaking him as he watches me take Cayde’s cock hungrily, waiting his turn. It’s been a long time since he’s had my mouth, and I know that he wants it. I’ve never sucked him in front of the others, never done anything to him other than lie there while he sprayed his cum over my stinging flesh while Cayde and Dean were present, and a rush of adrenaline bursts over my skin at the thought. I can see from his face that he’s thinking about it too, about fucking me while the others watch, and I can tell that it’s turning him on.

Something about that only adds to my arousal, that he wants it despite himself, just like me. Out of the three of them, Jaxon and I are the most alike, and the idea of sharing that experience with him excites me as much as I can tell it does him.

Cayde's hand tightens in my hair. "Eyes on me when you suck my cock, little Saint," he growls, and I moan, the sound muffled by all of his thick length shoved between my lips. He holds me there, my nose nearly grazing his abdomen as my throat tightens around him, my tongue rubbing against the underside of his cock in an effort to suck him as he fucks my throat slowly, hips rocking as he holds me in place for his pleasure.

And *fuck*, I love it. I'm so fucking wet, drenched, my hands gripping my thighs as I brace myself, forcing myself not to reach between my legs and rub my aching clit without permission. I'm dying to be touched, my heart racing with the anticipation of it, and I know that I have much longer to wait before I'll be allowed to have what I need the most.

Cayde finally pulls himself free, and I gasp for breath, gagging as I look at his cock hovering in front of me, wet and glistening. He smirks at me as he grips it, sliding his fist along the slick length, and he steps to one side, nodding at me. "Take a turn, Jaxon," he grunts, still slowly stroking himself as Jaxon steps forward, his face taut and eager as he angles himself towards my mouth.

I lean forward, wanting more, wanting the feeling of having my mouth filled again. I flick my tongue out, darting it over his piercing, licking the sensitive head. I know he loves it when I play with the jewelry there, pushing and teasing it with my tongue, and I do that for several seconds as he groans, his hand squeezing his cock as he lets me play with him.

"Open your mouth," he groans, his dark eyes meeting mine, the long shock of his dark hair falling to one side of his face as his hips thrust forward. "Take all of it, Athena. Now."

I know what he wants, and I don't know if I can do it. He's as thick as Cayde and longer, with the piercing on top of it, but I open my mouth anyway, obeying him as smoothly as I do the others. I'm his to dominate tonight too, his to command, and I slide my tongue out, letting him thrust forward, every inch of his length pushing into my mouth and down my throat as swiftly as he'd thrust himself between my legs if he were fucking me there instead.

For a second, it's almost too much. The sensation of his piercing suddenly in the back of my throat, along with so much of his cock, almost overwhelms me. And he knows it, because his hand is suddenly at the back of my head, steadying me as he pushes forward, his face dark and tight with lust.

"You can do it, Athena," he growls, and a shudder ripples through me at that. I *want* to, I want to take it all for him, and I look up at him wide-eyed as his hand presses against the back of my head, his tall, leanly muscled form leaning over me as he groans aloud with pleasure.

"*Fuck*," he hisses through clenched teeth as he slides into my throat. "Fuck that's good. That's right, baby. Take that fucking cock. Do it. You're such a fucking good girl, Athena. You're so fucking good at it. Yesss—"

My thighs squeeze together, pleasure rippling over me and through me until I feel as if I could almost come just from that, just from the sound of Jaxon's voice thickly praising me as I swallow his cock. I want it so badly, I want *him*, and I do everything I can to take all of it, until my nose is touching his skin and I can breathe in the scent of him, warm and male, and it turns me on so much that I'm trembling as I look up at him.

His expression is taut with lust, and he groans as I slide back off of him, my tongue twisting around his length as I do so. I take him once more, and then Cayde is standing next to him, his cock thrust out for me to switch between the two of them.

I hear Dean groan from the other side of the room, and I glance over to see him rubbing his hands over his thighs, the bulge of his hard cock clearly showing, straining against his fly. He looks hungry, watching me suck first Cayde's cock and then Jaxon's, going back and forth between the two of them, bobbing up and down as I suck at them both eagerly, wanting more.

"God, that feels so fucking good." Cayde pushes himself into my mouth once more, Jaxon right next to him waiting to rub his cockhead over my outstretched tongue when Cayde slides out. "I think it's time for something a little more exciting though."

He reaches for me then, grasping my wrist and pulling me upright. He spins me almost immediately, both of my wrists suddenly behind my back and held in his grasp as Cayde moves me forwards, towards the St. Andrew's cross.

The wood of it feels cool against my skin as he pushes me against it, and I gasp at the sensation of it against my breasts, all of my skin more sensitive than usual. I feel a long-fingered hand that I know is Jaxon's on one of my wrists, lifting it up to fasten it to one side as Cayde buckles the strap around my right wrist, and then they both kneel down, spreading my legs and binding my ankles at the bottom of it.

I'm trembling with how aroused I am, my body bound and splayed out for them on the X-shaped frame, and I hear Cayde chuckle as he stands up, his hand resting on the back of my thigh.

"Fuck, you're wet. I can see it from here." He runs his fingers up my inner thigh and I shudder, especially when he steps sideways so that I can see him lick my arousal off of them, his eyes dark and hungry as he looks at me. "You taste fucking delicious," he groans. "I bet you'd like me to lick that wet pussy for you, wouldn't you? You'd like my tongue on your clit?"

I can't pretend anymore. "Yes," I gasp, my hands tightening as I shudder against the wood, bracing myself in the straps. "God, please Cayde, I need it—"

"Such a horny little pet." Cayde chuckles. "Not yet. You've been a good girl so far. Take the rest of your punishment as well as you took our cocks, and you'll get fucked until you can't come any more, little Saint."

I moan at that, my thighs flexing as they try to clench together, but I can't anymore. My legs are splayed open, the frame tilted forward just enough that I know they can see my swollen folds between my legs, glistening with arousal for them, dripping down the insides of my thighs. I try to rub my hips against the frame, to get some friction against my clit, but the sharp, stinging slap of Cayde's broad palm against my ass tells me immediately that I won't get away with that.

“Bad pet,” he growls, his hand squeezing my ass where his palm struck me. “No pleasure for you until we tell you otherwise. You’ll wait longer for it, now.”

I moan helplessly as I watch him cross the room to the cabinet where I know the canes and crops and other implements are, and I watch him choose two, striding back towards me. “Cane or flogger?” he asks Jaxon, and another shiver runs through me, remembering the cane against my clit and Jaxon’s cum on my thighs.

Jaxon hesitates. “Flogger,” he says finally, and I wince, because I know that Cayde with the cane is the most expert, blistering pain that I’ll experience, followed by pleasure.

“You first, then,” Cayde says, almost disappointedly, and I let out a sigh of relief. I can’t imagine both Jaxon and Dean following the cane.

I can feel myself tense with anticipation as I hear the swish of the flogger through the air. Cayde is standing to one side, angled so that I can see him slowly stroking himself, watching as the first lash of the flogger hits my ass. Jaxon didn’t ask me to count, so I don’t. I just dig my nails into the wood, bracing myself as the heat blooms over my skin, the strips of leather catching and snapping. Jaxon isn’t as practiced with it as the others are, but he still knows how to strike, spreading out the lashes so that they go across each cheek, landing from top to bottom, down to where the curve of my thighs meets my ass. The leather snaps against the folds of my pussy then, grazing it, and I cry out as pain and pleasure together burst over my skin, sending me shuddering with a convulsion that’s close to an orgasm.

“Don’t you dare fucking come, little Saint,” Cayde says warningly, his hand squeezing his cock as he thrusts his hips into his hand, lazily fucking his fist the way I know he wants to be fucking me right now. “Not until we tell you that you can.”

I don’t know how many lashes Jaxon gives me, or how many he planned for me to have. I’m not sure if he even knows—I don’t think Jaxon is the type to plan out a specific count in his

head. No, Jaxon is the type to just watch me as he does it, enjoying the reddening of my flesh, waiting until it turns the shade that he wants to look at as he squeezes me between his hands while he slips his cock inside of me.

Just the thought sends another brilliant shudder of pleasure through me.

I'm not sure how much longer Jaxon's flogging goes on. At some point it stops being pain, each strike of the leather against my heated skin sending pure pleasure over me. When it finally stops and full seconds pass without anything grazing my skin, I see Cayde let go of his cock, and I know what comes next.

"Ordinarily I would let Dean go next," Cayde says, his voice a deep, anticipatory growl as he circles behind me, his movements almost predatory. "The cane should really be saved for last. But since we're making him wait, I suppose that makes it my turn."

He takes up his spot behind me, and I can hear the appreciative noise that he makes deep in his throat as he looks at the landscape that Jaxon left him. "Twenty strokes with the cane, Athena. I expect you to count these. And five of them are going between your legs. God help you if you come," he adds, and I can hear the smirk in his voice. "I know how much you love the cane on your clit."

Fuck. My head drops forwards, my forehead pressing against the wood. I don't know how I'll make it through this without coming. My body is trembling with both fear and anticipation, and I force myself to breathe, my hips already arching with the desperate need to feel *something* against my aching, pulsing clit. It's the most maddening, delicious, agonizing, sweetest torture, and I both want more of it and to beg for them to stop.

There's no tapping out, either. No safe word in here with them. When I step inside that door, it means I'm trusting them to know me well enough not to push me too far, and that in and of itself is part of the release for me, not having to decide whether or not to call it. Knowing that once I step inside this room, my surrender is complete. Whatever happens outside of

it stays there, and in here, there's only clinging to my sanity until the boys—*my* boys—decide I've had enough of the pain and decide to give me all the pleasure I can take.

"You know the drill, little Saint," Cayde growls from behind me. "Count them. Oh, and Dean?" he calls across the room. "Start thinking about what you want to use on her. You're on deck."

I hear the rustling of clothes, and I know Dean is finally stripping, but I don't look. I can't. It's all I can do to focus on what's happening now, on the first strike of the cane across my already burning ass, on calling it out so that it counts, and the tally doesn't go higher. Twenty is at the absolute limit of what I think I can take from the cane, and Cayde knows that.

"Fuck, your ass looks gorgeous when it's red," Cayde groans, bringing down the cane a second time across my other cheek. "You've learned to take it so well, little Saint." He brings it down again, this time across the base of my ass, and I cry out.

"Three!" I exclaim, a sobbing moan bursting from my lips as I jerk in the straps. "Fuck, Cayde!"

"Only counting, little Saint," he warns. "Or I'll start over."

Oh god no. At five, my ass is already smarting, the pain starting to radiate down my thighs, and if he starts over I think I'll die. *Six, seven*—I don't think I'll be sitting down for a day or two. But with each stroke, the pain of it blossoms across my skin and then warms into something else, a pleasurable heat that makes everything between my legs feel swollen and heavy and needy, my clit throbbing as I twitch and jerk in the straps, gasping as I call out each stroke.

Out of the corner of my eye I can see Jaxon, his face taut as he slowly runs his fingers up and down his shaft, occasionally stopping to toy with his piercing, rubbing his palm over his cockhead as he watches me. When Cayde hits ten, he moves towards me, and I can see from the look on his face that he's reached the point where he wants me so badly that it's nearly unbearable.

The feeling is mutual, I think dryly, crying out the eleventh stroke as my back arches, another sobbing moan spilling from my lips. I feel hollow, aching, needing to be filled, fucked, and I can see from the look in Jaxon's eyes that he wants desperately to give me exactly that.

He reaches up, his long fingers grasping my chin and turning my head so that my cheek is pressed against the wood, my eyes focused on his. Between strokes, he presses his lips to mine, pulling back quickly enough for me to call out my count, and then bringing his mouth back down.

I gasp, the sweetness of the caress at direct odds with the ferocity of the cane on my ass, and the two different sensations push my body even higher, until it feels as if I'm almost floating, suspended in an endless push and pull without relief, without satisfaction, my body on the edge of an orgasm that I'm constantly being denied. I'm terrified that I'll come when Cayde starts to cane me between my thighs, that I won't be able to stop myself, and I don't know what the punishment is after that. I know that holding my pleasure back is part of my submission to them, part of the game, and I *want* to, deep down. I want to wait, to feel that explosion that makes my body feel as if it's coming apart at the seams when I'm finally allowed to come.

But in this moment, I just think I'd give anything in the world to come.

Jaxon's fingers caress the side of my breast, down my rib cage, teasing me as he strokes my skin in small, swift touches that make my skin twitch and shiver, his fingers occasionally trailing down all the way to my hips, the flat plane of my abdomen, and that sends deeper shudders through me, because he's so *close*.

Fifteen. I moan out the number, gasping when I realize that this means the next strike will land between my thighs. I jerk in the straps, on the verge of begging Cayde to stop, telling him that I can't take it anymore, when Jaxon's hand tightens on my chin.

“You’re so close to being done,” he whispers, his lips brushing over mine again. “You can do it, Athena. I believe in you. You’re doing so well.”

I open my eyes, startled at the way he phrased it, but I can see in his face that he meant it, that he’s proud of me. That my ability to take their punishment, to submit to them and take what they need to give me, to give them their release by allowing them the use of my body, is something that they see as a *strength*, not a weakness. My boys don’t see me as weak because I’m strapped to this frame, taking the lashes and shuddering from pain and pleasure and need.

They see me as strong, as strong as they are. They respect me.

I’m not their pet anymore. Not even their toy.

They *need* me. Because the same way they’ve tapped into a dark part of me that I never knew I needed to have satisfied, I’ve given them the ultimate outlet for their fantasies. I’m as perfect for them as they’ve turned out to be for me.

Something about that knowledge makes me see everything differently.

“I love you.” Jaxon mouths it against my lips silently, so that no one else hears. But I can feel it, feel the outline of the letters against my mouth, just as the next strike of the cane lands on my inner thigh.

“Sixteen!” I gasp it out, and then the next as it lands on the opposite thigh. Three left, and I know where they’re going.

“Get ready, little Saint,” Cayde growls, but nothing could have prepared me for the sensation of the cane striking my clit, not even having experienced it before. I’m tender there, swollen and throbbing, so aroused that every nerve feels exposed, and when the cane strikes directly between my legs, snapping against my clit, every muscle in my body goes rigid, my back arching hard as I scream.

I’m so close to coming that I almost can’t stop it.

“Please,” I sob out, shaking, almost crying with pain and pleasure and desperate need. “Please, I’m going to come. I

can't take it again. I'm going to come so hard, I can't stop it, I need it, please please *please*—”

“Not yet,” Cayde growls. “Two more, and then it's Dean's turn. And then, if you've been a very good girl, you'll come until you can't stand it anymore.”

“Two more,” Jaxon whispers, stroking my cheek, his lips brushing over mine again. “Just hang on, Athena. It'll be so much better if you wait. Just hang onto that orgasm for me, baby. I'm gonna make it so good for you if you do.”

He's stroking himself slowly now with his other hand, long slow strokes, his fist flexing around his thick length, and I can see how hard it is, how difficult it is for him to hold back. “I can't wait to be inside of you,” he whispers as the next strike hits between my legs, and I cry out *nineteen*, shuddering. I'm past pain now. It's only pleasure, every muscle in my body clenched with the effort not to come. “I can't wait to fuck you, baby. I can't wait to feel how wet you are, feel you come on my cock, oh *fuck*.” He strokes a little faster, gasping as he kisses me again. “One more, Athena. You can take one more.”

It's not just one more, of course, because Dean is next. But I listen to him instead, telling myself *one more*, every muscle flexed to hold back the orgasm that's on the verge of overtaking me as the cane snaps through the air once more, the whistle of it telling me it's coming just before it strikes hard and fast between my thighs, stinging across my wet and swollen folds, the tip striking my clit perfectly.

“Fuck!” I scream aloud, jerking against the straps hard. “Fuck, Cayde, *twenty*, fuck, fuck!”

I feel his palm on my ass cheek, smoothing over it, caressing my skin. “Good girl, little Saint,” he croons. “You took that so well. I can't wait to fuck that ass.”

Oh god. I shiver at that thought. I knew it was coming, that they'd want my ass as well as my mouth and my pussy, that tonight wouldn't end without them fucking me in every hole. But just thinking about it right now makes me terrified and aroused all at once.

“Ready for your turn, Dean?” Cayde asks, his tone amused, his hand still resting possessively on my ass.

“Oh, fuck yeah,” Dean growls. “I’ve waited long enough for this. But I don’t want her ass.”

I hear him striding towards me, and the snap of a leather belt in his hands, just like the first time he bent me over the couch. It sends a shudder of need through me, but nothing like the tremor that I feel when he speaks again, his voice low and dark and full of hungry lust.

“Turn her around,” he says. “I want the front.”

ATHENA

Part of me is relieved that my ass will get a break, and another part of me is shivering with anticipation and fear, because I know what that means. At least part of his lashing will involve my pussy again, and I don't know how much more I can take without orgasming. I'm already so close.

"I get to touch her when I'm done," Dean says from behind me. "I'll wait until last to fuck her, but I've got plans, and you're not telling me otherwise, Cayde."

"Fine," Cayde growls, and I feel his hand and Jaxon's at my wrists and ankles, unbinding me. They turn me on the X, so that my back is against it, immediately redoing the straps so that I'm bound exactly the same way, only this time I'm splayed out facing them. It feels even more vulnerable like this. From behind, they could only see my wet folds, most of the view taken up by my ass. But like this, all of me is on display—my face, streaked with needy tears and gasping, my breasts, every inch of my body, down to my swollen and dripping pussy, spread open so that I know they can see every bit of it, from my throbbing, bruised clit down to my aching entrance.

"We're going to fuck you like this when Dean is done," Cayde tells me, his hand sweeping over my breasts, pinching my nipple until I arch upwards into his hand with a cry. His other hand slides down my stomach, and for a second I think he's going to touch my pussy, run his fingers over my clit or even inside of me, and I'm torn between begging him to and

pleading for him to stop. If he touches me, I'm going to come. There's no way I can stop it. The only thing keeping me from coming from the cane on my pussy is a combination of sheer will, and the lingering pain. If there's only pleasure, I won't be able to stop it.

"I'm running out of patience," Dean growls, and Cayde lets out a long-suffering sigh, stepping back so that Dean can take his place in front of me, and I get a good look at him for the first time since they came into the room.

He's just as gorgeous as the other two, tall and leanly muscled and arrogant. A runner's body, where Cayde's is a jock's and Jaxon's is a fighter's. His handsome face is taut and stern, his ice blue eyes bright with the anticipation of what's to come, and I can see how much he wants me, the way his eyes rake over me as if he's never seen anything more delicious, more beautiful than me in his entire life. All three of them make me feel that way now, like a rare delicacy to be devoured, like the answer to their prayers, like a temple dedicated to all their darkest desires. I don't feel small and embarrassed and ashamed anymore. The flush on my skin isn't humiliation any longer, it's elation, because I don't feel like their slave or their toy anymore.

I'm not their sacrifice. I'm their fucking goddess, taking their punishment and turning it into pleasure, taking their most depraved needs and my own so that we can all revel in it together, like some kind of dark Roman orgy, until we're satiated with our release.

He strokes his cock as he strides towards me. It's rock hard, jutting up from between his lean hips, as long as the others if not quite as thick, but still impressive. His belt is folded over in one hand, and I shiver at the sight of it, knowing what's to come.

Dean comes closer than the others, since he doesn't have as much range. It feels more intimate. He's so close that I can almost feel the heat of his body, his cock nearly brushing me. "Don't bother counting," he tells me silkily, his voice wrapping around me like smoke, thick and seductive. "Just feel it, Athena. Feel the pain and the pleasure. I want you so

wet that you're dripping on the floor by the time I'm done. I want you to come the instant you're touched, but not until then. I want you to be mine."

Mine. I look down at him, at the arrogant lord that I gave my virginity to, the one who won a town and then gave it up because I demanded it. I hold his gaze as he swings the belt for the first time, bringing it across my right breast, and the crack of the leather against the curve of it makes me cry out.

Each of the boys is so different in the way they punish me. Jaxon does it without a plan, until he feels he and I both have had enough, just the way he does everything else in his life. Cayde chooses the maximum amount of pain, taking out his inner rage in measured, hard strokes that are meant to hurt and pleasure all at once, making me count because he loves power over me, loves reminding me that in the end, he's in control. He needs that, that sense of control, needs my submission in a deep, primal way.

But Dean is measured and exact, in control completely, just like everything else. He doesn't need me to count, doesn't need the verbal assurance of my submission to him, because it's assumed. He's the lord of Blackmoor after all, in title if not in reality anymore, and this is his *right*. This is what he's owed.

He owned me once, and even now that I'm free, he knows that I was made to be his.

What he never knew until recently is that he was made to be mine, too.

I can see that in his face as the belt strikes me, how it's different this time. The blows aren't placed for the most pain anymore, but also where he knows they'll pleasure me, the snap of the leather striking my nipples every few strokes, sending electric bursts of pleasure out over my skin. His face is taut with need, his eyes raking over my body hungrily, and there's no detachment in his face any longer. I can see his chest heaving, his muscles flexed and taut as he moves the belt to my thighs, striking the soft insides of them. I can see the way his cock lurches, pre-cum dripping from the tip of it, and I

know he's holding himself back with the greatest effort. This is an exercise in self-control for him as much as it is in submission for me, reminding himself that he hasn't lost all of it just because he's rebelled with the rest of us.

Once upon a time, I was his gift, his trophy, his slave. I was his *right*, a virgin given to her lord like some medieval tribute. But now if he's a fallen lord I'm his fallen queen, and I can see the reverence in his face as he lashes me, the way he's burning up for me, as overcome with need as Cayde and Jaxon are in their own ways.

"God, Athena," he groans, and I shudder, because I've never heard him say my name in here exactly like that before. *Pet* is what he usually calls me, his nickname for me like Cayde's is *little Saint*, but when he breathes my name it sounds like nothing I've ever heard from his lips before. "Christ you're so fucking beautiful." He brings the belt down higher on my inner thigh, once on either side, and I can see him panting, his cock so hard that it's almost visibly throbbing, reddened and nearly touching his abdomen it's so stiff, and I know that he's desperate to be inside of me. "You look so fucking gorgeous like this, bound for me." He's close enough now that his words are low and quiet, meant only for me, and I stop watching the others, stroking themselves as they watch Dean belt me. The room narrows down to the two of us, and I can feel myself breathing faster too, my body shuddering with something that isn't quite an orgasm but is so close that I can hardly tell the two apart. "I'm going to fuck you like this," he whispers. "While you can still feel my belt on your skin. I'm going to fuck you and Cayde isn't going to fucking stop me. I need you on my cock, Athena, I fucking *need* you—" his icy eyes are bright with need, desperate with it, and he brings the belt down on my thighs again, his body shuddering with the effort to hold back.

"Fuck!" he groans aloud, and the belt comes up between my thighs, cracking over my swollen pussy, between my folds, against my clit. He strikes me again, his hand going around his cock, stroking himself with his left hand as he brings the belt up against my pussy for a third time. "Fuck, Athena, two more, god—"

I can see his self-control cracking, and it's driving me wild too, because I've never seen Dean like this, except for the night that we burned down the club together. This is the man underneath the carefully curated façade, the one that his family did their best to beat down and chain and imprison under arrogance and duty and formalities and a carefully planned and plotted life.

This is the man that's mine. The one who told his father to go fuck himself, who torched a building with me, who fucked me out in the open while it burned up against his car. The one who broke his engagement, who has hurt me and pleased me and made me into something altogether different before either of the others did.

Another. And another. And then, just before I can't hold back any longer, when my body is trembling and shaking, welted and red from his belt, my skin burning and the orgasm on the verge of bursting the seams of my skin with no way to hold it back, Dean throws the belt aside, surging forward.

"Fuck Cayde," he snarls. "Fuck them all."

And then his hand is on my chin, hard, dragging my mouth to his as he steps between my legs and shoves his cock into me in one long, hot, hard slide, his other hand on my hip as he presses me back hard against the frame.

"Come for me, Athena," he growls, low and hotly against my mouth, and then his teeth sink into my lower lip as he starts to thrust.

Oh god. I scream as I come apart, the orgasm I've been clinging to exploding with a force that threatens to make my vision go dark. The pain of his teeth in my lip and the pleasure of his cock inside of me combine and explode in a conflagration of hot, sweeping ecstasy, his fingers digging into my hip, his pelvis grinding against my bruised and swollen clit, and I want to cling to him, want to wrap my arms and legs around him, but I can't. I'm bound to the frame, unable to even touch him anywhere except my stinging, burning, oversensitive skin, lashed until I'm a raw and open nerve, and it's all pleasure. I can feel him rubbing against every spot

where his belt struck, my reddened and welted ass scraping against the wood, his muscled thighs slamming into my lashed ones as he fucks me hard and fast, with violent punishing thrusts that hit the very depths of me every single time.

His fingers are digging into my jaw, prying my mouth open, his tongue thrusting into my mouth with every stroke of his cock, and somewhere in the kiss I can hear him moaning against my mouth, his body shuddering as he drives himself towards his own climax.

“Fucking hell,” I hear Cayde mutter from somewhere. “Can’t fucking tell him anything—” but if there’s more or if Jaxon replies, I don’t hear it. I don’t hear anything else, because Dean is whispering against my mouth as he plunges into me, whispering words I never thought I’d hear him say.

“I love you, Athena,” he murmurs, his body pressed hard against mine, his cock surging inside of me in hard thrusts that fill me, open me, bring me shuddering and gasping towards the edge of a second orgasm. “Fuck, I love you, I don’t know what you fucking did to me, but god, I fucking love you, I love you—”

He’s repeating it over and over like a mantra, growling it against my mouth, between kisses, and then he lets go of my chin, both of his hands squeezing my hips until it’s almost painful, holding me in place as he goes up on his toes, driving into me harder than ever in quick, short thrusts that keep him inside of me, grinding against me, his mouth never leaving mine as he gasps out his pleasure.

“Fuck, I’m going to come, come for me again Athena, *fuck* —”

He’s grinding against my clit, and I feel it rise up sharp and fast, hard on the heels of the first one, my body still quivering with the aftershocks of the first. I’ve never known Dean to come so fast. He must have been painfully close too, because as I clench down hard around him, screaming my pleasure into his mouth, I feel him go rock-hard, and then the hot rush of him inside of me, a groan tearing from his lips as he comes. He jerks against me, holding me in place with a grip stronger

than anything I've ever felt, his hips bucking against mine as he tears his mouth away from mine, and then his lips are on my neck, his teeth in my throat.

He sucks hard on my flesh, his teeth sinking into my skin as he shudders, his cock still throbbing inside of me, filling me, his cum already dripping down my thighs as pleasure ripples through him. The noises coming from him are like nothing I've ever heard, as if his soul is being ripped out of him, and I'm not entirely sure that his teeth in my neck haven't drawn blood before it's over, his muscled frame trembling against me.

And then, to my utter shock, he drops to his knees in front of me.

"Christ, Dean," Cayde mutters, and Dean makes a sound that's almost a snarl, his hands still on my hips.

"Fucking wait your turn," he snaps. "You made me wait too fucking long. You two can fight over who gets her next, but I'm not fucking done yet."

And then, before I can fully process what he's doing, his mouth is between my legs.

It's not gentle. This isn't him licking my pussy to a slow and sweet orgasm. This is him forcing more pleasure from me, sucking it out of me, demanding my body's submission to him in pleasure as much as in pain. His lips are fastened around my clit, drawing it into his mouth, bruised and swollen and sensitive from two orgasms already, and I know this is only the beginning. Dean is going to make me come for him until I can't anymore, and then there's two of them still to go, determined to wear my body out until I can't give them anything else. His tongue lashes at my clit, his fingers thrusting up into my already used entrance, and I feel the vibration of his moan against my flesh as my pussy convulses around his fingers, his cum dripping out of me over his hand.

He's not eating me out, he's devouring me, and I know he's the only one who's going to do this to me tonight. I very much doubt Cayde or Jaxon are going to wind up with their mouth between my legs with Dean's cum already inside of me, and I

arch forwards, wanting all of it, the hot lash of his tongue and the wetness of his mouth. It's so fucking good, almost too much, and I arch my back as the orgasm hits me, straining at the straps holding me to the frame as I buck against his face, coming hard on his tongue. I want to squeeze my thighs around his face, grind against him, but there's only so much I can do. He has two fingers thrusting inside of me, curling, rubbing at the sensitive spot that pushes me even higher, and I'm nearly crying with the pleasure of it, the sensory overload almost too much.

He keeps going until it's not so much an orgasm anymore as a full-body tremor, shaking in the bonds holding me to the frame. Slowly, Dean pulls back, running his tongue over my quivering clit once more before rising slowly to his feet, an arrogant smile on his face. He's half-hard again, his cock hanging thick and swollen between his thighs, and I know he'll fuck me again before the night is over, and I know exactly where it will be.

"Your turn, boys," he says, backing up and giving them the same arrogant, lordly smirk. "See if you can follow that."

Jaxon laughs, his hand still lazily grazing his dick. He's on the sofa, watching and willing to wait his turn despite how hard I can tell he is, but Cayde looks pissed. "I told you to fucking wait until I told you otherwise," he snarls at Dean, looking as if he wants to deck him. "I didn't tell you you could shoot your load in her yet."

Dean laughs, a deep, dark sound that says clearly that he might have given up his claim, but he isn't going to be ordered around. It sends a shiver through me even as I'm hanging in the straps on the frame, my body already weak from three violent orgasms, because it's the laugh of a man who knows he has power, even if he's choosing not to exercise it.

"You don't own her either, Cayde. None of us do. She wanted my cock and I wanted to give it to her. I'm done for now, so you two can decide who goes next."

Cayde's expression is almost violent, his fists clenched, and Dean chuckles again.

“You want to fight me, go ahead,” he says, still smirking. “But there’s a naked girl over there, tied up and still wanting our cocks, so if you’d rather punch me than fuck her, that seems like a you problem.”

Cayde clenches his teeth, and I can see the ripple of fury through him. It terrifies me and arouses me all at once, because I know that he’s not going to punch Dean. He wants to, but he won’t. Any second now, that rage is going to be directed at me, and I know I’m about to get fucked hard all over again.

God, I want it.

I had the sweet, sensual sex that I needed with Jaxon this morning. I know that’s why he’s still sitting there, willing to wait, because he’s had me three times already since I woke up with him in my room. He’s going to let the others have their fill, take it all out on me, and then he’ll be the one to finish up, the last one inside of me. He’d rather be last than first, because that’s what I’ll remember more.

That’s what I’ll go to bed thinking of.

Cayde crosses the room to me in two strides, his face taut and angry, his green eyes dark with rage and lust. His eyes rake over me, my reddened and welted skin, my swollen pussy and thighs streaked with my arousal and Dean’s cum, and he laughs, a dark and vicious sound.

This is the Cayde in the locker room, in the hallway, the one who wants to hurt me and possess me. Because he knows I can take it.

Because he knows there’s just as much rage in me.

He surges forwards, his thick cock pressed between us, hot and throbbing, and his hand goes straight to my throat, beneath my chin, his fingers pressing into the soft flesh there. His thumb is on the mark Dean left on my neck and I cry out with pain when it squeezes. “You like that?” he asks, his voice thick with lust. “You like my hand around your throat, don’t you, little Saint? Did you like him fucking you?” His thumb digs into the mark harder, and I know it’s on purpose.

“Did you like him marking you?” he snarls, his face very close to mine. “Did you like him licking your pussy with his cum inside of you? He wanted to eat you *so* bad. I’m gonna make you come too, little Saint. But it’ll be with my cock and nothing else. I’m not licking up some other man’s cum. I’m going to fuck you, and then when Jaxon is done with your pussy, I’m going to fuck your ass. You’re going to end tonight with my cum all over you, so you remember that there’s three men you belong to.”

He surges against me, rubbing his cock against my belly, his pre-cum sticky on my skin. “I’m going to make you come so hard with nothing but my fat cock, and you’re going to beg for it like a good girl, aren’t you?” His hand tightens on my throat. “Aren’t you, little Saint?”

He lets go of me then, and I nod, gasping. His hand is on his cock again, squeezing, stroking, and my pussy clenches hard.

“Beg for it, little Saint.” Cayde smiles at me, his lips curving with a promise of everything he’s going to do to me. “Beg for my cock in your pussy. Beg so hard that I know you’d be on your knees if you could be.”

A shudder goes through me, but I lift my chin, meeting his eyes with the defiance that I know he wants. This is our dynamic, our game. We don’t fight in a ring, like Jaxon and I do. Cayde and I fight like this. A battle of wills that in the end, both of us win.

I smile right back at him.

“What are you going to do if I don’t?”

Cayde’s eyes glint, and his hand moves faster. I can see his cock twitch in his hand, see how my words affect him. “We haven’t used the crop on you tonight yet, little Saint, or the paddle. I could see how much redder your ass could get, paddle you until you’re crying. I could take that riding crop to your pussy, until you’re begging me to fuck you, and then tell you no.”

He moves closer, his hand slowing down, edging himself. “Remember that toy we used on you? I could leave you tied to

this all night, that vibrator on your clit, my cum drying on your thighs and your pussy while you come over and over all alone until your body gives out or the batteries die, whichever happens first. Just leave you here in the dark, dying to get fucked, while I go to sleep warm in my bed. That's what happens to bad girls who don't beg properly, little Saint."

I'm not entirely sure he wouldn't do it, but I don't think he would. He wants to fuck me more than he wants to punish me further, and I'm enjoying pushing his limits. "I don't think you'll do it," I hiss, licking my lips. "I think you want my pussy more than you want to torture me. And besides, Jaxon hasn't had his turn."

"Jaxon can fucking wait," Cayde snarls, lurching towards me again, his hand going around my throat once more. "I know what you're doing, little Saint. I know the game you're playing. Maybe I won't do that then. Maybe I'll just fuck your ass until I'm done, and then leave you here. How do you feel about that? No more orgasms for you." His other hand lets go of his cock then, slipping between my legs, his fingers rubbing over my clit. "How about that?"

"You're going to leave me here with just Dean's cum in my pussy?" I taunt him. "I don't think so. My pussy is yours too, right?" I lean forward, straining at the straps just enough that I can reach his face, and I dart my tongue out, running it over his lower lip before he can pull back. "So why are you making me beg? Just fucking take it, if it's yours."

I see the moment I push him over the edge, the moment he snaps. His hand tightens around my throat, squeezing almost past the point that I can take, and then he surges between my spread thighs.

"You drive me fucking insane," he snarls. "You make me feel like I'm going fucking mad."

His cock pierces me in one hard thrust, shoving inside of me, filling me and pressing against my already sensitive inner flesh, and I cry out, a choked sound that comes out as more of a gasp through the grip he has on my throat. "Fuck, Athena,"

Cayde groans, his hips jerking hard and fast. “You make me crazy.”

He leans into me, pressing me back, his heavily muscled body trapping me there, and his mouth grazes my ear, his voice growling against the shell of it as he grinds his cock into me. “You make me want to hurt you and save you all at once. You make me want to own you completely, at the same time I want to watch them fuck you until you can’t take anymore. You make me so fucking jealous, and you make me want to give you everything all at the same time—” he groans into my ear, his body shuddering against mine. “You feel so fucking good, you drive me insane.”

I tilt my head back against the frame, gasping as his cock slams into me again and again, pushing me towards another climax, the pressure of his hand on my throat only intensifying the pleasure. “You can’t fucking leave me.” He bites my earlobe hard, his lips dragging over my jaw when he lets go. “You’re mine too, Athena. If anyone tries to take you away from me, I’ll fucking kill them. I—god, Athena, the things you make me want to do, the things you make me want to fucking say, I feel fucking crazy—”

He’s gasping it now, rocking against me, his thighs hard against mine, his body pressed tightly to mine. *All of them in one day*, I think, an almost hysterical laugh threatening to bubble up from my lips, because I know what he wants to say. I know what he might not be able to say, because out of the three of them, Cayde is the one that’s both hardest to love and hardest to be loved by.

And yet, something about that makes it mean even more.

I know what he’s been through, what he’s suffered.

His mouth is against my jaw, and I turn my face so that my lips are against his ear, whispering breathlessly as he thrusts into me. “I know what you’ve been through, Cayde,” I murmur. “I know some of it, at least. I know why you’re so angry. So give it to me. I can take it.” I press my lips against his cheek, drawing in a shuddering breath as a ripple of

pleasure washes over me when he thrusts in hard, holding himself there, grinding against me. “I’m angry too.”

Cayde rears back, his gaze suddenly fixed on mine, fierce and hot. He grips my neck with both hands then, his fingers behind my head, his thumbs pressing into my throat as he tilts my head up. “You don’t know anything,” he growls. “You don’t know what happened to me.”

“I can guess,” I gasp out. “You don’t have to tell me. But I’ve been through it all too. And I’m fucking furious. So give me all of it, Cayde. I can fucking take it. Just don’t pretend I don’t fucking understand.”

He jerks backwards, still buried inside of me, something reverberating through him as he looks at me as if he’s seeing me for the first time. “Athena—”

My name slips from his mouth, his eyes still fixed on mine, and a beat passes between us, the air between us thick and hot.

And then his mouth slams down onto mine, and I forget everything else.

His hands go to my wrists, clamped down around them above the straps, his hips slamming into mine so hard that I know I’ll be bruised tomorrow. Every inch of me feels oversensitive, as if every nerve in my body is alive, and I can feel everything. All of his emotion, all of his rage, all of the boiling tangle of *feelings* inside of him, surging up in a froth that threatens to choke us both. “You’re going to destroy me,” he growls against my mouth. “You’re going to tear me apart —”

I laugh then, a sound swallowed up by his lips, because it’s him that’s tearing me apart, almost literally. His teeth sink into my lip, biting down over where Dean did exactly that, and I cry out, bucking against him. “Just say it, Cayde,” I grind out. “You can do it,” I add, mimicking his voice when he told me to take the rest of the lashes from the cane. “If I can take the punishment, you can do this. Fucking say it, while your cock is inside of me.”

“I can’t—” he shudders again, and I can feel that he’s so close, holding himself back by the thinnest thread.

“You can,” I whisper. And then, not to be cruel but because I know it’s what he needs, I whisper against his lips—“They did.”

He snarls at that, his mouth dragging away from my mouth to my throat, over the spot where Dean marked me, and I know he wants to put his own mark on me, to show everyone that I’m his too, to make sure that Dean isn’t the only one staking a claim. I know what I said cut him deep, but it’s the pain he needs, just like the pain he gave me.

This is what we do for each other.

“I know,” he whispers against my mouth when he yanks his lips away from my neck, my skin freshly bruised and throbbing. “I saw Dean say it to you. I bet Jaxon has too, I bet he said it first, the fucking pussy—”

“It’s not weak to say it,” I whisper, arching against him. “Just like taking the pain you want to give me doesn’t make me weak. I know you’re afraid—”

“I’m not fucking afraid of anything.” His fingers clutch at my chin, moving down to my throat, his cock hammering into me harder now. I’m on the verge of coming, but I’m trying not to, wanting to wait. Not to give it to him yet, or he’ll go over the edge before I force it out of him.

He needs this.

“Then say it.” I open my eyes, staring straight into his. “Tell me what you want to say, Cayde. Tell me while you make me come on your cock, while you fucking come inside of me.” I roll my hips against him as best as I can, arching so that he can feel every inch of me that can be pressed against him. “Fucking say it.”

“Athena—”

“Say it.”

“Fuck!” He rears backwards, throwing his head back as his hand around my throat shoves my head back against the frame,

his cock pumping into me hard and fast. “I can’t, Athena, *fuck*, you fucking—”

Whatever he was going to say is cut off by his lips on mine again, sucking my bloodied lip into his mouth, and I feel him explode inside of me, hot and violent, and there’s an answering tremor through me, but it’s not what he wanted.

I didn’t come for him.

And I can see it in his face when he’s spent, when he pulls back and looks at me, that he knows.

I expect anger, threats, him spitting vitriol at me. But instead there’s something defeated in his eyes, as if he was fighting a battle with himself, and lost.

Cayde slips out of me, stepping back, and for a long moment he just stares at me.

And then he spins on his heel, grabbing his clothes off of the floor and stalks out of the room, leaving me there.

There’s dead silence in the room for a moment. Dean looks as if he doesn’t know what the fuck to do, looking almost comical sitting in the armchair with his cock still hard, his hand dropping away from it to rest on his thigh.

But Jaxon stands up in one swift motion, crossing the room to me.

He’s naked, and still hard, but I don’t really notice. What I notice is his expression, taut and concerned, and when he touches me, it’s not sexual.

It’s worried.

He runs his fingers over my cheek, standing very close to me, as if he could shield me with his body. He’s almost brushing against me, but he doesn’t make a move to grope me or kiss me. Instead he gently cups my face, turning it to one side, looking at the bite marks in my lip and on my throat.

“Are you okay?” he asks gently, and I feel a sudden swell of emotion that could almost make me cry. I feel like a dozen different things all at once—exhausted and angry and confused and frustrated, and I don’t know if I want Jaxon to hold me or

make me come. I was on the verge of an orgasm with Cayde before it all went to hell, and my body is still reverberating with the sensation, even as my chest tightens with the flood of emotion.

“He was fucking out of control,” Dean says from across the room, his voice verging on pissed. “So much for running the show.”

“We’ve all been out of control with Athena at one point or another,” Jaxon says quietly. “She does that to us. But I swore I’d never hurt her again. And I think Cayde was too rough—was he?”

“I don’t know,” I whisper. I’d enjoyed it in the moment, even been close to getting off on it, and our battle of wills. But now, in the aftermath, I don’t know if I really liked it, or if I’d just enjoyed baiting him.

Jaxon’s fingers stroke my cheek, and I feel his cock brush against my belly. I know he’s still aroused, that he’s the only one who hasn’t had any relief yet. He flogged me first, only to sit and wait while the other two fucked me, still hard as hell from the blowjob and watching. And yet, I know beyond a shadow of a doubt if I asked him to take me down from this right now and let me go to bed, he would. He’s the only one I trust completely, even after everything, to do just that.

“Do you want more?” he asks softly. “Do you want something different?”

I know what he’s offering me. He’s not going to punish me anymore, or fuck me roughly like Dean and Cayde did. He’s going to give me something else.

“I don’t know,” I admit, and I truly don’t. I feel a pulse of anticipation at the thought of Jaxon touching me, inside of me, but at the same time I’m practically hanging from the frame at this point, my body too exhausted to even hold myself up. “I don’t know—” I breathe in, closing my eyes. “Part of why I like being in here is that I don’t have to decide.”

The words come out before I mean for them to, and they hang in the air between us. I’ve never admitted it out loud

before, even though I think it's understood. But Jaxon's hand presses against my face, tilting my chin up so that he can look into my eyes. His gaze holds mine for a long moment, as if he's trying to read my mind.

And then he nods.

"Okay," he murmurs.

He bends his head, and his lips brush against mine.

It's nothing like either of the others. He leans into me, kissing me deeply, his tongue sweeping inside of my mouth and tangling with mine as his cock slides between my legs, slipping along my drenched folds as he rocks his hips against me. It takes a minute for me to realize what he's doing, but when his piercing rubs against my oversensitive clit, his slick length following afterwards, back and forth, it immediately becomes clear.

"Oh god." I moan against his lips, feeling the burst of pleasure every time his piercing rubs over my clit, and I can feel him tensing too, his arousal heightening as he rubs himself against me. His hands slide over me, skimming over the welts and bruised places and touching me everywhere that feels good, caressing me as he moves faster, bumping his piercing against me again and again with quick, sharp movements that push me towards an orgasm faster than I would have expected.

"Jaxon, I'm—" I breathe in, feeling myself start to shudder, and I can feel him grin against my lips, one hand coming up to cup my face.

"That's right baby," he groans. "Come for me. Come for me, and then I'll slip inside of you, give you all of this thick cock, that's right—"

I cry out as it crashes over me, my entire body convulsing in his arms as he keeps rubbing against me, giving me the friction I need exactly where I need it, prolonging the orgasm as long as he can. The moment he feels me relax into his arms, panting as I try to catch my breath, his hand slips between us and he angles his cock so that he slides into me in one thrust,

his hand moving to my hip to brace me gently as he sinks inside of me.

Usually his thickness is an effort, but I'm so wet from multiple orgasms and full of Cayde and Dean's cum already that he slips into me easily, and I hear him groan as he starts to thrust slowly, his mouth pressed against my shoulder. "Fuck, Athena—" his hips twitch, and I can tell that he's holding himself back, trying to go slowly. "God, you feel so good. I've been watching this whole time, imagining how good it would feel, how *you* would feel, oh *fuck*—"

"You don't have to go slow," I whisper. "I can take it."

"I don't want to hurt you." He shudders, and I know it won't take him long to finish. He's been edging himself the entire time that Dean and Cayde were taking turns with me, and I can feel how hard he is, on the verge of coming already.

"You won't." I turn my head towards him, seeking out his mouth to kiss him again. "I want you to feel good, too."

Jaxon lets out a breathless groan, his mouth claiming mine again as he kisses me, deep and fierce, his tongue tangling hotly with mine as he starts to thrust harder, his cock sinking into me again and again in long, deep strokes that I can feel pushing my arousal higher too. I hadn't thought I could come again, but the feeling of his body against mine, his piercing rubbing over that spot inside of me as he fucks me slow and deep, makes me feel as if I'm on the verge of another climax. I arch my back, moaning, the sound disappearing into our kiss, and I catch a glimpse of Dean nearby, watching as he slowly strokes himself.

"You can have her mouth when I'm done, if she's okay with that," Jaxon groans, seeing Dean out of the corner of his eye too. "But I want to be the last one tonight—oh!" He cries out as my hips arch against his, my pussy clenching around him as I feel myself starting to come, and his mouth crashes down onto mine again, devouring my lips in a searing kiss as he surges against me, his cock sinking into me until he can't go any further as he starts to shudder, too.

“Oh god yes, come with me Athena, *fuck, fuck*—” he nearly shouts as I feel him go iron-hard inside of me, heat filling me as he presses me hard against the wooden frame, one arm sliding around my waist to hold me against him as we come together, moaning helplessly with the pleasure of it.

We stay like that for a long moment, Jaxon holding my trembling body against him as he comes down from the orgasm panting, and then finally he slips out of me, still catching his breath.

Slowly and carefully, he undoes the straps at my wrists and ankles, and I catch a glimpse of Dean over his shoulder, still working himself towards another climax as he watches us.

He steps forward as Jaxon unbuckles me, and I see Jaxon give him a warning look. “Dean—” he starts to say, but I sink to my knees, wanting to finish this.

“Fuck yes,” Dean growls, and I open my mouth for him, taking him between my lips as his hips rock forwards, his thighs flexing as he rests one hand on my hair. I can feel Jaxon hovering behind me, as if ready to pounce on Dean if he mishandles me in the slightest, but I can tell that Dean has no intention of doing anything close to that.

It only takes a moment before he stiffens, his cum flooding over my tongue as his hand tightens in my hair. I take it all, sucking and running my tongue over his cockhead as I lick it away, swallowing every drop until the last spurt of it has filled my mouth, and then Dean slips loose, gasping.

“Fuck, you give the best head I’ve ever had,” he groans. His hand runs over my hair again, stroking it, and then he reaches down, helping me up. Jaxon is already getting dressed, and he throws a blanket around my shoulders, holding me as Dean gets his clothes back on, too.

“Let’s get you upstairs,” Jaxon says. “You can sleep with either one of us—”

“I want to sleep alone,” I say flatly. “I need—”

I don’t finish, because I don’t know how to explain what I need, or that it feels wrong to pick one of them when both of

them have given me so much of themselves today, or that I feel hurt that Cayde couldn't in a way that I never would have expected myself to feel about it.

But to my surprise, neither of them argues with me. "We'll get you up to the shower and let you be then," Dean says, and I can feel myself relaxing, grateful that they didn't put up a fight.

I don't know where Cayde is. We don't see him as we head up the stairs. Part of me wants to find him, to talk to him. But I'm too exhausted, drained in every possible way. So I let Jaxon and Dean help me to the shower, and I do my best to put Cayde out of my mind.

It's easier said than done.

JAXON

The next morning around the breakfast table surprisingly lacks tension, despite the way last night went. I, for my part, don't have any intention of starting shit. I don't need to. Everything I could possibly need with Athena I got yesterday, and there's not a single part of me that feels threatened by either of the other two men in her life.

But if Cayde doesn't get his shit together, I might have to step in.

I'm still seething, remembering the way he manhandled her last night. He'd knocked me on my ass for something similar, gotten into a full-on fistfight over it, but since it was in the guise of one of his "scenes," it was supposedly fine. And sure, Athena had consented to it.

But still, he hadn't needed to be so fucking rough.

And especially not over the bullshit I overheard them murmuring to each other through it.

It's obvious to anyone that Cayde loves her, as much as Cayde can love, anyway. I think his version of love verges on an unhealthy obsession, but hey, we all have our vices. Athena is his. And if she's okay with it, far be it from me to tell her that he's dangerous. She already knows.

But if she's going to have one of us, it's clear that she's determined to have all of us. And while a part of me still wants to throw her on my bike caveman-style and whisk her and I both away from this fucking shitheap of a town, I know that's not how this is all going to go down.

I learned a long time ago that there's no escaping Blackmoor. Not as it stands, anyway. If that can be changed, well, then who knows what the future holds? Certainly not me. But first, we have to actually accomplish that.

Athena, Cayde, and Dean seem a lot more hopeful than I am that that's possible.

Over breakfast, something like a plan starts to come together. Cayde agrees to see what gossip he can pick up from the rugby team, and Athena reiterates that she plans to go to the fights with me, and participate. No one, including myself, is particularly happy about that, but the time is past when any of us could tell her what to do. Athena has a seat at the table now, one equal to any of us. She's won each of us over in our own way, and she's not the Blackmoor pet anymore.

She never was, to me. The best I'd thought I could do was ignore her.

But instead, I ended up falling in love with her.

Every moment that I'm around her, I want to be touching her, kissing her, inside of her. Now that I've given in to it, the need for her feels almost unbearable. It makes doing anything else—like training with her later in the day to start preparing for her fight, almost impossible. All I can think of as we circle each other in the ring is the last time that we did this, when she pinned me in the ring and dry-humped me until I nearly came in my shorts, driving me to the edge and then leaving me there rock-hard and on the verge of losing control.

I'd gone straight to the showers after that and jerked off furiously, coming in seconds. It hadn't been even close to satisfying.

All I want is her. Her body, her mouth, her hands, her pussy—any part of her that I can touch and taste and have. She's intoxicating, and though there's still lingering guilt, I can't pretend any longer that I don't want her and love her as entirely and completely as I ever have anyone. Maybe more, because as I told Athena, she's the woman I'm with now. I was different even a few years ago when I was with Natalie, and

Athena is who the present me has fallen for. I can't know how things would be if they were different, but I know what this is.

And I know that there's nothing in this world that would make me ever want to let her go.

We go through the motions of a workout, but I can tell her thoughts are as far away as mine are. I put her on the treadmill long enough to warm up, and then I spot her while she goes through her lifting routine. In the ring, she's more focused, but I can still tell that she's not a hundred percent there, and if I'm being honest, neither am I.

"What's going on?" I ask her, when I land a hit that sends her staggering backwards. "If you leave an opening like that in a real fight, your opponent is going to demolish you."

"I'm sorry." Athena wipes her hair out of her face with the back of her wrist. "I'm still tired from last night, I guess. And preoccupied."

"You can't let outside things get to you when you're in the ring," I admonish gently. "It'll get you hurt."

Athena raises an eyebrow. "I don't think you're all here either," she points out. "I landed a hit earlier that I know you could have blocked."

Guilty. "I don't know what you're talking about," I tell her with a smirk, raising my gloves and circling her. "Come on, let's go through it again."

I can tell she's redoubling her efforts after that, doing her best to focus and give it her all. Her movements are a bit more sluggish today, which I can hardly fault—last night was a workout in and of itself. Still, it's not just formal fights that she needs to be prepared for. Pixie could appear again at any moment, not to mention whoever else our fathers decide to send after her, or us. We all need to be ready, and it doesn't matter if we all spent the night before fucking ourselves blind. Whoever comes after us won't give a shit.

I know Athena knows that, though, so I don't chastise her again. Instead we get through the rest of our workout, and when we're finally done, it's dark outside.

Athena glances at the window, and then back at me. “Let’s shower here,” she says suddenly. “And then let’s go for a ride. I don’t want to go back to the house just yet.”

A thrill runs through me at the thought of her in the shower with me, and she must have caught sight of the expression on my face because she immediately laughs.

“I didn’t mean shower *together*,” Athena says, smirking at me. “Unless—”

“Unless what?” My heart leaps instantly at the thought of her under the spray in the locker room shower, soap sliding down the curve of her breasts, her hair wet and clinging to her skin.

Fuck. I’m going to get an erection standing here, and then she’ll really give me shit about it.

“I don’t think I’m up for—you know.” Athena flushes, and I know she’s thinking of last night. I am too, and yesterday, and damn near every time I’ve ever touched her or seen her naked. It’s an impossible fucking thing to forget.

“I’ll be a gentleman.” I raise my hand, grinning at her. “I won’t even touch you, unless you want me to.”

Athena raises an eyebrow, doing her best to look suspicious, but I can see something vulnerable in her face. I know she’s hesitant to trust, and the fact that she’s given any of us as much as she has, after all the missteps and mistakes that we’ve made, is a miracle.

I, for one, am going to spend the rest of my fucking life making up for the shit that I’ve done.

“Come on.” I jerk my head towards the locker rooms. “The gym is closed now, no one else is going to come in. We have the place to ourselves. And I promise, scouts honor. I’ll be a gentleman.”

“You were never a boy scout.” Athena laughs, but she follows me into the guys’ locker room. I can’t keep my eyes off of her as she starts to strip down. She’s perfect in every way that I can imagine, and I let myself look at her for a moment, admiring the muscle that she’s put on since we started training together, the breasts that fill my hands so

perfectly, her slender hips and the fall of her dark hair that I love to run my hands through. Her skin is still marked from last night, her breasts and thighs and ass covered in marks and welts from the flogger and cane and belt, her hips bruised from Cayde's hands and her lip slightly purple where Dean and Cayde bit her. The marks they left are still there too, dark on the side of her throat, the teeth marks slightly scabbed over. Anyone who saw her even clothed would know what she'd been doing, and I know that was the whole point. Everyone on campus knows who Athena Saint belongs to, but Dean and Cayde needed to leave even more proof of it.

I don't think anyone knows that I've taken my spot by her side too, other than the four of us. But I don't fucking care. I don't need to announce it to the world that she's mine. The only person who matters, as far as I'm concerned, is standing right here.

I keep my word and my distance as we get in the shower, passing her the soap and making sure not to brush up against her, even casually. But I can feel her eyes on me too, and that the heat in the room isn't just because of the steam wreathing around us from the water.

Athena tips her head back under the spray, letting it run over her hair, and I let my eyes flick to her breasts, where soap bubbles are clinging to her nipples and suds are running down her skin. She's so fucking beautiful, and even if being with her means sharing her, I can't believe that I get to have any part of her at all.

She opens her eyes, and they lock with mine. I flush, knowing I'm caught, but she just grins.

"What are you looking at?" Athena asks, her voice soft and almost sultry, and I smirk at her.

"You," I tell her bluntly. "You're so fucking gorgeous, I don't know how anyone could ever take their eyes off of you."

"Oh?" She moves forward suddenly, and I take a step back, remembering my promise. It puts my back up against the wall, the tile cool against my overheated skin, and Athena keeps coming, until she's suddenly pressed up against me, her soft

wet breasts against my chest as she tilts her head up, going up on her tiptoes.

“You promised not to touch me,” she whispers. “I didn’t promise anything.”

I can’t fucking think. My heart is pounding in my chest, my cock swelling instantly, and when Athena reaches down and grabs my wrists in each of her hands, raising my arms up as high as she can reach and pinning them to the tile, my cock instantly gets so hard that I think it might break off.

“Mm.” She arches against me, pressing my erection tightly between us, between the soft flesh of her belly and my muscled abdomen, rocking forward so that the swelling head rubs against her. “You feel good,” she whispers.

And then she kisses me.

Fuck, no one kisses like Athena. And she’s never kissed me like this. She holds me there, pinned to the wall, her hands gripping me with surprising strength as her tongue runs along my lower lip, pushing into my mouth, her teeth nipping at me as she kisses me hard and hot and fierce, and I don’t think I’ve ever been harder in my life. She feels soft and firm all at once, silky skin with muscle just beneath it, hot and wet, just like her pussy wrapped around me. I want to fuck her more than I want to breathe, and I also want to stay just like this, with her holding me against the wall and kissing me like she could never get enough of her mouth.

“You’re the only one who’s just like me,” she whispers. “The only one I trust completely. If I’d had a choice—” her words are warm against my lips, her breath soft. “It would have been us. But we’re past that now, you know that, right? It’s all of us or nothing. And—” she breathes in shakily, still half-kissing me, her mouth brushing mine. “I love them too, for different reasons. But nothing is like it is with you.”

I look down at her, having a hard time thinking through the fog of lust she’s roused in me, my cock hard and throbbing between us. “Why are you telling me this?” I manage to choke out, wanting more than anything for her to keep going, to give me something, anything more. I know I’ve been this horny for

her before, but fuck if I can remember when. And the last thing I want to hear right now is how much she loves someone else.

“Because I need to know that you’ll stay.” Athena looks up at me with those wide eyes, dark and deep, and there’s that vulnerable look there again that I suddenly understand. “I need to know you can handle it. That you won’t run when this is all over, and it’s the three of you.” She swallows hard, her eyes flicking down to my mouth and then back up. “I need Cayde and Dean, Jaxon. But I *need* you too.”

Her lips press against mine again, and I can feel her chest heaving against me, her back arching as she kisses me breathlessly. I can feel it, all of her need and her fear, and I want to hold her, to tell her that it will be alright, that I won’t leave. But I can’t, and I know why she’s holding me against the wall like this, why she needs to feel that power.

I know why she’s afraid that I’ll run. After all, that’s what I’ve always tried to do.

She presses her forehead against mine, her lips still brushing against mine, breathing hard as she squeezes my wrists. And then she steps back, turning away.

“Let’s go for that ride.”

JAXON

Not reaching for her when she stepped away, as turned on as I was, was one of the hardest things I ever had to do.

But I follow her out of the shower, willing my erection to go away as we throw on clean clothes and head out to where my bike is parked. “You want to go out to the cliff?” I ask her, and she nods.

I don’t have to ask her why, even as I hesitate to go. There’s more than just memories of Athena out there for me, but for her that’s all it is. It’s the night I rescued her after the pledge party in the basement, which by this point feels so long ago that it might as well have been years instead of months. It’s the night I took her to the diner and asked her questions about herself, took her out to that cliffside and touched her in a way that no one else ever had. We’d shared something that night, and it had laid the foundation for everything else that had followed.

It had led us here, and I know that’s why she wants to go back there.

But for me, it’s not just that night with Athena. It’s nights with Natalie, it’s where I lost my virginity and took hers, it’s where we planned our escape and where I went back to when I thought I would die of grief, when it felt as if my heart had shattered into so many pieces that I could never put it back together. It’s by the street where she died, and it’s where I tried to.

If Dean and Cayde hadn't found me, I would have. And there've been a lot of nights when I wish I'd just driven my motorcycle off the cliff, instead of trying to slit my wrists like a fucking girl.

But I didn't die. I'm still here.

And if Athena wants to go back to the place where we started, I'm going to take her, even if there's so much more to it for me.

There's not much traffic as we ride out, and I push the limits a little, going faster than usual. I know Athena won't mind, and I want to feel the rush of speed, get my heart racing for more reasons than one. I fucking love having her on the back of my bike, feeling her arms wrapped tightly around me, her cheek pressed against my back as we speed down the highway. The fact that she trusts me after everything, that she'll get on my motorcycle and let me take her wherever we're going, means more to me than I could ever explain to her.

She's as fearless and brave and beautiful as her half-sister was, and sometimes I wonder how I never saw it. They're so alike that it seems obvious now, but different enough that I know I love Athena for herself, and not just as a way to replace Natalie.

I could never replace Natalie, with anyone. But I could never replace Athena either.

My stomach clenches when we get closer to the cliffside, when I come around the bend not far from the spot in the street where Natalie died. I haven't been back out here since Athena and I started sleeping together for real, and I feel that knot of guilt that I've managed to mostly shake since the night Athena and I went out to the coast, as if I'm betraying Natalie. I hadn't felt like that when I'd brought Athena out here the first time, but I'd been planning to avoid all of this back then.

I'd been planning to avoid *her*. To stay out of her bed and keep her out of mine. To stay out of the whole damn game and stay faithful to a dead girl.

Now everything has changed.

I park the bike near the trees where no one driving by should see it, and glance over at Athena, shaking her hair out as she takes off her helmet. She looks so fucking beautiful that I can hardly stand it, but that cold guilt is still there too, not least of which because out here especially, she looks so fucking much like Natalie. Black hair, same body, same way of jumping off the bike and shaking out her hair. *I swear I love her for different reasons*, I think to myself, almost as if I'm trying to explain myself to a girl who can no longer hear me. *I'm not replacing you. I didn't even know she was related to you. I loved her long before I knew. And I'm sorry.*

I'm sorry, and I'm not. Because Athena is everything that I could want now. And I couldn't bear to lose her either, even if it meant bringing Natalie back.

It's a dichotomy that's going to haunt me for the rest of my fucking days.

"Come on." Athena takes my hand, leading me out into the meadow. We didn't bring a blanket with us, but the grass is still fairly thick and soft, since it hasn't frozen or snowed yet. It's still fall, and the weather is still holding, even if it's chilly. The moon is shining overhead, just past half.

"It's supposed to be a full moon on Halloween," I say quietly. "As if that night isn't already going to be fucking creepy as hell."

"I used to love Halloween," Athena says quietly. "I wonder if I'll ever feel that way again."

I slide my arm around her waist, looking up at the moon, and she leans against me. I know what she's talking about, although neither of us wants to say it entirely aloud. For everyone on campus who isn't one of the founding heirs and everyone in town who isn't a ranking member of the families, Halloween is just a night to party and drink and dress up and follow your kids around while they collect candy.

For us, this year, it's a night to dread.

It's the night of the final ritual for the heir. The night that Dean is supposed to prove that he took Athena's virginity, and

lay his claim to the town. The night he's supposed to be officially engaged to Winter, in a ceremony in the labyrinth.

For us, it's the night when we're going to put a stop to all of this.

It's the night when we'll succeed or fail, and everything that follows will be because of one of those outcomes.

Two weeks. It's all we've got. Two fights for Athena, before then. Fourteen days and fourteen nights to say the things we have left to say and do all the things we want to do before we risk everything.

The stakes have never been higher.

Athena reaches for my hand, pulling me out of my thoughts as she tugs me down to the ground with her, sitting in the grass. She stays close, leaning against me, and we're quiet for several long moments, just looking out over the cliffside and letting the wind blow past us, enjoying the peace.

"There's a reason I wanted to come out here," she says finally, softly, as if it would be a sin to speak too loudly here in the silence.

"Why?" I truly don't know. I'd assumed it was because of what this space meant to her for us, and that she'd just wanted to spend some time with me.

"You sat and listened to my memories out on the beach," she says quietly. "And I asked you for yours, and you said not yet. You said it wasn't the place for it. But I know that this is. And I think it's time."

Fuck. I go very still next to her, my chest tightening. I don't know if I want to talk to Athena about Natalie more than I already have, if I want to share all of it with her. Not because she doesn't deserve to know, but because I haven't talked to anyone about it. If I say it all aloud, talk about everything that happened in the past tense, it'll stay firmly there forever. And I don't know if I want Athena to know how deeply I loved someone else.

I'm afraid that if she knows, she won't be able to love me as much. How could she, when her half-sister was for a long time

the greatest love of my life?

“I need to know,” Athena says quietly, her fingers threading through mine. “I know it’s hard, Jaxon. But we don’t have much time left. You know everything about me that there is to tell. And I need to know about her.” She turns to look at me, her blue gray eyes soft and full of more understanding than I could have hoped for. “Please, Jaxon. Don’t hide from me anymore.”

“Are you going to ask for their secrets, too?” I can hear the bitterness in my voice, feel it on my tongue, but I can’t help it. She wants me to lay myself bare for her, and I’ve only ever done that once before. I could lose Athena very soon, and if I do and I somehow come out of that labyrinth alive, I don’t think I can bear it again. I don’t think I can crack apart like that, lose something that means so much to me, and ever be whole again.

Athena tenses next to me, but she nods. “Yes,” she says quietly. “I will. But this—Jaxon, I know you loved her. I know it breaks your heart to remember. But she was my sister. And you’re the only person left that I know who knew her, too.”

“I know.” I take a deep breath, tilting my head back and looking up at the moon. “Okay.”

So I start to tell her. I tell her about the first time I ever saw Natalie, when we were fourteen. “She hated motorcycles,” I tell Athena with a laugh. “I thought she was the prettiest girl I’d ever seen, back then, but I swore to myself there wasn’t a chance in hell. All I cared about was a bike of my own. I couldn’t be with a girl that would never get on the back of it. But I couldn’t seem to stay away from her, and she kept crossing my path. There was really no reason for her to. Other than being a part of the St. Vincents so far as I knew, she didn’t have any connection to me, and she treated Cayde like an annoying younger cousin, even though there was less than a year between us all. But we were—drawn together.” I pause, looking over at Athena, feeling as if every word out of my mouth burns. “Fuck, Athena, how am I supposed to tell you all of this? It’s going to hurt you.”

“No, it won’t,” Athena says calmly. “I know you loved her. God, Jaxon, I love two other men besides you. If anyone in this world knows that you can love different people in different ways, it’s me. I know you loved her and I know you love me now, and you were a different person then than you are now, too. None of it matters, except that I need to know to understand you. And beyond that, I want to hear about my sister.” She swallows hard, looking away. “I’ll never meet her, Jaxon. Never tell her who I am. I’ll never talk to her or share anything with her. She died before either of us ever knew the other existed. Jaxon, I *need* to hear this.”

“Okay.” I let out a sharp, hard breath. “Okay.”

Athena’s hand tightens around mine, and I know she means it. It doesn’t make it much easier, though.

“Nothing happened between us for what felt like a long time. I was obsessed with her, in that way that only a boy in his mid-teens can be. But I had other things that I was obsessed with too.” I laugh shortly. “Working out, and the Devil’s Sons. That was pretty much my life—hanging around the club and trying to soak up everything I could so that I could get my own bike, working out and learning to fight, and fantasizing about Natalie. But I didn’t make a move. Not even close. I was too damn scared.”

Athena laughs softly. “So she was the one who started it? I guess maybe not much has changed.”

I glare at her, but there’s no malice in it. “That was for different reasons and you know it. Want me to stop telling the story?”

“You know I don’t.” Athena glances at me.

“Nothing happened until we were sixteen. I got my motorcycle, despite everything my father tried to do to keep it from happening, and I rode it to school on my birthday, and the very first person I saw was Natalie. And despite how much she’d always sworn she hated motorcycles, she asked me to take her out on it.

Take me for a ride, birthday boy?

I can still hear her voice, clear as day, floating through the air. It makes my chest go tight, my throat constrict, and I can't speak for a minute, remembering that bright day when I brought her out here for the first time.

I thought you hated motorcycles.

I'm pretty sure I still do. But I love you, Jaxon King.

“I brought her out here, my favorite spot. It was the first time I'd really spent time with her alone—really alone, where no one would walk in or interrupt us. And I—” I swallow hard, forcing myself to keep going, to remember no matter how much it hurts. “I kissed her for the first time.”

Athena doesn't say anything, but her fingers squeeze mine, and I know she's doing exactly what I did on the beach for her—simply being here, and listening. She's giving me back what I gave her, and I know that this is as necessary for me as it was for her, to say it all aloud, to talk about it for the first time to anyone.

It hurts, but she's right. We can't go into what's to come with secrets. And if we come out on the other side, all of us, we'll need to start fresh.

All of this needs to be behind us, no matter how much it hurts.

“She told me she loved me,” I say quietly. “I had no idea. I was a stupid sixteen year old boy, there's no way I knew. But I loved her too, and I told her so. And then—”

Take me for a ride, birthday boy?

“It all happened in one day.” I shake my head, laughing softly. “My first motorcycle, my first kiss, my first time with a girl. Falling in love. All on my sixteenth birthday. A hell of a birthday.”

“It sounds like it.” Athena shifts next to me, crossing her legs and turning towards me so she can look at my face as I talk, her hand still wrapped around mine.

“She wasn’t afraid of anything,” I murmur. “She was like you, in that. She was brave, and beautiful, and when she loved, she loved with everything in her. I forgot who I was with her, that I was a King, the least of the families but still expected to be a part of it all. Expected to stand at either Cayde or Dean’s side—and lets be honest, we always knew who it would be. Cayde was under so much pressure to fight for it, but he never really wanted it. It was always going to be Dean. No one has ever worked as hard as his father did to groom him to take this town back.”

I pause, looking out across the meadow. “We came here every chance we got. Every date, every night that we could get away, losing ourselves in each other. We forgot that I was an heir and she was just a girl, a lesser St. Vincent—and now, of course, I know she wasn’t even that. We didn’t understand, then, why our families were so violently against us being together when they found out. I do now, of course. But she never did.”

“And you weren’t going to be kept apart.” Athena is already two steps ahead. “Romeo and Juliet.”

My mouth twists. “That’s exactly what we thought we were. Teenage boys get a bad rap, but a teenage boy in love can be every bit as dramatic as a teenage girl. She wanted to leave, and she didn’t keep that from me. She wanted us *both* to leave. It was like she had some...some sense of what was coming. She didn’t even want to wait until we were eighteen. She wanted to go as soon as possible, as soon as it became very clear that our families intended to find a way to keep us apart.”

“So it was her idea.”

“It was, but it didn’t take much to get me all in on it. I bought her a ring—the smallest fucking ring anyone has ever seen, but it’s the thought that counts I guess—but she fucking cried when I gave it to her. I told her I was going to get her a better one before I asked her to marry me for real, but she told me that she didn’t ever want anything else. I told her it was my promise to her that I was going to leave it all behind, that I didn’t care about any of it. Just her. That she was all I needed.”

My throat tightens again, and I squeeze Athena's hand hard. "We were supposed to leave the next night. She was crossing the street to meet me here when the car hit her." I take a deep, shuddering breath. "I'll hear her scream in my head for the rest of my goddamn life."

Save me, Jaxon.

Save me, and take me away.

She never said any of that, while I held her broken and bleeding in the street. But I hear it in my head anyway, just like I have in my nightmares for so long.

"She died here," I say quietly. "And I wanted to."

Athena's eyes widen, and she looks at me for a long moment. "What do you mean?" she asks finally, and I clench my jaw, grinding my teeth as I try to find the words to say it aloud.

"I've never talked about it to anyone. Not Cayde or Dean, not any girl, definitely not my fucking parents. No one." I look up at the half moon, my heart pounding in my chest.

"When Natalie died, I lost everything. I lost *myself*. I stopped hanging out with the Sons. Stopped going to class. I fell behind, got held back a year. That's how I ended up in the same class with Dean and Cayde. All I did was work out and fight at night and ride around on my motorcycle. I didn't give a shit about anything. I couldn't leave, and I sure as fuck didn't want to stay here. I didn't have any escape. Until finally I thought of one."

"Oh god, Jaxon."

"I didn't really think it out. I came out here all the fucking time. I'd ride out here and cry and scream and curse and shout where no one could hear me, fucking scream at the sky until my throat bled. I fucking tortured myself with it, coming back here to our spot, coming back to where she died. It was all I fucking had left of her. That picture, and this cliff."

"Thinking back, I should have just driven my motorcycle off the edge," I continue quietly, my voice raw. "But I didn't think that far ahead. I was just out here, staring up at the sky, feeling

like I was so shattered that there was no way that I'd ever feel anything but this awful, bottomless, endless grief. It hurt so much I didn't think I could bear it any longer. I didn't believe I'd see her again if I died or some shit like that, but at least I would stop hurting. At least I wouldn't have to remember that she'd died in front of me, in my fucking arms, and I couldn't save her. At least I'd get some fucking rest."

I can see that Athena is crying now, quietly, tears sliding down her cheeks. She doesn't sob or even make a sound, and I know she's hoping I won't see. But the moonlight is glinting off of her face, and I can tell.

"I had my knife with me," I whisper, as if someone other than Athena might hear. "I slit my wrists with it. Across, because I wasn't thinking, and that probably saved my life. That, and the fact that I was supposed to meet up with Cayde and Dean, and as flaky as I'd been, they came to find me. They knew where to look."

"Shit," Athena breathes. "They saved your life?"

I nod. "They found me passed out here. Threw me in the car and took me to the hospital. It was all hushed up, of course. One of the heirs trying to commit suicide would have been a hell of a scandal. My parents were furious, not because I almost died, but because it made our family look bad. We were already the least of the three families, how could I do that to them?" I shake my head. "They didn't give a shit about losing me, just about how I reflected on our family."

Athena's mouth twists wryly. "It certainly didn't get you to become a model King."

I can't help but laugh at that. "Oh, it definitely only made it worse. I was the black sheep, and I was proud of it. I didn't try to kill myself again. Once was enough. I figured it meant I was supposed to live with the grief, be the one who remembered her, the one who loved her most. I spent a lot of time the last year of high school trying to fuck the pain away. I felt like shit doing that, and I felt like I ought to feel like shit. I was punishing myself as much as anything, because I felt like I'd never deserved her, like if she hadn't picked me she'd still be

alive. I tore myself apart in any way I could. And I was bound and determined to have nothing to do with this fucking town. That's why—" I take a breath. "You know. That's why it took so long for us—"

Athena doesn't say anything to that. She just reaches out, taking both of my hands in hers, and she turns them over so she can see my wrists. There's just enough light in the meadow that she can see the thin lines there, and she runs her thumbs over them. "I never noticed before," she says softly. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be." I don't pull away, even though no one has ever touched them before. It feels almost more intimate than any other touch, and I'm suddenly very aware of her, aware of how close she is, how alone we are, of how this is our place and not our place all at once, and I wonder if I should do the things I'm thinking of. If it would be wrong. "It's in the past."

"It's still a part of you." She presses her thumbs against my flesh, looking up at me with those wide eyes, soft and open. "I'm glad you chose this. I'm glad you didn't do it the way that would have killed you. I'm glad you didn't drive your bike off the cliff. I'm glad—" Athena breathes in, her gaze fixed on mine. "I'm glad that you're here, Jaxon. I know you've been in so much pain for so long. I know how it can feel unbearable, like you're drowning in it, like there's nothing you can ever do to escape it. But if you need to—" she pauses, her lips parting, and I'm suddenly very aware of her fingers on my skin, the scent of her and how warm she is.

"You can give it to me," she whispers. "And I'll give my pain to you. We'll hold it for each other. And we won't ever have to bear it alone again."

My pain. Cayde's rage. Dean's chaos. She takes the things we hold so deeply inside of ourselves, the things no one else can bear, and somehow makes it into something beautiful. And in that moment, her gray eyes fixed on mine, her hands circling my wrists and her fingers touching my scars, I know why.

Because she has all those things inside of her too.

Pain. Rage. Chaos. She's all of us in one, and we're all of her.

I reach for her, pulling her into my lap the way I did the first night I brought her here. Her hands are still around my wrists, and I wrap mine around hers, looking into her eyes.

"If there's an order to the universe," I whisper, reaching up to touch her face. "Then you were always meant to find us, Athena Saint. And we were waiting for you all along."

Athena swallows hard, and she raises one hand to mine, covering it. "If there is," she says softly, "then that would mean every bad thing that's happened to us, to everyone in this town, to everyone that Blackmoor has ever touched, had to happen. It would mean it's all fate, that it couldn't have ever been changed." She bites her lower lip, looking into my eyes. "Does that make it better or worse, Jaxon? If it's fate, and not just horrible fucking luck?"

"I don't know," I murmur. "But we're going to make sure that it wasn't for nothing. Your parents, Natalie, you, us, everyone—we're going to make sure that all that pain isn't for nothing. I fucking promise you that."

Athena sucks in a breath, and both of her hands go to my face, holding me so that I can't look away. "Don't make me promises you can't keep, Jaxon King." She pauses, her fingers pressed against my cheekbones, and I know she's deciding whether to ask the next thing she wants to say.

"Just say it, Athena. Ask it. Anything."

"Why did you bring me here that night?"

I know the answer isn't as profound as she might like. Or maybe it is. I still don't fully understand it myself. But it's all I have.

So I answer her honestly.

"You needed somewhere safe, just for a little while. And it was the only place I could think of to go."

Athena nods, slowly, and I can see that her eyes are shimmering again.

“This was our place,” I whisper. “The only place we were ever safe. And then—it wasn’t. She died here. It wasn’t safe after all and maybe—maybe I just wanted to make it that way again. Maybe I wanted to believe that there was still something here that mattered. Or maybe—maybe I knew long before I ever really did.”

“Knew what?”

“That I was going to love you. That you were meant to be mine. And that you’d turn everything that hurt me back into something beautiful again.”

When she kisses me, it takes my breath away. And I know that’s exactly it.

I spill her back onto the grass, my body over hers, her hair spread out like a raven’s wing. “You’re my past and my future all in one,” I murmur. “And I’m never going to lose you. I swear, we’re going to get out of that ritual alive. I’m going to keep you safe, Athena, if it’s the last fucking thing I do.”

Athena looks up at me, shaking her head. “I don’t need you to save me, Jaxon,” she says softly. “I can do it myself. This is my battle to fight, too. I don’t need you to stand in front of me.”

“Beside you, then.” I run my knuckles over her cheekbone. “And we’ll walk out together.”

“Yes,” Athena breathes. “That’s more like it.”

She pauses then, her fingers stroking my cheek. “When we went to the beach,” she says softly, “you told me to leave all my happy memories there. And you’ve done that here—the happy and sad both.” She looks down at me, stretched over her, and I can see in her eyes that she knows as well as I do where this is going next.

“Do you want to do this here?” she asks quietly. “This was your place—yours and hers. I know you brought me here once before, and we—” she hesitates. “It doesn’t mean we have to do it again. If you want to keep it for yourself, the way it was before—”

Something in the way she says it makes my chest clench so tightly that it hurts. The temptation is there to say yes, to get up and take Athena away from here, back to the manor house, to leave this meadow as a shrine to Natalie and I and everything we had together.

But no matter how I feel about it, all of that is gone. *She's* gone. And I have to move forward.

“No,” I whisper. “It doesn’t do any good to live in the past.”

“You’re right,” Athena agrees, her voice barely audible. “It doesn’t.”

When I reach for the button of her jeans and she reaches for me, it’s not lust. *Every time we do this, it feels like something different*, I think as I slide them over her hips, tossing them aside in the grass. The first time was nothing but unhinged lust, frustrated desire, tearing at each other. And since then, every time I’ve been with Athena, it’s felt different. There’s been hurt and there’s been anger and there’s been forgiveness and comfort, and there’s been desire too. But this is something else altogether.

My hand comes up to touch her breast through her t-shirt, and Athena takes my hand, bringing my wrist up to her lips. She kisses my scar, brushing her mouth along it, her tongue flicking over the faint ridge, and I gasp, sucking in a shuddering breath. “You can’t leave me, Jaxon King,” she says, looking up at me with eyes gone dark and fierce. “I don’t need you to protect me. But I do need you.”

“I need you, too.”

There’s no more words that need to be said between us after that. I bend to kiss her, my hand in her hair, the soft black strands tumbling over my fingers as my tongue tangles with her, her mouth warm and sweet as I reach between her legs, pushing her panties to one side. She’s wet for me, and I part her with my fingers, my lips never leaving hers as I start to push myself inside of her. I feel her shudder as I move, the pleasure rippling down my spine as I feel her around me, wet and hot and so fucking tight, and when I’m inside of her as

deeply as I can go, I feel her arch against me, her hands gripping my shoulders.

I bury both of my hands in her hair, holding her mouth to mine, and I start to move.

It's slow and sweet, unlike anything I've done in years. I haven't been with someone like this since Natalie, haven't thought the words *making love* in my head, and I wait for the cold guilt to twist in my stomach. I'm with another girl, here in our meadow, and it's so like it used to be that it would be easy to forget that it's Athena. But I don't.

I keep myself here, now. I look down at Athena's face, at her grey eyes and her dark hair and her parted lips begging for more, and I let go. I know some of it will always be with me. A grief as deep as the one Natalie left me with isn't one that can ever be shaken completely. But like I told Athena, I can leave some of it here.

And now this is our place, too.

I don't know what we all plan to do, if we make it out of that labyrinth beneath the Blackmoor Estate. But I know that whatever happens, if we stay or go, a part of me will always be here.

Part of me is buried with Natalie, and a part of me is here in this meadow. And everything that's left, Athena holds in her hands.

She shudders against me, clinging to me, and I hear her whisper in my ear that she loves me.

I love you, Jaxon King.

I love you.

I reach for her, pulling her into my lap as I lean back on my heels, one hand behind her head and the other wrapped around her waist as I thrust up into her, my mouth on hers, whispering the same words back to her, lost in the kiss. "Mine," I whisper, my hand tightening in her hair, and Athena nods, her legs wrapped around my hips as she rocks against me.

“Mine,” she whispers back, and I kiss her again, hard and fierce and deep.

It doesn't last long enough. It never could. I keep fucking her like that for as long as I can, her hair spilling over my hands and her face glowing in the moonlight, her mouth soft and warm under mine, until she starts to tremble against me, her hands clutching at me, and I know she's coming for me.

I spill her back on the grass, my hips rocking against hers as I come too, pouring myself into her in a rush of pleasure so strong it bows my back and makes me dig my fingers into the ground, bracing myself as I bury myself in her as deeply as I can. She leans up, kissing me again fiercely, her hands in my hair as she takes everything that I have to give her, and I moan her name aloud into the cold night air until it's all over, and we fall into the grass together, breathless and sweaty despite the chill.

I don't know how long we lay there. We might have fallen asleep for a little while in each other's arms, because the sky is starting to grey by the time I find Athena her jeans and help her get them back on.

“We should go back.” I look up at the sky, where we can still see the half-moon even though it's beginning to lighten. “If Cayde or Dean wakes up and we're already gone, they're going to think something happened.”

“Yeah, we should.” Athena pushes herself to her feet, and we walk slowly back to the bike. As she puts on her helmet, I glance back once at the meadow, and I realize that for the first time, something inside of me feels lighter.

I know there will always be a part of me that can't entirely heal. But for the first time, I feel like when this is all over, there might be a future for me. For *us*.

I swing onto the bike, and start the engine. And then I drive us away, into the growing daylight.

ATHENA

If I'm being honest, the last thing I want to do the next day is go to a rugby game. But it's the last one Cayde will play before Halloween, and Dean insists that we should go—all of us. So I find myself out at the field after class, with Dean and Jaxon sitting on either side of me, and Mia sitting in front of me.

I can tell that Mia hasn't been sleeping well. She looks paler than usual, with bags under her eyes, but we try to steer away from any topics involving our research on the town or what's going to happen very soon. I haven't told her all of our plan, so that she has some plausible deniability if it all goes wrong. She won't be there—there's no reason for her to be, and I don't want her to suffer because she's my friend, if I don't make it out.

I don't want anyone else to get hurt because they love me. I already spend too much time terrified for Mia as it is, because the pool of people who can be used against me is shrinking. And if it is the boys' fathers, and they don't want to hurt their own sons, Mia is all I have.

I've tried not to let her know how much danger I worry she's in, but I think she already does. She's smart—smarter than I am, really, and I'm sure that's why she looks as if she hasn't slept in days.

I have a hard time following the game, if I'm being honest. Just being out here watching Cayde has me preoccupied, thinking about the other night in the study, and how Cayde and

I haven't really talked since then. Unless it's as a group, talking about the upcoming ritual and our plan, he's mostly avoided me. It's not hard to figure out why, but just like Jaxon and I out on the cliffside, I need Cayde to open up to me. We can't do this if we don't trust each other. I've trusted these three boys with everything. I need them to do the same.

I have some idea of what happened to Cayde, why his back is scarred, why he's so full of rage. But I need to hear it from him. And I want him to say it.

He almost had, in the study. He'd been so close to telling me he loved me. And I know that deep down, he does. He loves me in the only way he knows how to love—possessively, obsessively, dangerously. He's wanted to break me since the day he saw me, because I'm willing to bet that there's never been a single thing he's wanted so desperately or loved that didn't hurt him in the end.

I understand him. I understand all of them.

But I need *him* to understand that.

I'm so deep in my thoughts that I don't hear the shout from the field at first, or the commotion that follows. I don't even realize what's happening until Dean jumps to his feet, cursing.

"Athena!" he snaps my name at the same time Jaxon is rising, and I look up at him, confused.

"What's going on?"

"Shit, Athena, were you asleep?" He's already pushing his way out of the bleachers, Jaxon close on his heels, and I follow them, still unsure of what's going on. Mia is behind me, and I have to almost jog to keep up as Dean and Jaxon shove their way through to the edge of the field.

And then the crowd parts, and I see exactly what's going on.

Cayde is on the ground, motionless. A few of the players are surrounding him, and my heart leaps into my throat, my pulse racing. "What happened?" I exclaim, looking at Dean.

"I don't know exactly," he says grimly. "I saw one of the other players run into him, hard. One of *our* players. I don't

know which one though. But he's fucking down, and he's not moving."

Dean is already ducking under the cord that separates the crowd from the field, and Jaxon and I follow without a thought. One of the refs shouts at us, telling us to get off the field, and Jaxon rounds on him with impressive ferocity.

"That's my best fucking friend," he snarls, "and Dean's too, and her boyfriend." He jerks his head towards me. "Don't you know who we fucking are?"

I've never heard Jaxon throw that out before that I can remember. Jaxon doesn't give a shit about being a King or an heir, in fact, he actively tries to escape it. But I guess this is the one scenario where he's willing to use it.

"No," the ref starts to say, and Jaxon laughs.

"That's Dean fucking Blackmoor," he growls. "So get the fuck out of our way. And call a fucking ambulance."

If he says anything else, I don't hear it. Because all I can see is Cayde lying unconscious on the grass, his face waxy and bloodless. And all it takes is one glance to see his right leg, twisted in a way at the knee that no leg should ever be.

—

I'd said that the last place I wanted to be today was the rugby field. But I was wrong.

The absolute *last* place I want to be is back at the hospital. The last time I was here, my mother was dying in the burn ward. I'd prefer to never set foot in this hospital, or any hospital really, ever again.

But here I am, sitting in the waiting room with Dean and Jaxon, hands clenched into fists between my knees as we wait.

Cayde's parents should get here eventually. I know I, at the very least, need to be gone before that happens. The last person I want to see is Philip St. Vincent. But they were out of town, and Dean said it'll be at least six hours before they get here.

In the meantime, Cayde is having emergency surgery on his knee.

It's not the kind of surgery you die from. He'll come out of it just fine. Dean and Jaxon keep telling me that, but it's like buzzing in my ears. Because the last time I was here, someone I loved died.

And I haven't even told Cayde how I feel about him yet. I haven't heard him say it back. We haven't had a chance to finish what we started, together or when it comes to this cursed fucking town. And even though I know this isn't really a dangerous surgery, that he's young and he'll be fine, that there's no reason to worry about anything except his ability to play rugby in the future, I can't stop the thought that loops over and over in my head, telling me that any minute now a doctor is going to come down the hallway, and tell me that Cayde is dead.

All of this is making me paranoid and suspicious, I know. But I keep thinking of ways his surgery could be tampered with, ways it could be made to look as if it went wrong, if Dean's father wants to eliminate one of the problems standing between him and his son actually inheriting Blackmoor.

Cayde's father wouldn't stand for it, I tell myself. It just wouldn't happen. But I can't stop the anxiety from making my heart race and my throat close over, until I feel like I could die, too. Like I could choke to death from fear, here in this waiting room.

Eventually, after what feels like hours, a doctor does come down the hall. I want to throw up the minute I see the white coat, and I feel the room tilt slightly, the grief and anguish I'd felt when I'd seen the doctor coming from the burn ward and known instinctively what he was going to say rushing back in a wave that threatens to swallow me up.

I feel a hand on my shoulder, steadying me, but I don't know if it's Dean or Jaxon. I'm too out of it to tell.

"Is there any family here for Cayde St. Vincent?" the doctor asks, and Dean stands up.

“They’re not here yet,” he tells the doctor. “But I’m his best friend. Dean Blackmoor,” he adds pointedly, and just like always, there’s a shift in the doctor’s expression when he hears the name.

It doesn’t matter if we all take this whole place down brick by brick, I think grimly, looking at the two of them. There will always be someone who stands up and takes notice when Dean Blackmoor says his name.

“The surgery went well,” the doctor says, and I feel a rush of breath go out of me, relief crashing over me so hard and fast that I feel dizzy. “He’s resting now, but if you want to go in and wait until he wakes up, you can. *Just* you,” he adds to Dean, as Jaxon and I immediately stand up.

“They’ll be coming with me,” Dean says smoothly.

“I can’t allow—”

“Would you like me to tell Philip St. Vincent about this when he gets here?” Dean raises an eyebrow. “This is Cayde’s other best friend, and his girlfriend. Or maybe I’ll give my father a call, and talk to him about his yearly donation—”

“No, that’s fine,” the doctor says hurriedly. “You can go back. Just don’t stay too long. Your friend needs rest.”

He’s okay. I know that it’s probably not as simple as that, but it’s all I can think as we make our way to Cayde’s room. He’s alive, and he’s going to be okay.

Like the doctor had said, Cayde is asleep when we walk into the room. We find seats quietly, waiting for him to wake up. I watch him as we sit there, irrationally afraid that the perfectly normal vital signs on the machines will suddenly change.

It’s the most innocent and peaceful I’ve ever seen Cayde. He looks almost boyish laying there, his blonde hair brushed back, his light lashes lying on his cheeks. It reminds me of the few times I’ve slept next to him, and I feel an ache in my chest at the thought. I hate seeing him here, in a hospital bed, instead of his bed back at the manor house.

It’s at least an hour before Cayde starts to wake. We’re careful not to all pounce on him at first, giving him time to

adjust and realize we're there before we start to talk.

"Hey," he manages to croak finally, pushing himself up a little in the bed. It's clear he's on some pretty heavy pain medication, and as he moves and the blanket shifts I catch a glimpse of the bandages around his knee.

"Hey yourself," I manage. "How are you feeling?"

"I've felt better, for sure." Cayde frowns. "Have you talked to the doctor?"

Dean nods. "Have they talked to you, yet?"

Cayde licks his dry lips. "Can someone get me some water?"

I nod, pushing myself out of the chair and going to get one of the small paper cups. Dean is still hovering, waiting for Cayde to answer his question.

"Yeah," Cayde says finally, once he's had a chance to drink a little of the water. "They talked to me when I came out of the recovery room, before they gave me more pain meds and knocked me out again." His mouth twists, and I can see his eyes darken, that familiar anger returning to his face. "They told me I'm fucked for the rest of the season. Extensive meniscal tear, I believe was the diagnosis. When I suggested that maybe I'd heal faster than they thought, the doctor warned me that there's a serious chance I might not ever play again."

The room goes very quiet for a moment. "Yeah," Dean says finally. "That's what they told me, too."

"It's fucking ridiculous," Cayde growls. "I might be completely fucked, and for what? Not even a player from the other team pulling some shit."

"It was one of your teammates," Dean says quietly. "Do you think it was on purpose?"

Cayde laughs, a dark, bitter sound. "Yeah, it was fucking on purpose. I don't have a single doubt."

"Did you see who it was?" I interject. "Or have some idea?"

Cayde looks at me then, and the anger in his face is hard to look back at, like staring directly into the sun. "Yeah," he says

finally, and then looks back at Dean.
Romero. Winter's younger brother."

"It was Grayson

DEAN

I'm not the angry one in the household. My self-control might be a mechanism to keep from letting loose the chaos that I sometimes want to unleash, but it's carefully honed. I'm calm, cool, collected—almost all of the time.

Lately, though, it's been harder to keep a grip on that. Harder to keep from letting it slip.

And when Cayde says the name of the player who's benched him for the rest of the season—maybe made it so he'll never play again—I see red.

I'm starting to get a taste of what Cayde feels like all the time.

Grayson Romero.

Winter's little brother.

And I very much doubt he came up with the idea himself.

I manage to convince Athena to go back to the house with Jaxon. She doesn't need to be at the hospital when Cayde's father gets there, and she knows it, but it's as hard as expected to convince her to leave. She wants to come with me—she's too smart not to know where I'm headed if it's not back to the house as well—but I tell her firmly to go with Jaxon. I can see in her face that she wants to fight, and the only thing that stops it from turning into an argument in the hospital hallway is Jaxon reminding her that she has a fight tomorrow night, and that she needs to get some rest.

That works, finally. She's not pleased about it, but she goes. Which is saying something, because convincing Athena to do anything that isn't her idea these days is pretty fucking difficult.

I laugh to myself as I watch them leave, heading for Jaxon's bike as I go to my car, shaking my head. I would never have guessed it, but I like that Athena found her fighting spirit. Somewhere around the time the Sons tried to take her from us, when we brought her back, I realized that she was a lot more than the pet we thought we were given. She's a force to be reckoned with, and under different circumstances, I might even have wanted to bring her with me to back me up.

But I need to handle this alone.

Our fathers really didn't know what the fuck they were doing when they picked Athena to be the sacrifice.

It doesn't take me long to figure out where Winter is. I have her phone tracked, unbeknownst to her, because there's no way in hell after everything she's pulled that I don't want to know where she is at all times. I'd figured she had something up her sleeve.

I just didn't think she'd get her brother to do her dirty work for her.

It's a bit of a drive away from the hospital, but by the time I get to the mansion where the little dot on my map says she is, she hasn't budged. I know exactly where I am—Eleanor Blackwood's house, one of the richest girls at the school who isn't Winter. The Blackwoods are an offshoot of the Blackmoor family, and while they don't have any of the ranking or claim that the Blackmoors have, just money, they do their best to pretend that isn't the case. They put on a lot of airs, but in the end, they're just distant cousins.

Eleanor was probably seething with jealousy when Winter was supposed to marry me. And now that the engagement is off—if Winter has even admitted it—she's probably thrilled to pieces. I'm surprised their friendship survived it, to be honest.

I ring the doorbell, like a gentleman. I could bang on the door, like Cayde probably would, or try to find an open window to sneak through like Jaxon certainly would, but I'm nothing if not polite. Winter is going to get the best side of me, right up until she realizes I know, and then I'm going to show her the worst. She thinks she's seen it already, but she definitely hasn't.

I'm not sure anyone has. But I'm through with these fucking games, and I'm through with people I care about getting hurt.

Eleanor is the one who answers the door, and she looks utterly shocked and not entirely pleased to see me. That tells me immediately that Winter *has* admitted our engagement is off—which surprises the hell out of me. *More likely, it got out without her meaning for it to.* I can't imagine that she would admit defeat that easily.

However it got out, Eleanor probably thinks I'm here to try to win her back, and is ready to go right back to being green-eyed and jealous as fuck of Winter.

That couldn't be further from the truth.

"I'm here to see Winter," I tell her calmly, and I see her expression turn even more sullen. "Can you go and get her for me, please?"

"We're having a girls' night." Eleanor purses her lips at me. "No boys allowed."

"Good thing I'm a grown man then," I tell her as pleasantly as I can manage. "Winter, please."

Eleanor looks at me darkly. "I'm not some servant for you to order around—"

"You're a Blackwood. Which means you are, in fact, below me in the pecking order of this town. And if I happened to mention to the wrong person that you kept me here on the porch, arguing with me when I asked you politely—"

"What the fuck is going on?"

Winter appears behind Eleanor, her flame-red hair knotted on top of her head in a bun, a look that isn't particularly

flattering even on someone as stunningly beautiful as she always has been. Still, beauty doesn't make up for being rotten on the inside, and Winter, I've learned, is as spoiled and rotten as they come.

I'm so fucking glad I didn't agree to marry her.

"He just showed up," Eleanor starts to complain, turning towards her friend, and I take that opportunity to step into the open doorway, grabbing Winter hard by the elbow and dragging her out onto the porch.

"You can't—" Eleanor starts to yelp, but I grab the door handle with my other hand, bodily knocking her back with the door itself as I yank it shut.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Winter snaps as I drag her down the porch, intending to pull her around to one side of the mansion where no one passing by will be able to get a good look or listen in on our conversation.

"Ah yes. I always did think you had a filthy mouth." I haul her behind me, ignoring her yelps of pain as my fingers dig into her elbow. "I looked forward to showing you what it was really good for, at one point. But now I don't think I'd let you near my cock with a ten foot pole."

"I'd fucking bite it off," Winter spits, looking at me with blue eyes glinting with rage.

"Oh, I believe it," I agree. "Just one of the many reasons I called off our engagement."

"You humiliated me—"

I laugh at that, wrenching her around the side of the building and throwing her up bodily against the side of it, blocking her in so that there's no way she can try to wrench free and run. "Oh, Winter, you have no fucking idea what real humiliation is." I move a little closer to her, close enough that I could touch her if I wanted to, and I look down into her eyes, letting my voice turn dark and smoky. "You have absolutely no idea about the things I would have made you do if you'd been my wife." My hand tightens on her elbow, and I smile coldly down at her. "The things I would have done to you."

Winter flushes pink, looking away from me as if she's embarrassed to even meet my eyes. I chuckle, the dark sound filling the air between us.

"Oh." I reach out with my other hand, grabbing her chin and turning it sharply back so that she's forced to look at me. "You thought about what some of those things might be, didn't you? I can see it in your face. You *fantasized* about them, about the dirty, filthy things that Dean Blackmoor might demand of his bride. After all, you're hardly innocent. But I promise, you can't even imagine. Not even laying in your bed at night, playing with that little pussy that's probably never been fucked right no matter how many times you've tried."

Winter is flaming red now, her chest and neck and face nearly the color of her hair. "Fuck you!" she spits out.

"Mm, no." I wipe at my cheek, where some of her spit landed. "You won't be getting the chance to do that. Not anymore."

Winter sneers at me. "Because of *her*. Because of that little whore your father gave you and the other boys. That biker trash. She was supposed to be your *pet*, Dean. You weren't supposed to fucking fall in love with her. She's made you into an idiot." She lifts her chin, glaring back at me. "I guess I should be glad that I didn't marry you. I wouldn't want to marry someone stupid enough to fall in love with a sloppy, disgusting cunt like the one you've got living in your house right now."

The rage bubbles up in me, hot and fast and thick, and I react before I can think it all the way through. My hand connects with her cheek before I can stop myself, hard enough to send her head swinging sideways as I lunge forward, pinning her against the wall with my weight, my arm near her throat.

"Talk about Athena that way again. I fucking dare you."

"Oh, big bad Blackmoor man." Winter turns to look at me, her cheek already reddening. "Going around hitting girls."

"You're not just any girl. You're a manipulative, calculated, cunning little bitch. And you're the reason my best friend is in

the hospital right now. So I'd think very carefully about what you say next."

Winter blinks at me, as innocently as someone like her possibly could. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Like fuck you don't." I grab her shoulders, shaking her hard and tossing her back against the wall, still blocking her in. "Your snot-nosed little brother didn't think of destroying Cayde's knee on the field all on his own. Either you're trying to get me back because I said I wouldn't marry you, or there's something bigger going on here. And you're going to tell me what it is."

As much as I viscerally hate her, Winter has balls of steel. She looks right back at me, not giving an inch. "You think you have so much power, Dean, but you only have what you've been given. You're working on borrowed time. You and your little friends and that whore taking up my spot in your bed need to step carefully. Your father is the one who's really powerful, Dean. He holds all the cards, and he won't stop at anything to make sure that you fulfill the destiny he set for you. Win the game, marry the girl, inherit the town. You already did one of those. Now get your shit together, Dean, and finish it. You don't have a choice."

I hiss through my teeth, grabbing her by her upper arms and shaking her again, hard. I can see the marks my fingers are leaving in her delicate skin, marks that will probably bruise, but I can't bring myself to care. "Like *fuck* I don't," I snarl at her. "I have as much of a fucking choice as anyone else. And I've made mine."

Winter just laughs, using every bit of strength she has to wrench herself out of my grasp, even as I see her wince from the pain. "You're going to pay for that, Dean Blackmoor," she says, lifting her chin. "You're going to pay for all of it."

And then, before I can grab her again, she makes a run for it, straight back into the house, slamming the door behind her.

I could go after her, but there's no point. I'd have to apply a lot more force to get more out of her, and I feel suddenly exhausted. I hate Winter to my bones, but the idea of beating

her black and blue or hurting her to the point of real damage suddenly doesn't hold the appeal that it might have a few minutes ago, when I was in the grip of my rage.

She's a vicious little bitch, but I doubt she set this all up herself. Someone else is using her, and in that respect, she's no different from any of us. We've all been used by our families, at some point.

It's time that we put an end to this.

Less than two weeks, and it will be over, one way or another.

I'm ready.

ATHENA

I don't feel the thrill of going to my first fight that I'd thought I would. Cayde is back home, but he's in bed, recovering from the surgery with a pair of crutches to get around on—something that's going to complicate things when it comes to carrying out our plan for Halloween night, such as it is. I wouldn't say it's the best plan, or even a really great one.

But it's the best we've got. And tonight we're meant to be gathering whatever information we can about any moves that the Sons might be being told to make before then.

No one is going to talk to me. I don't have a place there, no one knows me, or if they did recognize me it wouldn't be fondly. Jaxon, on the other hand, can move through the crowd, listen and talk, and maybe pick up something here and there. So tonight, I'll do the fighting, and he'll do the talking.

Dean hasn't said much since he came back last night, a black look on his face as he went straight upstairs to his room. I have a good idea of where he went, but whatever happened, he clearly didn't want to talk about it. And if it had been productive, he wouldn't have looked so angry.

I feel anxious and jittery as we ride out to the warehouse for the fights, even the usually soothing speed of the motorcycle and the feeling of my arms wrapped around Jaxon not enough to calm me down. I can feel everything looming, way too close and far too uncertain, and I'm conscious of the clock ticking,

chipping away at the time we all have left together second by second.

I never would have thought it would be so precious to me. And now there's hardly any left.

“Focus,” Jaxon says when we reach the edge of the warehouse, looking down at me. “This isn't training in the gym with me. They're going to be rough, and brutal, and they're not going to pull any punches. If you're not paying attention, or you drop your guard, you're going to get hurt. And I don't want that. I also don't want to deal with Dean and Cayde if I don't bring you back in one piece,” he adds wryly. “So remember what we've practiced, Athena, You can do it.”

I nod, but I'm not so sure. All the training we did in the gym suddenly seems far away, and the excitement I'd felt at participating in a real fight seems foolish. I'm very aware that whoever I fight tonight is going to try to win whatever it takes, and these aren't professional bouts. These are underground fights, without a whole fucking lot of rules.

I'm going to have to be just as focused and just as intent on winning, and right now all I want is to be back at the house, or maybe out at the cliff with Jaxon. Anywhere else to savor what I have left still instead of taking yet more blows.

But we're here, and I'm determined not to fuck it up.

The girl that they pit me against is bigger than me—taller by a few inches with plenty of muscle weight on me. It's sure as hell not like a fight where they actually pay attention to weight classes, not that I'd ever thought it would be.

But I quickly find out, one round in, that I have an advantage. I'm not as fast as I could be, it's something we've been trying to work on in practice, but I'm faster than her. She hits like a fucking freight train, but I can dodge a lot of her hits, catching her in the belly and back even if I have a harder time getting to her face. And I can keep away from the ropes, which I quickly pinpoint is her strategy. She wants to back me into a corner so she can whale on me, because she doesn't have the dexterity to really catch me and deliver the hard hits she needs to knock me out if we're away from the ropes.

That's not to say she doesn't get some hits in. She definitely does, and by the time we're five rounds in, I'm bleeding from my nose and lip, and there's several places that are definitely going to be bruised. I want to look for Jaxon, but I know better than to get distracted. I need to win this fight, and I won't be able to do that if I'm trying to find him in the crowd. We came into the warehouse separately on purpose anyway, so no one who might recognize either of us would pinpoint that we're together.

Even without looking for Jaxon, I'm not sure I'm going to win. I'm getting tired faster than I should, and I know if I lose too much steam, I'll lose what little advantage I have. And I *want* to win, not just because I want Jaxon to be proud of me and because I want to feel proud of myself, to prove that it was the right choice to let me do this—but also just because I don't want to know what it would feel like to have this fucking beast of a woman knock me out.

It comes close. Very close. More than once, I think it's the moment that she's got me, and I'm going to be out. But then, by some miracle, I manage to get under her guard, and deliver a shot to her ribs that leaves her reeling. I come up, darting into her space before she can strike, and give her a sharp uppercut, straight to the chin. Hard and swift, just like Jaxon taught me.

She drops like dead weight to the floor of the ring.

It takes a minute for it to sink in that I'm the winner. I feel a little dizzy, probably from the hits I took to the jaw, and I desperately want to sit down. Instead, I force myself to hang at the edge of the ring, watching the remaining fights. I want to find Jaxon, but I follow the plan, and wait. We came up with it for a reason, and more than anything now, we need to stick to our plans, and follow it through to the end.

It's the only chance we have.

I don't see him until I make my way out of the warehouse at the agreed upon time, feeling sore in every muscle and bone and desperately wanting a hot bath. Jaxon meets me down the

street, waiting with his bike, and I see the concern on his face when he gets a good look at mine.

“How much of it did you see?” I ask, letting him take a tissue and dab at my nose and lip. They’ve stopped bleeding, but my mouth is going to be sore for a bit.

“Enough.” Jaxon tosses the tissue away, and I can see the pride in his face when he looks down at me. “You did a hell of a job, Athena. I was pissed when I saw who you were up against. I’m not going to lie, I thought she was going to destroy you in a couple rounds.”

“Thanks,” I say dryly, reaching for my helmet.

“You know exactly what I mean. She outweighed you by half of one of you. But you made the best of it and figured out how to use it to your advantage. And you fucking beat her. I’m fucking proud as hell of you.”

I pause, looking over at him, and I can see how utterly sincere he is. “Thank you,” I say softly. “I’ve got one more before Halloween, right?”

“Yeah.” Jaxon runs his hand through his hair. “I don’t know how much it’s going to help. I didn’t find out a lot. If the Sons do have something up their sleeve, orders from higher up or otherwise, they’re not talking about it. Wisely,” he adds. “I do think that points to all of this being orchestrated by our fathers, though, and not just a revenge vendetta that the Sons are on because of your dad. That would be a personal, club thing. But if our fathers are running this, if it’s part of a bigger scheme to make sure that we don’t succeed in fucking up what they’ve built, they’d be wise to keep it close to the vest. Talking wouldn’t earn them any favors.”

I nod. “Yeah, that makes sense. And it’s what we thought. I know it’s not *good* news, but at least it fits.”

“Yeah.” Jaxon swings onto the bike, his face grim. “This town is just as fucked up as I ever thought it was.”

I cling to him on the ride back, feeling every jolt and bump in the road in my sore body. Still, I don’t want the ride to end. I feel the best when Jaxon and I are on his bike together, when

it feels like we're suspended somewhere between reality and possibility, when it's possible to keep the world at arm's length.

"Sometimes I just want to keep going forever," I say quietly when we reach the manor house, unbuckling my helmet. "Just as far and as fast as we possibly could."

Jaxon goes very still in front of me, and I immediately regret saying it aloud. I know that above all, he wants that. He was willing to walk away from everything once—family, familiar things, his friends, his inheritance—to have freedom with the woman he loved. And I know he'd do it again. I love all three of them, but above anything else, Jaxon loves me. And he'd walk away from Dean and Cayde and everything else in an instant to have a life with me that didn't involve Blackmoor or anything to do with it.

"We could," Jaxon says quietly, his helmet in his hands. "Right now. I'll start the bike back up and we'll go. Just as far as we can. We could leave together."

"We'd be letting them win," I say quietly. "And who's to say they wouldn't catch us on the way out, or before we got too far? Who's to say the same thing that happened to Natalie wouldn't happen to me, or to us?"

Jaxon's jaw tightens, and I see the look in his eyes, his shoulders tense. "I don't care who wins," he says angrily, his voice low and dark. "As long as I have you. They can have this fucking town. I don't give a shit about it." He looks back at me, his expression resigned. "I know you want your revenge, though. You need it."

I look at him, surprised. "Don't you want it too? *Need* it? Revenge for Natalie? For everything they took away from you?"

Jaxon shrugs, hanging his helmet off of one handlebar. "I gave up on revenge a long time ago," he says quietly. "I figured it wasn't possible. If I'm being honest, it kind of still feels like it isn't." He hesitates, taking a breath. "It kind of feels like we're going to die down there. And if it was just me, I wouldn't really fucking care. But it's not." He reaches for

me, helping me down from the bike. "It's you. And I'd rather drive away tonight than take that chance."

I reach up to touch his face gently. "I'll be fine," I promise him. "We're all in this together. We're not going to die. I won't let that happen."

Jaxon smiles wanly. "You're the bravest, fiercest girl I've ever known, Athena. More than anyone. But you're just one person. Together, we're just a few. And we're going up against something that's lasted for hundreds of years. We can't have been the first to think like this."

"Maybe not." I shrug. "But we're going to be the last." I lift my chin, looking squarely at him. "In ten days, Jaxon, Blackmoor is finished."

ATHENA

To my surprise, Dean and Cayde are waiting for us when we go inside. They're in the living room, a bottle of champagne in a bucket of ice, and both of them already nursing drinks made from some clear liquor.

"Are you supposed to be drinking while you're on painkillers?" I ask Cayde, narrowing my eyes as we walk in. "I don't think so."

Cayde laughs, lifting his glass in my direction. "Probably not. But fuck it. I might be dead soon."

Dean ignores him, looking at me with that same concern that I'd seen on Jaxon's face when I'd met him after the fight. "Jesus, Athena, your face."

"You should see the other girl."

"She fucking won," Jaxon says, pride evident in his expression and voice. "It was a close fight, but she beat a girl that was just about twice her size. Took her straight down eight rounds in."

"And I need a hot shower, at the very least." I glance at them. "Save some for me. I'll be back down in a bit."

I don't linger in the shower too long, just long enough to get the blood and sweat washed off of me and let the hot water sink into my skin, easing some of my bruises and aches. When I feel closer to human again, I get out and dry off, not looking too closely at my face in the mirror as I towel dry my hair and throw on a pair of yoga pants and a tight tank top with no bra

underneath. I know the boys will enjoy that, and more than anything, I want to enjoy a night with them, one where there's something to celebrate.

Someone got the fire going in the living room, and the room feels warm and close when I walk in, the boys laughing about something, the sharp tang of alcohol in the air and the male scent of three very masculine men. I feel a tremor of something run through me, a need that could never be satisfied by just one of them. I look at them sitting there, before they catch a glimpse of me, my three boys.

My arrogant, cruel lord, my savage brute prince, my merciless king, gentle only when I'm in his arms.

And me, their queen. Their goddess.

Tonight, all I want is the three of them, all together, worshipping me like one. Making me feel like there's nothing else in the world except me and them, and all the glorious things that they can make me feel.

There will be plenty of time for reality later.

I take the champagne Dean offers me, drinking it a little faster than I should. The fizz of it feels as if it goes straight to my blood, easing my aches and lifting my spirits. I squeeze in between Cayde and Dean, listening as Jaxon recounts what he saw of my fight, and then I fill in, telling them the rest. There's the clinking of glasses and the looks of pride on all three of their faces, their reservations about my fighting disappeared like the bubbles in my glass.

It's hard to know exactly how long it takes for the mood to shift to something else. At some point Dean takes my chin gently in his fingers, careful of the bruises on my face, and kisses me, his tongue brushing past the place on my lip where the girl managed to get in a hit. It hurts, but I don't care. I've had worse, from others and from them, and tonight I want it all. Not a scene in the study, not something set up for me to submit to them while they take out their feelings on my body.

I just want the four of us, doing whatever we feel like. I want to feel normal—or as normal as a girl can feel when she's in

love with three men, and plotting to overthrow a town.

Dean takes the empty glass out of my hand, setting it aside, and I hear his groan as he deepens the kiss, leaning me back against the couch as he moves between my thighs. When he's had his fill of my lips, he moves to my throat, his tongue running over the fading spot where he'd marked me, down to my cleavage, sliding down my body until he's kneeling between my legs, reaching up to pull my yoga pants down my hips.

He grabs my waist in his hands and pulls me so that my ass is on the edge of the couch, spreading my thighs so that he can see all of me, laid out in front of him like a meal he can't wait to devour.

And then—oh god—he fucking does.

I cry out the minute his tongue swirls over my clit, his hands on my inner thighs as he holds me wide open for him, his mouth seeking out all the spots that he knows I love. Cayde shifts, moving awkwardly towards me, and I turn to kiss him, seeing the hard bulge of his cock already tenting his shorts. On the other side of me, I feel Jaxon's hand on my breast, pinching at my nipple through the thin material of the tank top, until suddenly his lips are on the cotton, sucking at my breast through it, his teeth sinking lightly into my stiffening nipple as I arch and moan, my hips grinding against Dean's face.

So many mouths, so many hands. Lips against mine, hands on my breasts, my waist, under my tank top, pulling it off. Dean's tongue between my thighs, circling my clit, flicking against it, sucking it into his mouth, his fingers sliding upwards, sinking into me as he pushes me towards a climax that I desperately need. I feel dizzy with pleasure, caught in the swirl of hands and lips and tongues and bodies, clothes coming off until there's not a shred of covered flesh, Dean managing to keep eating me out even as he strips naked. I'm shuddering, trembling, muscles tensing as I near the edge, and I feel Cayde's rough hand on my breast, squeezing, pulling at my nipple as Jaxon turns my face to his, kissing me hot and slow and deep as Dean thrusts his fingers deeply inside of me

and pushes his tongue against my clit, licking as if his life depends on it as he sucks my sensitive flesh into his mouth.

The orgasm hits me, hard and fast, and I don't know whose flesh my nails sink into, who I grab onto as it crashes through me, my back arching hard and my eyes rolling back as I lock my thighs around Dean's head, grinding against him, coming hard on his tongue. He keeps licking, pushing me through the orgasm, drawing it out for as long as he can. And the moment it starts to ebb, there's suddenly another pair of hands on my inner thighs, long-fingered hands that I know are Jaxon's, and another mouth taking Dean's place.

Fuck. Dean is kissing me then, guiding my hand to his stiff, throbbing cock as he plunges his tongue into my mouth and I taste myself on him. Someone else takes my other hand, and I feel my fingers wrapped around Cayde's thick cock, his mouth on my neck as I stroke them both, hips bucking wildly against Jaxon's face as he lashes his tongue against my swollen, over sensitive clit. He wastes no time sliding two fingers inside of me, curling them expertly as he finds that spot deep inside of me, pressing against it as he rolls his tongue over my clit again and again, and I gasp aloud, feeling another climax coming quickly on the heels of the first. I stroke Cayde and Dean faster, squeezing their cocks, the feeling of their hot, hard lengths in my hand as I start to come again driving me wild. I want to suck them, fuck them, take them all, and I scream my orgasm against Dean's mouth, the sound half-muffled in the kiss as I come on Jaxon's face, my arousal flooding over his tongue as I lock my legs around his shoulders, bucking and writhing as I strain for every ounce of pleasure that he can give me.

I'm trembling when Jaxon pulls away, my body still twitching with the aftershocks, but I slide down from the couch, kneeling in front of Cayde between his spread legs. I slide my hands up his broad, muscled thighs, squeezing as I bend down, taking him in my mouth, swirling my tongue around the tip of him as I take as much of him in my mouth and throat as I can, bobbing up and down as I run my tongue up the length of him while he groans, his hand fisting in my hair.

Dean and Jaxon are on either side of him, and I reach for them too, stroking them as I suck Cayde, wanting to touch all of them at once, to have them all at once in any way I can. I come back up for air, leaning forward to take Dean into my mouth, rubbing the flat of my tongue underneath his cock until he tips his head back, groaning with pleasure, and then I turn to Jaxon, sliding down the length of him as I suck, his hand tangling in my hair as he pulls me down, his hips thrusting forward as he allows himself to fuck my throat for just a moment, as long as he knows I can take it.

I keep switching between them, sucking and stroking, until they're all shuddering with pleasure, muscles rigid and tensed with the effort to hold back, the air thick with the scent of sex and filled with the sound of male pleasure, and then I rock backwards on my heels, turning to shove the coffee table out of the way as I move backwards on the carpet.

I know what I want tonight, and it only takes a second for me to get them to grasp exactly what it is.

It takes a second to get Cayde on the floor, with his injury, but we manage. I stroke him as Jaxon lies down too in the opposite direction, his legs on either side of Cayde.

"I want her ass," Dean says with a thick, lustful growl, his hand wrapped around his cock as he looks at me hungrily. "I wanted it the other night, but we got interrupted."

Something on Cayde's face looks like he wants to make a remark, but I don't give them time. I bend over Cayde and Jaxon, holding their cocks together with one hand as I lick and suck, getting them as wet as possible as Dean's fingers work between my thighs, spreading my arousal between my cheeks as I arch back against his hand, nearing another climax from the erotic scene in front of me alone. I want this so fucking bad, all three of them at once, and I'm dripping wet, so soaked that it might actually be possible.

Dean waits while I straddle the other two men, my hand wrapped around their cocks as I slowly slide down, the tips pressed against my entrance, parting me as I start to sink onto them.

“*Fuck,*” Cayde groans as he slips inside of me, him and Jaxon at the same time, and the moment both their cockheads are inside of me I cry out, the feeling of fullness so intense that I don’t know if I’ll be able to take more. On their own, they fill me up, but together it’s almost too much, pain and pleasure to the point of making me dizzy.

“That’s right,” Cayde growls, reaching up between my thighs, his fingers finding my clit and circling it, sending a burst of pleasure. “Take our fucking cocks, little Saint. Fucking take them both—” he tips his head back, groaning with a sound of pleasure so deep that it’s almost pain as I slide down another inch, and then another, bit by bit until after what feels like forever, I sink down fully onto them both, Jaxon and Cayde’s cocks buried inside of me.

I hold myself there for a second, letting myself absorb the sensation, and Cayde’s fingers are still working my clit, rubbing and pinching until I can feel my thigh muscles starting to tremble, my whole body shaking as ripples of pleasure start from what feels like my very toes, all the way up through me until I’m grinding against them, my back arched as I ride them both through an orgasm that feels like nothing else I’ve ever experienced.

It doesn’t feel like a normal climax. It feels like it doesn’t stop, the ripples starting again as soon as I start to move. I can’t ride them both as hard as I would one of them, but I roll my hips, moving up and down their shafts a few inches as I grind against them, and behind me, Jaxon lets out a moan of pure pleasure, his hands gripping my ass hard as he bucks up into me.

“God, it’s so fucking *tight,*” he moans. “It’s so fucking good, holy fuck, I’ve never—*god.*”

“I’m not waiting much longer,” Dean growls. “Just tell me when, Athena.”

I breathe in, a deep, shuddering gasp for air as another wave of pleasure ripples through me, and I shift atop them, mentally preparing myself for Dean. I want it, I want it more than anything, with a sort of fierce need that makes me ache just

thinking about it, my clit throbbing under Cayde's touch, but I know it won't be easy.

"Okay," I whisper, my head tipping back as I grind down onto them both, their groans sending electric shocks of pleasure across my skin as I moan, trembling with how fucking good it feels.

And then Dean is behind me, straddling Jaxon, one hand on my waist as he guides himself towards my ass, pushing his cockhead between my cheeks. His cock feels cool and slick with something to ease him inside of me, and as he presses the tip against my asshole, I think for a second that I can't take it. There's no way. I'm already so full, fuller than I've ever been, and it's never been easy for me to take any of the men in my ass.

But I also know Dean isn't about to stop, unless I absolutely tell him to. And I'm determined to do it.

I want all three of my men, at once. I want them all inside of me, and I want to come for them, all three of them, on their cocks all at the same time. Just the thought is almost enough to tip me over the edge again, and Dean feels me relax a fraction.

"That's it," he groans, pushing his cock forward. "Make her come, Cayde," he growls. "She's close, I can tell. Get her there."

It doesn't take much. His fingers on my clit, combined with his and Jaxon's cocks inside of me, and Dean pushing forward, is enough to topple me over the edge. I cry out, my nails digging into Cayde's chest as I come hard, writhing on the two cocks stuffed in my pussy as Dean surges forward, taking advantage of the moment of my pleasure to get the head of his cock inside my ass. I moan helplessly as he thrusts forwards, my hands pressed against Cayde's chest, nails scratching at his flesh as Dean holds onto my hips, pushing forward inch by inch until suddenly, somehow, he's fully inside of me, buried inside of my ass, and all three of them are inside of me.

It's almost too much. It *is* too much, but it feels so fucking good. I'm past the point of having individual orgasms. My body is just sensation, just ripples of pleasure making me

shudder and moan and twist on their cocks, and they rock against me, hips bucking as they find a rhythm.

“Fuck, Athena—” Dean’s fingers squeeze my hips, his voice ragged with pleasure. “I’m not going to last long, your ass feels so fucking *good*.” He grinds against me, barely thrusting, panting. “So fucking hot and tight, oh my fucking god—”

“None of us are,” Jaxon groans breathlessly. “I’ve never felt anything like this, *fuck*—”

“I’m fucking close too,” Cayde growls. His hips arch up at the same time as Jaxon’s do, pushing their cocks as deeply inside of me as they can go, and I rock atop them, the slightest slide of them in and out of me pushing me to heights of pleasure that I couldn’t have imagined existed. “I’m going to fill you up with my cum, *fuck*, Athena, I’m going to come so fucking hard—”

“Wait,” I gasp, hardly able to speak. “I want all of you at once. I want you to all fill me up at once, oh god, oh, oh—” The pleasure crashes through me again, making me twist atop them, my head falling back as I moan, and I feel Dean’s lips on my neck, his teeth grazing my skin as he pushes himself as deeply as he can into my ass, rocking against me.

“Tell me when you’re about to go,” Cayde grinds out. “Because I’m right fucking there.”

I’ve never felt anything like it. I’m caught among the three of them, shuddering with near-constant pleasure as the three men race to catch up with each other, thrusting and grinding as they drive themselves towards their climaxes, all of them buried inside of me, using me, filling me past the point that I ever thought I could take, and I feel both Dean and Cayde’s fingers between my legs, toying with my clit as they groan, the air full of the sounds of their pleasure and the scent of our skin and sweat.

“Now,” Dean moans, and I can feel him, rock hard and throbbing inside of my ass. I can feel all three of them like never before, the tightness and fullness making it so that I can feel every ridge of their cocks, how rock hard they are, the heat of them burning me up from the inside.

“Oh god, yes,” Jaxon gasps, his hands squeezing my hips, and Dean and Cayde’s fingers speed up on my clit, pushing me towards an orgasm so powerful and violent that I don’t know if I can take it.

But I want to. I want it all.

And then all three of them start to come at once.

Their groans of ecstasy blend together, mingling as I feel Jaxon and Cayde burst together, flooding my pussy with their cum as they throb inside of me, both of them bucking and writhing against me, grabbing and squeezing at me as they come harder than I’ve ever felt. I can feel Dean letting go too, his fingers pinching my clit as he roars out his pleasure, his cock harder than I’ve ever felt it, the heat of his cum filling my ass as he grinds hard against my ass, and the moment he feels me starting to come too he grabs my ass with his other hand, squeezing as he comes.

I don’t know how long it goes on for. My back is arched so hard that it feels like it might break, my head tipped back against Dean’s shoulder as I gasp and moan, and I feel Cayde and Jaxon’s hands on my breasts, sensation overwhelming me until I don’t know where I end and they begin anymore. I feel wanton, depraved, worshipped, filled with them, and it’s everything I wanted.

Everything I needed.

ATHENA

Somehow, eventually, we all come untangled. We end up in the massive shower in Dean's bathroom, three of us, Cayde waiting until I can help him without him falling trying to get in and out of his. I feel so wrung out that it's hard to stand, but somehow I manage to get clean, and I give both Dean and Jaxon one more kiss before I go to Cayde's room.

He gives me a look as I knock once and step inside. "This is fucked," he mutters. "I need fucking help getting in and out of the shower."

"At least you have me to help you. It could be one of the guys." I look at him, giving him the same sort of smirk he loves to give me as I help him. I can tell he's pissed off by all of it, still irritable even after the sex, although I can hardly blame him. His entire year—maybe more, has changed in an instant. But it's like that for all of us now. None of us know what the future looks like.

"Are you staying?" he asks when he's out of the shower, ignoring my offers of help as he limps towards the bed with the help of his crutches.

"I'd planned on it." I climb onto the bed, on the side I usually sleep on, and Cayde glances at me.

"It's been a while since you stayed in here with me."

"I'd meant to, the other night," I say softly. "But things didn't go the way I thought they would, when we—"

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Cayde says curtly. His expression is darkening, storm clouds gathering, but I push forward anyway. Just like with Jaxon, I know this conversation needs to be had.

“I know,” I say gently. “But Cayde—everything is about to change, one way or another. We have to be honest with each other. And—” I take a deep breath, steeling myself. I don’t want to be the one to say it first to him. But I know with Cayde, it’s necessary. He might meet me halfway, but he’ll never be able to take the first step. Whatever has happened to him, it’s scarred him in ways far beyond the marks on his back.

I reach for him then, threading my fingers through his, and I feel him stiffen. “Athena—” his voice is almost a warning. “Athena, we don’t need to do this. We—”

“We do,” I say firmly. “And whatever happens, I want you to know.”

His eyes meet mine, and I see something in them that I hadn’t expected to.

Fear.

“Athena—”

“Cayde, I love you.” I squeeze his hands tightly, blurting out the words before he can stop me. “I know it might seem strange. I know out of everyone, you and I have had the strangest road to get here. You’re a brutal, damaged, terrifying man, and you’ve torn me apart in ways that I can’t begin to describe. But you’ve put me together, too.”

He doesn’t say anything, and so I plunge forward. “Each one of you, Cayde—you and Dean and Jaxon—there’s something in each of you that’s in me, too. And with you—”

“Anger.” He says it in a low voice, rough and deep, and it reverberates somewhere deep inside of me.

I nod, swallowing hard. “We’re both full of it, Cayde. At the world, at ourselves, at everything that’s happened to us. We both want to tear apart the ones who hurt us. You tried to tear me apart instead, and for a while, it worked. But you didn’t

count on the fact that I could give it right back to you.” I can feel tears filling my eyes, and I laugh, clutching his hands in mine. “It’s strange and violent and it’s probably really fucking unhealthy, but at this point, who the fuck cares?” I look into his eyes, green and burning, and I know he’s hearing me. I know I’m getting there, and I don’t stop.

“If you want to burn the world down, Cayde, I’ll do it with you. If you need to rage, if you need me to take it from you, I will. And you’ll take mine from me. And maybe, somewhere along the way, we’ll leave some of it so we can finally have some fucking peace.”

“I don’t know if that’s possible.” He takes a deep, shuddering breath. “Athena—”

“Cayde—”

“No, you listen to me now.” His jaw clenches, his eyes darkening. “I wasn’t even supposed to have this fucking life. My brother died because a worthless piece of shit got behind the wheel while he was drunk and plowed into him. If not for that, he’d be the one in this bed with you. No—scratch that.” Cayde shakes his head. “You’re here because my father wanted to push me into trying to win the game. So you wouldn’t even be here. You’d be living your life, and you’d never have gone through any of this. None of it would have ever happened. And—”

“I’m sorry your brother died,” I tell him, looking fiercely into his eyes. “But I’m not sorry I’m here. Not anymore. I *love* you, Cayde, no matter what that means or how hard it is or how we tear each other apart sometimes. I love Dean too, and Jaxon, and I want all three of you. I want this, and if we come out on the other side of Halloween still alive, that’s not going to change. I’m in this, with all of you. I mean it.”

“Maybe so,” Cayde says, his voice deep and bitter. “But you can’t take it away, Athena. You can’t change how my father beat the shit out of me, just because I wasn’t Daniel. Because I could never measure up to him. You can’t change how I watched one of the Sons string up the man who caused the

accident, while my father stood there and watched, and made me watch. You know what that does to a teenage boy?"

"I can imagine."

"No. No you fucking can't." Cayde hisses it through his teeth, his chest heaving. "My father turned me into someone I didn't even want to be. Everything I am—the way I look, the sports I play, the life I lead, right down to being here, someone else chose for me. I've never chosen a single fucking thing for myself, until—" he takes a shuddering breath, and suddenly, as if something shifted inside of him, I feel his hands wrap around mine, too.

"Until I decided not to let Dean win," he says quietly. "Until I decided to believe in you. And I've never regretted that, little Saint. I've regretted every single thing about my life up until then. But not that. And whatever happens next, I won't."

I can't find a single word to say. My heart is pounding in my chest, and I cling to him, feeling suddenly breathless.

"So yeah." Cayde shakes his head, his mouth twitching. "Yeah, Athena, I fucking love you. You're the only thing I've ever chosen for myself, and this path you've taken me down is the only one that's ever been my own. I love you."

"I love you too." I whisper it, leaning forward to kiss him, and I feel his hand go around the back of my head, crushing my mouth to his. "I love you, Cayde. I hated you once, and fuck, sometimes I still do. But I love you, too."

"We're in this together now," Cayde murmurs. "All of us. You're the only woman I've ever said that to, Athena. The only woman I've ever loved. And if I lose you—"

"You won't." I whisper the words fiercely against his mouth. "None of you are going to lose me, and I'm not going to lose any of you. We have to believe that. We *have* to."

Cayde nods. "I'm not going to be a whole hell of a lot of a help, crippled like this. But I'll do my best."

"It's not much of a plan anyway," I say with a grim laugh. "But we'll do our best to succeed. And succeed or fail, we'll all do it together."

Cayde kisses me again, his mouth hard and hot on mine, and we fall back onto the mattress together, all hands and mouths, sinking into each other.

We're far from safe. But I have all three of them, completely, at last. And despite everything, I feel something like peace wash over me.

I've come this far. We'll make it the rest of the way.

—

My next fight is the night before Halloween. We'd discussed pulling me from the card, not least because it wouldn't be good for me to be injured tomorrow night. "She needs to be in good shape," Dean had argued, "not bruised and hurting."

But in the end, the possibility of us finding out any clues about what might happen tomorrow outweighs the worry of what might happen to me. It's too late to get Jaxon into any of the fights, and I wouldn't be able to get much information anyway, other than just eavesdropping. "I can handle myself," I promise, looking at them firmly. "I'll be fine."

What I don't expect, on the way out of the house, is to find Winter in the driveway, leaning up against her white Mercedes. Jaxon and I stiffen instantly, and I feel him shifting into fight mode, tense and angry.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" Jaxon snarls, but Winter just laughs, a high-pitched girlish sound, as she steps away from the car.

"I'm here to tell Athena something," she says with a smile.

"Like fuck you are." Jaxon starts to move in front of me, but I stop him, my hand on his chest.

"I can handle my own fights," I say calmly. "And if she's just here to say something, then there's nothing to worry about."

"That's exactly why I'm here," Winter says with an insincere smile. "I wanted to tell you good luck at your fight tonight."

I blink, startled. "How the fuck do you know about that?"

Winter smiles, tossing her red hair back as she lifts one manicured hand, examining it. “Oh, I know a lot more than you think I do,” she says with a malicious smirk. “I know that you’re going to regret ever fucking with my life, for one. You’re going to regret thinking you could do better than what you were born to be.”

I smile at her, but it doesn’t quite reach my eyes. “Oh? And what would that be?”

Winter laughs. “A pet, Athena. Something to serve men better than you. A rich man’s whore. Not someone who *matters*.”

I let out a sigh. “Look, Winter, if you want to fucking start something, grow a fucking spine and actually fight back. Your name-calling doesn’t hurt me. I don’t fucking care what you think, and Dean certainly doesn’t. None of us do.”

“Oh, sweetheart.” Winter laughs, shaking her head. “When you’re as rich as I am, you can pay someone else to fight your battles. You don’t have to actually do it *yourself*.”

Something goes off in the back of my mind at that, an alarm that I know I should pay attention to. But Jaxon’s hand is on my arm, urging me away. “We’re going to be late,” he says. “Winter, get the fuck out of here before Dean sees you. He won’t be so merciful.”

She just smirks, shrugging. “Have fun tonight, Athena.” She wiggles her fingers as she turns back towards her car. “Good luck.”

The nagging feeling sticks with me on the ride to the warehouse, something tight and anxious in my gut. But I don’t have time to think about it. The warehouse is full, the crowd restless, and I’m about to be up.

It’s time for one more fight, before tomorrow night.

A warmup for the fight of my life.

And I’ve got to be ready.

JAXON

I'm pissed as hell at Winter for showing up like that. Part of me almost hopes she hung around long enough for Cayde or Dean to see her, so she could get what's coming to her. But I can't afford to linger on that. Athena is up for her bout, and I need to pay attention to what the fuck is going on.

I don't have high hopes that I'm going to find anything more out than I did last time, but we've got to try. Right now, we're going into tomorrow night blind, and that's the worst possible scenario. Anything, even a crumb, would be better than nothing.

I can hear the cheering as the girls in the ring gear up to fight, and I want to watch. There's something in my gut telling me that something is wrong, and I know better than to ignore it. The last time I had a feeling like this, the woman I loved wound up dead in the street, bleeding out on the asphalt while her murderer drove away.

The last time I had a gut feeling this bad, I lost everything I loved.

I'm not picking anything up. None of the conversations around me are about a single fucking thing I care about, just club business and strippers and who is betting on who in the fights. I push my way through the crowd, jostling for a view of the ring. There's a huge guy in front of me, taller than me and twice as wide, and it takes a minute for me to push around him, but when I do, I have a clear view of the ring.

And the moment I see it, my heart stops.

The girl opposite Athena in the ring isn't a muscled fighter like the girl last time. She's even smaller than Athena, thin and petite, scrappy looking with black hair and a septum ring that twinkles in the warehouse lights.

Pixie. Fucking Pixie.

I shove my way forward, not caring about the crowd or if they realize that Athena and I are together. I've got to fucking stop this. "Athena!" I yell out her name, hoping that she can hear me. I've never seen Pixie fight, not even once. If she's in that arena, there's something else going on.

Winter's voice echoes in my head.

I wanted to tell you good luck at your fight tonight.

I know a lot more than you think I do.

When you're as rich as I am, you can pay someone else to fight your battles.

"Athena!" I shout her name again, practically screaming it, but the crowd is frothing for the start of the fight, and there's no way she's going to hear me. I try to push through to the very edge of the ring, because I'm on the verge of going under the ropes and dragging her out bodily myself, but I can't get that far. And the fight is about to start.

Right as they call the first round, Athena's eyes flick sideways, and they meet mine, finding me in the crowd.

She's pale, and I know she knows.

She nods once.

And then the fight is underway.

Fuck. Fuck. I grit my teeth, watching. Athena is a better trained fighter, but now the flip side of her last fight is occurring. Pixie is small and quick, and more than that, she's not there for a real fight.

She's there to hurt Athena. And she's not going to stop.

Athena isn't prepared for that. She's prepared for a real fight, for trained moves, for punches and kicks and grappling. She's not ready for Pixie to launch at her, clawing and grabbing,

ducking under Athena's punches. Athena tries to turn, regaining her balance, but Pixie launches towards her, getting a handful of Athena's hair and dragging her head back.

Her nails rake down Athena's cheek, and I hear Athena cry out.

Fuck this. I shove forward, trying to get to her, but the crowd is like a brick wall. All I can do is watch as Athena wheels around, yanking herself out of Pixie's grasp, and then she kicks out, sweeping Pixie's legs out from under her and sending the petite girl down to the mat.

"Yes!" I almost scream it, jumping into the air. "Fuck her up! Shit!"

But Pixie isn't going down that easily. She's up from the floor of the ring in a second, flying at Athena again, but this time Athena is ready. She swings at her, sending the other girl sprawling.

It goes on like that for a few minutes, and I watch them, nails biting into my palms as my hands fist at my sides, my jaw clenched. Pixie flings herself at Athena again, and this time, as she manages to get Athena off balance, she brings her down to the mat, landing atop her.

A few of the men around me start cheering, yelling lewd comments, but I hardly hear them. Because I see something they don't.

A glint of a knife in Pixie's hand as she leans over Athena, her mouth twisted in a triumphant smirk as her hand goes up towards Athena's throat.

I scream Athena's name, even though I know she'll never hear it, the world shrinking down to that glint of the blade and Athena's slender neck, and I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that it's about to happen all over again.

The woman I love is going to die in front of me.

I wait for it, the spurt of blood, the cry, that horrid sound that nothing else in the world can replicate, but it doesn't come. And then I see it.

Athena's hand shoots out, grabbing Pixie's wrist. The two girls grapple for a moment, twisting together on the mat, and to anyone who didn't catch a glimpse of the knife, it just looks like they're wrestling, each of them trying to keep the other from getting up, and trying to get the other to tap out.

But Athena is fighting for her life, and the fuckers around me are too busy cheering over watching two girls wrestling to even fucking get it.

I'm not sure they'd stop it even if they did. This would just be more entertainment for them. Rage fills me, white hot and blinding, and I throw myself forward again, forcing myself through the wall of people in front of me as I see Pixie wind up atop Athena again, the two girls grappling for control of the knife. Someone swings at me, pissed that I'm pushing through, but I just duck. I don't fucking care. I have to get to Athena, have to get that fucking bitch off of her before she kills her—

There's a high-pitched scream of pain, and I see it, the spatter of blood across the mat, arterial spray coating the surface. My heart stutters in my chest, and I feel it all over again, the wave of pain and grief that I know will kill me all over again.

Right after I strangle Pixie to death with my own bare hands.

And then I get to the ropes, and my heart stutters again, but for an entirely different reason.

It's not Athena's blood on the mat.

It's Pixie's.

ATHENA

I can't stop shaking.

My fingers go numb, nerveless, and I feel myself drop the knife. The girl who just tried to kill me is writhing on the mat, her hands clutching her throat, her blood spraying across the ring as her eyes stare up at me, wide and terrified.

I don't know what to feel.

She tried to kill me.

I'm still alive.

There's a choking sound, something wet and horrible and guttural, and then she jerks, and goes still. Her head lolls to one side, her eyes still wide but sightless now, her hand falling away as the spray slows, turning to a trickle.

There's shouting all around me. A cacophony of it, and somewhere in it I hear my name.

Hands on my arms, pulling me out of the ring. Jaxon's hands, strong and sure, hustling me through the crowd, towards some back entrance. Someone tries to grab me, but Jaxon swings, his fist connecting and sending the man to the ground.

"We've got to get the fuck out of here, Athena! Come on!" Jaxon is dragging me now, and something wakes up inside of me.

If I lose now, it was for nothing.

The next man who comes for me, I send sprawling. Side by side, Jaxon and I fight our way through the crowd, pushing towards the side entrance of the warehouse. There's so many of them, but the tight crush of the crowd means that not more than one or two can come at us at once, and some of them are starting to fight each other, the chaos turning into a flat-out brawl as we stumble towards the door.

Jaxon shoves it open, and we spill out into the cold night air, panting. He shoves the door closed behind us, holding it as he looks at me, his eyes black in the dim light.

"We're going to have to run for it, Athena," he gasps. There's blood trickling down his forehead, and I want to reach for him, but there's no time. "We're going to have to run for the bike, as fast as you can—"

"You're not running anywhere."

Mark Blackmoor's clear, cold tone cuts through the air, and Jaxon and I turn as one, my heart sinking to my toes as I see what's blocking our way—Dean's father, and several of the Sons, guns leveled at us.

"Take the girl," he says casually. "I'll deal with the King boy."

"Like fuck you will!" Jaxon snarls, lunging towards Mark, but four more Sons appear out of nowhere, grabbing him and hauling him backwards. Against two, maybe even three, Jaxon might have stood a chance, but they overpower him, holding him back as he tries to wrench free to get to me.

A hard, heavy hand grabs my elbow, and I wrench away, only to have another set of hands grab me from behind. "Easy there, sweetness," a rough voice says in my ear, and I throw an elbow, doing my best to land it in his gut. I hit my mark, but it's not enough. There's more Sons, surrounding me, and even as I claw at one of them in front of me, managing to rake my nails down his face, I can't react to all of them at once.

I don't see the fist coming that connects with my jaw. I barely even feel it.

I'm quite literally out before I even know what hit me.

The room where the ritual is held is cold.

I didn't know that, last time. Last time I was drugged, barely sensible of what was happening. I still don't remember all of it, just vague hints, memories of a veil over my face and wine on my lips. Things that come back in dreams sometimes, even though I think I'd rather not remember at all.

This time, I'm awake.

I'm not on the altar. I'm bound, sitting slumped in the center of the room, my back to someone. I twist around and realize that it's Dean, who is just beginning to rouse too. He jerks his head towards me, his expression crumpling as reality rushes in, and he realizes what's happening.

"Fuck, Athena—" his voice is miserable. "*Fuck*. They— what happened? Where's Jaxon?"

"I don't know." My mouth feels thick and dry. "The fight was rigged. Someone—I think it was Winter who paid her— someone got that Pixie girl into the fight to try and kill me. But I—"

I squeeze my eyes shut, wishing I could forget. I'll never be able to stop seeing her face, wide-eyed and terrified, knowing that she was about to die as she felt her own blood spraying out between her fingers. I'll never stop hearing that final sound. The way she choked as she tried to breathe.

I've killed someone. Someone is dead, and I did it.

"I killed her," I whisper. "She tried to stab me, but I got the knife, and I—"

"Oh god, Athena." Dean's voice is a whisper, and I hear the regret in it, the way he's questioning every choice we've made right now. "You can't think about it right now," he says, his voice low and as sharp as that blade. "You can't think about it, okay? You'll go crazy if you do."

"How do you know?" I swallow hard. It's so cold that I'm shaking, or maybe it's shock setting in. "You don't know what it's like—"

“I do.”

“What?” I lick my dry lips, wondering if I’ve heard him correctly. “What do you mean—”

“There’s a number of things that Cayde, Jaxon and I had to do to prove we were men worthy of being the heirs to Blackmoor,” Dean says bitterly, looking away from me. “And one of those things was to each kill a man, shortly after we turned eighteen.”

I feel as if someone has sucked all of the air out of the room. “None of you ever said anything about that—”

“Should we have?” Dean shrugs. “What difference would it have made? It can’t bring them back. And if I’m being honest Athena, for myself, I wasn’t sure if you’d understand.”

“I’ve been so angry I could kill before,” I say quietly. “There’s people I feel as if I want dead.”

“Being so angry or so hurt that you’d kill for revenge and killing in cold blood are two different things,” Dean says quietly. “We were told that each of the three men had betrayed the family in some way. But I have no way of knowing if that was true. None of us did.”

I swallow hard, feeling slightly sick. “So why did you do it?”

Dean doesn’t say anything for a long moment, and the silence feels almost oppressive. When he finally speaks again, his voice is low and resigned. “I want to say that I had no choice. But the truth is, there’s always a choice. Any of us could have chosen not to kill them. We just couldn’t live with the consequences of that choice. So we killed them, because not suffering our fathers’ anger was worth more than the lives of men we didn’t even know.”

Dean shifts on the hard stone floor, and I try to turn, wanting to see his face. He’s turned away from me, his face shadowed, and I can’t make out his expression.

“What you did was different, Athena,” he says gently. “Pixie would have killed you. There’s no shame in fighting to save your own life.”

I want to believe that he's right. But I don't know if I can.

"I can't stop seeing it," I say thickly, trying not to cry. "I can't stop hearing her—"

"I still see his face in my dreams sometimes. He begged." I can hear the pain in Dean's voice, and something that sounds almost like regret. "He begged me not to kill him, and I pulled the trigger anyway. I didn't even hesitate. I knew it was what was expected of me, and so I did it." His voice is faraway, as if he's somewhere else altogether, not here with me. "Cayde struggled. I saw it in his eyes, but he did it too. Jaxon was the only one who tried to fight it. He tried to refuse. But in the end—" Dean shrugs again, and he finally turns his head to look at me. "We all killed them. We did what we were told to do. I could say we didn't know better, but—"

His eyes meet mine, and all I can see in them is resignation. "It doesn't matter, does it? They're still dead. Why we did it doesn't matter. Not to them."

I open my mouth to say something, what, I don't know exactly. But before I can, there's the sound of footsteps coming down the stairs beyond the entrance to the huge stone room that we're in, and a moment later I see Jaxon being shoved forward, Cayde just behind him.

Two Sons are holding Cayde up, forcing him to walk despite his knee. I can see that his face is twisted in pain, but he's hobbling forward anyway, his eyes dark and full of an anger that just might save us, if we could get free.

Right now, that's a *huge* fucking "if." Jaxon's nose is bleeding, his eyes slightly glazed. From the bruises on his face, I'm guessing that they beat him enough to leave him feeling out of it and woozy, and enable them to get him here. If they hadn't, they'd have had a hell of a time, I'm sure of that. If Cayde hadn't been crippled, he and Jaxon together could have taken out a good number of them.

A small, hopeless sob bubbles up from my lips. We'd thought we'd had it under control, but they'd been systematically breaking us down, making sure that we were in a position where we couldn't band together and fight back.

We'd thought we were being so secretive, but now I feel like a complete idiot.

The men in power here have been eliminating threats to it for centuries. And we'd thought that we could stop it simply because we'd decided *no more*.

A small, frightened squeal comes from the steps, and my head jerks up, my blood running cold. *No, no, no*, I think, adrenaline spiking through my veins, but I know who it is before I'm even able to see her.

Mia is being dragged down the stairs, her curly hair wild and loose around her face, her hands bound behind her back too and a gag tied around her head, keeping her from screaming. Her eyes are wide and frightened, and they lock onto mine immediately, terrified and pleading.

Oh god, no.

Everyone I love is in this room, at the mercy of the men that we tried to defy. And all I can think is that I'm about to lose all of them.

The Sons drag Cayde and Jaxon to the pillars on either side of the altar. Two of them hold each man as another undoes their wrists long enough to bind them again behind the pillars. Cayde is barely able to struggle, off balance and his face screwed up in pain as he tries to keep his weight off of his injured knee, but Jaxon starts to struggle, trying to break free from the two Sons holding him. For one brief moment, I think he might overpower them, but the burly Son on his right delivers a hard punch to his gut, making Jaxon double over as another strides forward, grabbing the front of his shirt and shoving him backwards against the pillar hard enough that the back of his head smacks against it.

Jaxon groans, slumping against the stone, and they finish the job of restraining him quickly.

"Fuck you!" Cayde yells, yanking against his restraints anyway, his voice thick and laced with pain. "Fuck, Athena, are you alright?"

I swallow hard, trying to somehow get a grip on the situation. It's too much, too fast. Mia is being dragged towards the altar, forced down to the floor and her wrists tied to a large ring attached to the side of it. Her eyes meet mine, and I can see frightened tears welling up in them, sliding down her cheeks and soaking the fabric shoved between her lips.

I've never felt so helpless. I've failed all of them, but especially her, because the only thing Mia ever did was be nice to the new girl on her first day at a prep school where she didn't belong. If she hadn't spoken to me that day, hadn't gone out of her way to make friends with me, she wouldn't be down here right now with us, facing whatever fate that's waiting for us.

"I'm alright," I manage, forcing down the panic that's threatening to crawl up my throat and take over. If I let myself start to panic, I won't stop. I'll start crying, or screaming, and it'll all be over. I might as well give up and die right now. "I'm not hurt. Are you—"

The sight of torchlight flickering down the stairs interrupts me, followed by the heavy footfalls of more people entering the room. Like something out of a horror film, a procession of robed and hooded figures begin to file into the room, surrounding the altar in a wide circle around us. Their hands are clasped in front of them, heads bowed, and then three more figures enter, wearing robes of a slightly better quality, embroidered around the hoods and hem.

Cayde, Dean, and Jaxon's fathers, I'm certain of it.

The one in the front is carrying a goblet with letters etched into the sides, and the one in the back has a long dagger held ceremoniously in their palms. As they stride past us towards the altar, I can see that it has three gemstones embedded in the handle—blue, green, and clear.

None of this seems promising.

My heart is pounding as the four Sons bringing up their rear step towards Dean and I, grabbing us and pulling us to our feet. I wobble slightly in place, my heart racing as I look around the robed figures.

This can't be real.

It can't.

It's like something out of a dream, some awful B movie, something you watch at Halloween and make fun of how ridiculous it is.

But it is.

It is real.

It's fucking *real*.

The boys' fathers circle behind the altar, placing the goblet on one side of it and the dagger longways on the other. And then, stepping back so that they're side by side, they drop their hoods in unison, revealing their faces.

Philip St. Vincent, the current ruler of the town, is in the center. Dean's father is on his right, and Jaxon's is on Philip's left. They look at us, cool and impassive, and utterly without mercy, and in that moment all I can feel is a deep sense of absolute hopelessness.

Everything we'd tried to prepare for, every plan we'd tried to have, is gone in an instant. And it feels overwhelmingly as if we were insane to ever think we could succeed.

The Son holding Dean undoes the ropes holding his wrists behind his back, and Dean jerks his hands free, rubbing his wrists as the circulation starts to return. The one holding me, on the other hand, just grips me tighter, twisting the bonds holding my hands behind my back so that they grate painfully against my skin.

"Fuck you," I hiss through my teeth, and the man behind me just chuckles.

"Who knows," he whispers in a lascivious tone. "If you've pissed off the bosses enough, maybe they'll let us enjoy you when you've served your purpose." His fingers climb up my wrists, rubbing against my skin. "I'd enjoy that. Your traitor father almost got my ass thrown in prison."

I open my mouth to retort, but Dean is already stepping forward, his gaze fixed squarely on his father. "Let them go,"

he snaps, his hands fisting at his sides. “I’ve had enough of this, father. I told you—”

“The ritual is beginning,” Philip St. Vincent intones, stepping forward and placing his palms on the altar as he interrupts Dean. “Dean Blackmoor, you and the sacrifice that you’ve claimed have been brought here, on the holy day of Samhain, to confirm the blood that you have spilled and the place in this town’s legacy that you have claimed.”

Dean’s father smiles broadly, pride etched on every line of his face, as if he truly believes that Dean will give in now. That he’ll change his mind.

“Dean Blackmoor, repeat after me—”

“No.” Dean’s voice cuts through whatever Philip was about to say, and I can hear his father in him in that moment, his tone as clear and cold as anything I’ve ever heard, the finality in it coming down like a hammer on stone. “I deny my place as heir. I deny the ritual. I deny—”

“Silence!” The word is vicious, ringing in the air, and his father’s face twists, his hands clenching the side of the altar. “I knew you were rebellious, but I’d hoped that you might change your mind, when you saw how fruitless it was to fight. But now—”

“We brought this on ourselves,” Philip St. Vincent says calmly, turning to look at each of the men on either side of him, “when we strayed from the old ways. Tonight, as we discussed, it is time to go back.”

Mark Blackmoor nods. “The old ways are the ways that made this town what it is today. Dean Blackmoor, you are the heir. The virgin blood that you claimed seals you as the Blackmoor heir, and the future ruler of this town. And tonight, to reconsecrate this town as we once did, the ritual will be different. It will be as it used to be, and more. Because of your rebellion, a greater sacrifice is needed.”

What the fuck? My heart skips a beat, my pulse lodging in my throat and making it feel hard to breathe. Beside me, I can

feel the tremor running through Dean, but he holds himself upright, facing his father fearlessly.

“I said, I deny—”

“Tonight,” his father continues, as if Dean hadn’t spoken, “tonight you will claim Winter as your bride, on this sacrificial altar, instead of ritually claiming your sacrifice as previous generations have. And when you are finished, together you will sacrifice the failed heirs, as the sacrifice watches, and remembers her place.” Mark Blackmoor turns towards me, his expression twisted and triumphant. “On her knees.”

Hands pull me towards the altar facing it, shove me down, my knees slamming painfully into the stone as I fall. Mia is slumped forward, still crying, and she looks up at me then, her eyes bloodshot and hopeless.

“What about Mia?” I speak before I can think better of it, looking up at the three implacable men behind the altar. “She doesn’t have anything to do with this, she—”

“She helped you plot against us.” Jaxon’s father speaks then, and I look at him, startled. I’ve never even seen him before, let alone heard his voice. Considering how the other two families treat the Kings, I’m surprised they’re allowing him to speak. “Don’t think we don’t know about your little *research* sessions. This girl was defiled by your rebellion, just as our sons were. But tonight, we will purify you all with blood.”

Dean’s father smiles cruelly. “We will take it upon ourselves to purify this girl, when the ritual is almost complete. A second virgin sacrifice should be enough to rectify the wrongs you have brought upon this town.”

Mia lets out a small, hopeless cry, twisting against the ropes holding her to the altar, but it’s useless. I can’t even bring myself to meet her eyes, or Cayde’s, or Jaxon’s—or any of them.

It’s my fault. My fault. My fault.

The words circle in my head, cutting at me, tearing me open from the inside out. If I’d just given in, accepted my fate. If I’d let Dean win. If I’d never incited the boys to think

differently about their place in the world, if I hadn't dug into the history of Blackmoor, if I'd just been able to give in, to submit to the will of those that had decided for me, we wouldn't be here right now.

My fault. My fault.

“Athena!” Jaxon calls out my name, his voice thick, as if he can see my thoughts on my face. “Don't give in. Don't—”

He cries out as one of the Sons lurches forward on either side of him, delivering blows to his stomach and face, making him cough and gag.

“Silence!” Philip St. Vincent's voice rings out. “The ritual has begun. You will not speak.” He nods to the two Sons flanking the entrance, his face cold and stern. “Bring in Dean's bride.”

A groan spills from Dean's lips as a shadow creeps down the walls, the shape of a woman preceding the one walking into the room, and a moment later we see Winter, her smile beatific as she enters. She's wearing a white robe, tied at the waist, her red hair spilling like blood over it, her hands clasped innocently in front of her. There's no veil over her face, and her blue eyes meet Dean's, shining with triumph. She doesn't even bother looking at me, as if I don't matter anymore. And I suppose I don't.

She's won. All this time I treated her like a nuisance, a spoiled brat who wouldn't go away, wouldn't accept that she'd lost the man she wanted. I'd been arrogant, certain of the boys' love of me, certain that they wanted me above anything else.

I'm still certain of that. But it isn't going to save us.

I feel as if I can't breathe, and Dean looks as if he wants to commit murder, his expression furious. His hands are clenched at his sides, his chest heaving, and I hear Cayde curse aloud from the other side of the room.

“You've got to be kidding me!” he yells. “Not this fucking bitch again—*shit*—” He cries out as one of the Sons kicks him

hard in his injured knee, an almost animal sound of pain spilling from his lips.

“Cayde, stop,” Dean says, his voice steady as Winter walks towards him, but I can hear the misery in it. “Don’t fight.” He looks over at Cayde, and then at Jaxon. “They’ll make it worse. Don’t—”

I can hear the failure in his voice, the defeat. He looks at me as Winter approaches the altar, as Philip St. Vincent and Jaxon’s father spread a white sheet over it, and I can see everything that he wants to say written across it.

I’m sorry.

I love you.

Winter reaches for the tie of her robe, and I stare at her, stunned. I can’t imagine ever willingly allowing myself to be fucked on an altar in front of my future in laws, but Winter looks as if she’s been waiting her whole life for this moment. She lets the robe fall open, sliding from her shoulders to the stone floor, and her hair spills over her shoulders as her naked body is revealed to the entire room.

She’s gorgeous. There’s no way around it. Her figure is perfect, her breasts full and high, her waist slender, her flat stomach leading down to the perfectly shaved apex of her thighs. She looks every bit the glowing bride, and I can’t help but stare, feeling as if I’m having an out of body experience.

This has to be a fucking dream.

It can’t be real.

But it is.

Dean looks at me helplessly as Jaxon and Cayde’s father go to either side of Winter, helping her onto the altar. She lays back, arms above her head, legs spread and waiting for Dean. I can see the wheels turning in his head, trying to think of what to do, how to stall. How far to go, before he tries to stop this somehow.

But he knows as well as I do that we’ve been outsmarted.

There’s no way out.

“It’s okay,” I mouth. No matter what happens next, I don’t want to watch Dean be hurt, or die in front of me. I don’t want *any* of us to die, but if we fight back right now, we’ll all suffer. There’s got to be some way—

I look at the altar, the goblet on one side of Winter and the dagger on the other, placed ceremoniously, and a wave of frustration washes over me. If I could get to that dagger somehow—but there’s men surrounding me, Sons everywhere. If I so much as move, I’ll be stopped before I can make so much as an inch of progress. And they’ll make sure that I don’t get another chance.

“Begin the ritual, son.” Dean’s father speaks clearly and loudly, the order in his voice plain, and Dean steps forward helplessly, reaching for his zipper. I half expect them to tell him to disrobe, but when no one says anything, I realize this is part of it. It’s a power play—a clothed man and a naked woman, performing a ritual. That’s all this is about, male power and male rule, using women to further their plans, to make them stronger, to give them what they need and then throwing them aside.

Using us. Sacrificing us.

Murdering us.

“I can’t.” Dean fumbles helplessly, frustration coloring his tone. His cock is out, limp and soft, and he grips it, trying to stroke himself to an erection, but he can’t. There’s no response. He might be trying to go along with the situation until he can figure a way out, but his cock isn’t on board with the plan.

If it didn’t put us in so much danger, I’d be proud of him.

“The sacrifice.” Mark Blackmoor nods towards me. “Make her useful.”

Someone behind me hauls me up, dragging me towards Dean. I’m shoved back down roughly onto my knees, Dean turning towards me with a look of helpless misery on his face, his cock hanging limply in front of me. I don’t have to be told what I’m expected to do.

Get him hard, so he can fuck another woman in front of me. His *bride*. The woman who tried to have me killed.

So I can be thrown away, Dean's friends and my other lovers murdered, my best friend violated, and the cycle of violence and rape and torture and sacrifice can keep going on, for a generation and a generation and a generation after that.

Anger rises up in me, hot and thick, pouring through my veins, my adrenaline spiking. I think of Natalie, left for dead in the street. My mother, burned alive in her home. Lives and dreams and hopes and love, destroyed, burned and buried, so that these men can keep their power.

And it won't stop.

Unless I find the strength to do something, to risk it all one last time, it won't *ever fucking stop*.

Like fuck will I let that happen.

I look up at Dean, taking in his face one last time, just in case this all goes wrong. Just in case I've miscalculated, in case this is just another stupid idea, one last foolish Hail Mary in an effort not to let them win. I don't dare take the time to look at Cayde or Jaxon, but I hold their faces in my mind too, using them for strength.

We have one chance. Just one.

And it's up to me.

I named you after the goddess of war.

Athena Saint.

I'm no one's sacrifice.

I lurch up and sideways, throwing myself backwards towards the altar. I doubt I can grab the knife, but I try anyway, reaching for the studded handle. My fingers almost go around it, but I manage to knock it sideways, sending it off of the altar and skidding across the stone floor, sliding away from us both.

One word spills from my lips, a scream in the echoing room.

"Dean!"

He lunges forward at the same time one of the Sons do, both of them going for the knife. Dean gets to it first, his hand snatching it up, and he comes for me, throwing himself bodily against the Son who tries to block his path. With one swift motion, he grabs my wrists, hauling me backwards as he slides the dagger between my hands, slicing through the ropes. He nicks me in the process, the point of the blade scoring my skin painfully, but I barely notice.

“No!” Philip St. Vincent lurches forward, grabbing for Dean, and Dean shoves the dagger into my hands, his eyes wide and fierce like nothing I’ve ever seen from him, glinting like ice in his face as he turns and swings, his fist connecting with Philip’s face.

And then it’s madness.

I know exactly what I’m supposed to do. I go for Jaxon first, the one most capable of helping me right now. The other hooded figures are shrinking back, unsure of what’s happening, and that’s exactly what I’d hoped for. I don’t know who they all are, but I’d guess they’re other family members, other old men who will be caught off guard that their sacrifices are daring to fight back. But the Sons, ten or so of them if I have to guess, are already surging forward, doing their job and intent on keeping us from succeeding.

I’ve never been more grateful for Jaxon’s training. I clutch the dagger in my left hand, ducking as one of the Sons comes towards me, slicing wildly at one as I strike out at another with my right fist, managing to catch him in the jaw. There’s no finesse or grace to my movements, I rush headlong for the pillar where Jaxon is bound, throwing myself behind it and sawing wildly at the ropes that are holding him.

But Jaxon doesn’t hesitate, either.

The moment he’s free, he lurches forward too, going for three of the Sons at once, his fists raised and his entire body thrown into the fight. I don’t dare take the time to watch him, but I can tell he’s trying to disarm them. I start to go for Cayde, but he catches my eyes, shaking his head wildly.

“Don’t!” Cayde yells. “I can’t help you fight! Get Mia loose, and fight, Athena! *Fight!*”

I nod, swerving and going for Mia next, stabbing at the Son who tries to intercept me. It’s not easy to stab a man, and the dagger glances off of him, but it slices deeply enough into his thigh that he staggers back, yelling in pain as I go for Mia’s ropes next.

“If you can’t fight, hide,” I gasp at her, and then a movement above me catches my eye.

Dean is grappling with his father, the two of them struggling as Mark tries to strike his son, attempting to subdue him. Dean isn’t paying attention to anything else, and now Winter is pushing herself up from the altar, her eyes burning and furious as she grabs the heavy chalice from the other side of her, her nude body rising up like some kind of marble statue come to life as she raises the chalice above her head, clearly intending to bring it down onto Dean’s.

“*Dean!*” I shriek his name just in time, and he twists to one side, catching sight of Winter. He rallies, grabbing his father and shoving him backwards, kicking the older man’s legs out from under him as he grabs the chalice out of Winter’s hands, throwing it to the floor.

“Winter, this is over,” he snarls. “We’re done. I’m not going to fuck you, I’m not going to marry you, and I’m—”

“Like hell you’re not!” she shrieks at him, throwing herself towards him, her nails clawed at his face. “You worthless piece of—”

It happens so fast that I hardly have time to register it. She leaps at him, intending to take him down to the floor, and Dean grabs her before he can, his hands on her waist as he throws her bodily to one side, flinging her across the room. She screams, a sound abruptly cut short as her body connects with one of the pillars, her head striking it with a sharp cracking sound that sends chills all the way to my bones.

We shouldn’t leave her there, I know that. But there’s no time. Dean’s father is up already, lunging for his son, and one

of the Sons is going for Mia. I see a gun in Jaxon's hand as he takes down the last of the three Sons fighting him, and then he spins as his father grabs his elbow, swinging at his son's face as the two start to fight.

I slash at one of the Sons coming for me, but they're starting to thin. For a moment, I almost think that we're getting the upper hand, and then suddenly I feel hands on my waist, dragging me backwards.

One of those hands goes around my throat as the other slides over my stomach, the man holding me wrapping his arm around my waist as his fingers dig into my neck, cutting off my air so that I can't scream. He drags me back into the shadows, and I realize dimly that the other hooded figures have fled in the chaos, leaving the room much emptier than it was before. Beyond me, I can see Jaxon and Dean struggling with their fathers, the remaining Sons throwing themselves into the fray, bodies on the stones. One of them is Winter's, pale and nude against the stones, and deadly still, blood leaking from her face onto the floor.

The man holding me wrenches me around, throwing me against the wall, his hand tightening on my throat as he pushes me backwards. His face swims into view, and I realize with a cold, sickening sensation in my stomach that it's Philip St. Vincent, his face twisted and sneering as he chokes me.

"You little bitch," he hisses. "I did everything for you. I saved you and your worthless biker whore of a mother. I should have thrown you both to my dogs, instead of giving you a place to live. Instead of giving you my *charity*."

"You murdered her," I whisper, choking the words out from around the pressure on my throat. "You fucking killed my mother—"

"I tried to kill *you*." Philip smiles cruelly at me. "I had you abducted. I told my men they could do whatever they wanted to you, so long as you suffered. But like a fucking cockroach, you just wouldn't die. And then you turned our boys against us."

His hand slides off of my waist then, down to my hip, inside the waistband of the tight leggings I was wearing for the fight earlier. “So now, I’m going to find out what exactly is so good about you that you managed to seduce all three of our heirs into rebelling against their fathers, and their natural place in the world.” He licks his lips, the hand on my throat moving up to clutch at my chin, his thumb shoving its way between my lips. “I’ve never had pussy that good. But there’s a first time for everything, I suppose.”

I feel my stomach twist, nausea rising up in my gut. But I force myself to stay still, to focus, because in his rush to drag me into the shadows and violate me, in his anger, Philip St. Vincent had forgotten two very important things.

He hadn’t restrained me.

And I’m still holding the dagger.

Beyond me, the fight is still going on. Somewhere in the room, I hear a gunshot go off, the sound echoing painfully in the chamber. I don’t let myself register it though, don’t let myself pay attention to Philip’s hand returning to my throat to pin me to the wall or his fingers creeping into my shorts, sliding along my flesh.

I have one chance. One chance for all the revenge I need, in one moment.

He’s so focused on what he’s doing, so eager, that he doesn’t even notice my hand start to come up. He doesn’t feel me shift my weight, preparing to do what Jaxon taught me, remembering how to get someone bigger and stronger than me off of me and turn the tables on them.

He doesn’t have time to react when my knee comes up, slamming into his groin. A guttural noise spills from his lips as he doubles forward, and I take my chance, throwing my weight into him as I wrap my left arm around his neck, using every bit of leverage I have to wrench him around before he can recover, shoving him back into the wall.

“You bitch!” he screams, and I slam my right hand forward, driving the dagger as hard as I can into his gut.

For a moment, I think I won't be able to wrench it free again. His body convulses with the sudden pain, and it takes all of my weight to hold him against the wall as he struggles, a scream of pain bubbling from his lips. But I'm not done. I stab him again, wrenching the dagger free with every ounce of effort left in me, and as I move away from him, Philip staggers, sinking to his knees, his undone robe falling open as blood soaks the white shirt beneath it.

He looks up at me, shock in his eyes. "You fucking bitch—" he hisses, his hand going to his stomach. "I'm going to fucking kill you—"

"No." I bend down, grabbing his hair with my left hand and yanking his head back, looking down into the eyes of the man who for as long as I've lived here and before that, has commanded this town. The man who ordered so many deaths, so many horrors. The man who, with the help of others, has taken so much from me and tried to take so much more. "No."

My hand tightens in his hair, and I raise the dagger to his throat, pressing the blade to his skin as the jeweled hilt digs into my palm.

"This is for Natalie," I whisper. "For my mother. For myself." I swallow hard, steeling myself for what I'm about to do.

"This is for all of them."

And then in one hard, sharp motion, I jerk the dagger across his flesh, opening his throat.

It's so much like Pixie it should horrify me. But it doesn't. All I feel is cold satisfaction as I watch the realization surface in his face, his hand coming up to clutch at his throat as fear fills his eyes, and he realizes what I've done, the fatal error that he made.

"You—you—*cunt*—" he chokes out, and I smile cruelly down at him, my fist still clenched in his hair.

"My name," I say quietly, looking down into his dying eyes, "is Athena Saint."

And then I shove him backwards, his body falling heavily to the floor.

I turn in a daze, taking in the rest of the room. Jaxon is finishing off two of the Sons, one of them falling heavily to the floor as I turn. His father's body is crumpled near two others, a gunshot wound visible in his forehead. Dean's father is very still too, on the stones near the altar, and Dean is sagging against the pillar where Cayde is tied, trying to undo his ropes.

I stagger towards Dean, the bloody dagger in my fist, and when Dean looks up and meets my eyes, I just nod.

"It's over," I whisper as I cut Cayde free, and Cayde slumps into Dean's arms, swallowing hard as he looks past me to where his father is lying still.

"I killed him." I look at Cayde, wondering if he'll hate me for it, if he'll ever be able to look at me the same. "He tried to—" I start to justify it, but I stop, closing my eyes.

It doesn't matter what Philip tried to do to me here, tonight. He'd done enough before to justify his death a dozen times over.

"I killed him," I say simply. "I'm sorry."

"No." Cayde shakes his head, his words thick and difficult. "No, you did what you should have." His gaze rests on his father's body for a moment, and I can see him remembering all the things he told me, the years that he suffered at Philip St. Vincent's hands. "No," he says again. "He deserved to die."

"Your father?" I look at Dean, and then past him to Mark's still body, and Dean shakes his head.

"He's gone," he says softly. "Jaxon's too. They all—"

"They all sealed their own fates," Cayde says. "And now, let's get the fuck out of here."

I nod, taking his other arm as Dean and I help him towards Jaxon, who is gathering Mia up from where she's huddled by the altar. All around us are bodies, and I look at Winter's as we walk past her, her hair tangled around her face, as red as the

blood congealed on the stones by her mouth, her body sprawled on the stones.

She's dead, too. They're all dead. And try as I might, I can't feel anything but relief.

Because we're not.

Despite everything, despite all the odds, we're alive.

All of us.

It takes seemingly forever, but we manage to get up the stairs, all of us taking turns supporting Cayde as we climb the stairs out of the labyrinth up into the main house. I try not to look around as we head for the front door, not wanting to remember my time here. There's too many memories—me studying with Mia, helping my mother clean, swimming in the pool, reading in the library, and of course, that fateful party when something very different had happened in that library.

I see Cayde glance towards it, but he doesn't say anything. None of us do, as we step out into the cold night air, the full moon hanging above us as we make our way out onto the front lawn.

"I'll get the car," Dean says. "We tried to hide it further down, Cayde and I. That's when they surprised us, and—" he raises his hands helplessly.

"It's alright," I say quietly. "It's over now."

But it's not, not completely. There's still a part of our original plan that we *can* execute, and all it takes is one look among the four of us for me to know that we're going to do exactly that.

Cayde and Dean had planned to hide the car on the estate grounds, the containers of gasoline that were part of our original plan stashed inside. Now Dean brings the car up the drive, opening the passenger's side door and getting Cayde inside with my help, as Jaxon unloads the gasoline.

"Stay here," I tell Mia. "Keep an eye on Cayde, okay?"

She nods, still very pale, and I look at her, concerned. "Are you okay?"

Mia gives me a small, faint smile. “I don’t know,” she admits. “But I will be. They’re gone, aren’t they?”

“They’re gone,” I assure her. “And you’re safe.”

She sighs, sinking against the car, relief in her eyes. “Then I’ll be okay,” she says softly. “Eventually.”

We leave Cayde and Mia there, Dean and Jaxon and I trooping back across the lawn with containers of gasoline in each hand. We split up once we’re inside the house, covering every possible surface with the liquid, splashing it across floors and furniture and possessions, until the house is drenched in it. And then we regroup on the front lawn, the three of us facing it.

“You’re not doing this without me.” Cayde’s voice comes from behind us, and we turn to see him standing there with his weight on one leg, Mia supporting him. She gives me a faint smile, and I can see that some of the color has come back to her cheeks, despite the shock I know she must still be in.

“We do it together,” Cayde says firmly. “All of us. A new beginning.”

Dean holds up the box of matches. “All of us?”

Cayde nods, and Dean passes it down, the five of us standing in front of the trail of gasoline we left down and over the front porch to start the fire. “Are you ready?” I ask, and Dean just looks at me, his expression hard and set.

“Burn the motherfucker down.”

And so we do.

We throw the matches all together, and the gasoline ignites, flames crawling up the porch as we light more, throwing them into the flames until the box is gone and the fire is burning steadily, creeping towards the house and into it.

I can see the curtains starting to catch flame through the windows, the furniture, and we back up, helping Cayde across the lawn as we get a safe distance away from the burning mansion.

We stand there, watching it, and I feel my chest clench as I look at the three boys, these men that I love.

Men that were once my tormentors, my captors, who became my protectors and then my lovers. Men who once thought they would subdue me like everyone else, but who learned exactly how strong I can be.

That we're stronger together.

"What happens now?" I whisper. "What do we do?"

"When the house is ashes," Dean says quietly, "we'll have the labyrinth sealed, and a new foundation poured. We'll have a new house built over it, *our* house. All of ours," he adds, looking at Cayde and Jaxon and I. "If that's what you want." His gaze lands on Jaxon. "I know you've always wanted to leave Blackmoor behind. But I want you to stay. I know Athena feels the same, and I think we all do." He looks at Cayde, and then at me. "We stay, and we make a new Blackmoor, together. We make sure that we root out everything that's left of the society, and we make sure it never rises again. A fresh start, together."

There's silence for a long moment, the only sound the fire crackling across the lawn, and for one heart-pounding, terrifying moment, I think Jaxon is going to say no. That he's going to get on his motorcycle and ride as far from Blackmoor as he can, leaving it all behind.

And if that's what he wanted, I could hardly blame him.

But then he nods, and relief pours over me, nearly bringing tears to my eyes.

"I'll stay," he says quietly. "If that's what Athena wants."

"I do," I blurt out. "I want that. I want *all* of us. Together."

"Together," Cayde echoes, and the four of us look at each other, the moment hanging heavily in the air.

I turn towards the car, where I'd left the dagger in the backseat, and I retrieve it, wiping it clean. "We stopped their ritual," I tell them, rejoining the circle. "So now we'll make one of our own."

Dean looks at me curiously, and I reach for his hand, bringing it to my mouth. I press my lips against the fleshy base of his thumb, sucking hard at the skin there, numbing it. And then I look up at him, meeting his eyes as I press the point of the dagger into his hand, carving a shape there.

A letter.

A.

I hear Mia gasp behind me, but Dean doesn't make a sound. He just holds my gaze as I cut, his blue eyes fixed on mine, and he doesn't need to speak. I can read all of it in his face, everything he could possibly say to me, fierce and wilder than I've ever seen him.

There's no arrogance in his face now, no carefully honed control. Just Dean, *my* Dean, the man who fought for me tonight. Who fought for *us*.

I take Cayde's hand next, and I do the same, holding his green gaze as I carve my initial into the base of my thumb, deeply enough that it will scar, just like Dean's. And then when I'm finished, I turn to Jaxon, and he holds out his hand.

"Yes," he says simply, and that's all I need.

He could have left. But he chose to stay.

When I'm finished, I hold out the dagger and my hand, looking at my three boys.

"Your turn."

They each take my hand, one at a time, leaving their initials in the same place, small and deep, next to one another at the base of my right thumb. *D. C. J.*

Dean reaches for me first, his hand gripping mine, blood smearing together as he kisses me fiercely, his tongue tangling with mine as the acrid scent of smoke fills the air. "Mine," he whispers, and then he passes me to Cayde, who grips my hand too, his lips claiming mine.

"Mine," Cayde murmurs against my lips, and then Jaxon reaches for me, the blood on his hand mingling with the rest of

the red smeared across my palm, mine and Dean's and Cayde's.

Mine.

Jaxon kisses me, long and deep, and I can feel the certainty in him, the relief. The sense that we can start fresh, that this is a new beginning. The four of us, together, against the world.

We turn as one, blood still trickling from my hand, and watch as the mansion burns. "It's really over, isn't it?" Mia asks softly from behind us, and I turn to look at her, a smile spreading over my lips.

"It is."

That's not entirely true. There's still other members of the society to find, the rest of the families to root out, a new way of running this town to figure out. There's plenty to do, when it comes to making a new Blackmoor.

But that all comes tomorrow. For tonight, with the three men I love, I'm going to enjoy watching it burn, just as I'd said I would. I'm going to enjoy my victory.

They'd thought they could sacrifice me, hurt me, destroy me, but they hadn't counted on their sons loving me, or what would happen when they did.

But all that's over now.

My name is Athena Saint.

And Blackmoor is mine.

*KEEP READING for a preview of the first book in Ivy's upcoming series, **Hunting Winter!***

WINTER

It's dark when I wake up, and it smells. Like what, exactly, I'm not sure, but it's not all that pleasant. Something like gasoline and grease, with a faint tang of sweat and alcohol. It takes me a moment to open my eyes, and I'm not entirely sure that I want to. I'm pretty sure that I'm dead, and that this is hell, and I'm not in any hurry to find out what's waiting for me. It's also colder than I would have thought. But I can't imagine any other place that smells like this. I half expect the gasoline smell to ignite at any second, engulfing me in flames.

But as my senses return a little more, and I shift uncomfortably, I start to question that. I'm on a bed, I think, a scratchy blanket over me. I go to move my hands to touch it, but I can't.

They're over my head. And it's then that I realize there's something around my wrists, holding them in place.

I'm tied down.

Fear, cold and startling, shocks me down to my bones and my eyes fly open. It's dark in the room that I'm in, but there's enough moonlight creeping in from the blinds covering the window above me that I can see the outlines of the things in the room. I'm lying on a bed in the center of it, an end-table on one side, a dresser against the far wall. Posters on the walls, the shapes of naked women, motorcycles, and cars vaguely silhouetted on them.

With the new awareness comes pain, too. Pain in my head, sharp and brilliant, shooting through me as I twist in the bed,

trying to yank my wrists loose. I stop almost immediately, because that brings a new kind of pain, blossoming through me and sucking every ounce of air out of my body.

What happened? I try to remember. All I can gather are fuzzy shapes and vague outlines, like a television channel with bad reception. I try to think back as far as I can, to remember what I might have been doing that could have resulted in *this*, waking up tied to an uncomfortable bed in a strange place, every part of my body hurting as if I've been beaten.

Maybe that's what happened. Fresh terror bubbles up in me, and I try to breathe, fighting back a panic attack. Maybe I've been kidnapped, beaten, hurt in some way. Or maybe I was in an accident, and was rescued—but the fact that I'm currently tied up indicates that's probably not the case.

I squirm on the mattress, trying to find some way out of this, but all that does is make me realize that I'm naked underneath the blanket. *Oh my god.* A dozen horrific scenarios rush through my head, and I start to cry, tears welling up in my eyes and sliding down my cheeks. My nose stuffs up instantly, and fresh pain ricochets through my skull, which only makes me cry harder.

What did I do to deserve this? I can't remember anything that I could have done that would have gotten me into this literal bind. And then, as I push my mind to think back further, *more*, I have the skin-crawling realization that that's truer than I originally thought.

I can't remember *anything*. Not just what I might have done or who I might have pissed off to get me here, but anything at all. Not what happened before I woke up, or where I am, or where I live, or what I do. Nothing about *who* I am. Not even my name.

Oh god.

I must have been in some kind of accident. Or maybe whoever brought me here and tied me up is responsible for the fact that I can't remember—but I must have had some kind of head injury. Something severe enough to wipe my mind clean, leaving almost nothing helpful behind.

Those can heal, right? I try to think of anything I've ever heard about memory loss, any bad movies I've ever watched with amnesia as the plot, but all that's gone, too. It's like whoever I was before is gone, replaced with this shell of myself that's lying here, in an unfamiliar room, waiting for someone to walk in and tell me what the fuck is going on.

I'm both dreading and looking forward to that, because whoever comes, I doubt they're going to be someone I want to see. Not considering my current situation.

But at least I might have some answers.

Despite my rising panic, my injuries and exhaustion take over, and I drift back to sleep for a while. My dreams are fuzzy too, blurred faces and a room I don't recognize, full of screams and blood and the feeling of being tossed through the air, of floating and then falling. It's the falling that jerks me awake, making me gasp aloud as my body jackknifes in the bed, trying to sit up and the bonds on my wrists preventing me from doing that. I sink back against the pillows, gasping, and then I realize that the dream wasn't the only thing that woke me.

The doorknob is turning, and I stiffen, feeling myself instinctively try to move backwards as the door swings open, revealing a man standing there, looking straight at me.

It takes me a moment to register what I'm seeing. I'd expected someone old or ugly, disgusting and vile, and this man certainly might be those latter things on the inside. Almost surely, if he's the kind of man who would leave a girl tied to the bed.

But he's not old, and he's not ugly.

He looks like he's in his mid-twenties at most, with deeply tanned skin and dark eyes, and thick black hair swept away from his face. He's dressed in jeans and a white t-shirt with stains along the hem that look like grease, and motorcycle boots, his hands stuffed in his pockets as he leans against the doorjamb, taking his time as he watches me. His features are strong, his jaw sharp and defined, and he's looking at me as if

he's not at all surprised to see me there, a smirk on his full lips.

I can't remember any other men I might have known before this, but I'm pretty sure he's got to be the most gorgeous man I've ever seen.

"Winter. You're awake." He raises an eyebrow, and I stare at him, shocked.

"How—how do you know my name?" I swallow hard, wincing at the pain in my throat. It feels raw, the words scraping over and up it, and I choose my next ones carefully, not wanting to talk more than necessary. "Who are you?"

The man in the doorway shifts, ignoring the first question entirely. He answers the second one instead, his eyes sweeping over me as hungrily as if he knew what I looked like underneath the blanket. There's something in his dark eyes that's almost predatory, freezing me in place, and I can feel my heart pounding in my chest as he starts to speak.

"My name is Gabriel Martinez," he says, his voice slightly accented when he says it. "And you, Winter?" He pushes himself off of the doorjamb, a smile spreading across his face.

"You are mine."

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