



BROKEN  
KINGDOM

ROYAL  HEARTS  
ACADEMY

A. JADE

# BROKEN KINGDOM

Royal Hearts Academy - Book Four

A. JADE

## Contents

### [Broken Kingdom](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)  
[Chapter 28](#)  
[Chapter 29](#)  
[Chapter 30](#)  
[Chapter 31](#)  
[Chapter 32](#)  
[Chapter 33](#)  
[Chapter 34](#)  
[Chapter 35](#)  
[Chapter 36](#)  
[Chapter 37](#)  
[Chapter 38](#)  
[Chapter 39](#)  
[Chapter 40](#)  
[Chapter 41](#)  
[Chapter 42](#)  
[Chapter 43](#)  
[Chapter 44](#)  
[Chapter 45](#)  
[Chapter 46](#)  
[Chapter 47](#)  
[Chapter 48](#)  
[Chapter 49](#)  
[Chapter 50](#)  
[Chapter 51](#)  
[Chapter 52](#)  
[Chapter 53](#)  
[Chapter 54](#)  
[Chapter 55](#)  
[Chapter 56](#)  
[Chapter 57](#)  
[Chapter 58](#)  
[Chapter 59](#)  
[Chapter 60](#)

[Chapter 61](#)

[Chapter 62](#)

[Chapter 63](#)

[Chapter 64](#)

[Chapter 65](#)

[Chapter 66](#)

[Chapter 67](#)

[Chapter 68](#)

[Chapter 69](#)

[Chapter 70](#)

[Chapter 71](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Extended Epilogue](#)

[Royal Hearts Academy](#)

[About the Author](#)

# Broken Kingdom

Royal Hearts Academy - Book Four

*“For never was a story of more woe than this of Juliet and her Romeo.”*  
— *William Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet*

First published in USA, October 2020  
Copyright © Ashley Jade

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means without the prior permission in writing of the publisher, nor be circulated in writing of any publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published without a similar condition including this condition, being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictional manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or deceased, or events is purely coincidence.

**Broken Kingdom**

**Photographer:** Scott Hoover

**Cover Design:** Lori Jackson at Lori Jackson Design

**Editor:** Ellie McLove

Rosa Sharon

Kristy Stalter

# Prologue

## Oakley

*Bianca.*

She's my first thought when I open my eyes.

However, she's not the first person I see.

That would be my dad.

And two police officers.

*Shit.*

A quick glance around tells me I'm in the hospital.

*Fuck.*

"What—" I try to move, but can't.

When I look down, I realize why.

I'm handcuffed to a goddamn bed.

And *not* in a way I'd typically enjoy.

"What happened?"

My dad—who looks more scared than I've ever seen him before—takes a step forward. "You were in a car accident."

Sounds about right, because the last thing I remember was driving.

And arguing.

*Her tears.*

But mostly? The last words she said to me before the world became one big blur.

"You had a seizure at the wheel," Dad continues, but I can't focus on that.

I have more important things to worry about.

"Where's Bianca?" I sit up in bed. "Is she okay?"

Given cars are number one on her list of fears, she must be freaking the fuck out.

*I need to see her.*

"She's...uh—" His expression falls. "She's still in surgery."

My brain must temporarily fritz out because I can't make sense of this.

"Surgery?" The thing in my chest—the fucked-up organ she brought



back to life—beats wildly. “She’s gonna be okay, right?”

*She has to be.*

The girl is the definition of a fighter if there ever was one.

Frowning, he pulls a seat beside my bed and sits. “We—well, the Covingtons—won’t know anything for a while.”

I need to see Jace and Cole.

*Fucking hell.*

They’re gonna be so pissed when they find out that not only did I have a seizure behind the wheel with their sister in the car—but that I’ve been hooking up with her all summer.

Who am I kidding? *Bianca’s more than a hookup.*

Either way, they’re not going to take the news well.

However, their anger is the least of my concerns right now.

There’s gotta be a doctor—*someone*—I can speak to about her.

“Is there a doctor or nurse around? I need to know how the surgery—”

“Oakley,” Dad snaps, cutting me off. “We can’t worry about them right now.”

I don’t like the distance he’s putting between us.

My dad’s been Mr. Covington’s personal lawyer—and friend—for years.

So much so his running joke at home was that the Covington’s bullshit was inevitably his bullshit, too.

Given Jace and Cole are my best friends—hell, my *brothers*—I feel the same way.

Needless to say, the line in the sand he’s suddenly drawing between our families doesn’t sit well with me.

“What do you mean we can’t worry—”

“Oak.” My dad gestures to the police officers. “Our family has its own issues to deal with right now.”

I want to laugh at his use of family.

We haven’t been one of those since the day I got mad at my dad, boned my stepmother, and caught feelings for her...

Only to find out she was using me to get pregnant.

Which she did.

*Until she wasn’t anymore.*

Well, with my baby.

Shortly after the miscarriage, she got knocked-up again...with my half-sister.

The way it should have been from the start.  
But that's the thing about me. I'm always fucking shit up.  
Case in point? What's happening now.  
I flick my gaze to the officers. "Why are they—"  
*Motherfucking cocksucking shitballs.*  
If there was a car accident...there were officers on the scene.  
Which means they found and seized a little over ten-thousand dollars'  
worth of cocaine and heroin in my trunk.  
Now I know why my dad is scared.  
Hell, I'm scared, too.  
I glance at my dad, too afraid to speak because I don't want to further  
incriminate myself.  
Although that's laughable, because I'm fucked.  
*So fucked.*  
As if sensing my internal struggle, he turns to the two officers. "Can I  
have a minute alone with my son?"  
They look at him like he's crazy.  
"That's against the rules," one of the officers states matter-of-factly.  
"Fuck the rules," my dad barks, but I can hear the fear in his voice  
seeping out under his bravado.  
My chest twists.  
My dad has every right not to be here given what I've done to him.  
And yet...here he is. Standing by his piece-of-shit offspring.  
*Being the parent my mother never was.*  
Gathering his composure, he stands. "Gentlemen, there are no windows in  
this room." He motions to the cuffs around my wrists. "And he's secured to  
the bed." He looks them in the eyes. "He's not going anywhere. You have my  
word."  
I'm expecting them to decline, but my dad must garner a lot more respect  
and pull than I thought because they concede.  
"Five minutes," one of them grunts as they head for the door.  
Gripping the short, sparse strands of hair from his balding head, my father  
blanches. "You're in deep fucking shit, Oak."  
*Oh, I'm aware.*  
"I know." I wince. This is bad. *Real fucking bad.* "How much shit?"  
He starts ticking things off with his fingers. "Well, for starters, they  
seized over a pound of cocaine and heroin from the trunk of your car." He

glares at me. “Your blood alcohol level came back a 0.08%. Which is over the—”

“Legal limit,” I finish for him.

*Because when I fuck up...I really give it my all.*

Quite frankly, I’m surprised it wasn’t higher.

“They also found trace amounts of cannabis and cocaine in your system.”

*No surprise there.*

“I was trying to sober u—”

“Well, that didn’t fucking work,” he screams, his eyes flashing with rage.

“I’m sorry.”

However, my apology has nothing to do with me doing drugs.

It’s because I know he finally knows the truth.

There’s so much pain etched in his face—so much disappointment lingering—it hurts to look at him.

He averts his gaze, as if he can’t bear to look at me, either. “At least now I know why you moved out so abruptly.”

Yeah, because I couldn’t face myself in the mirror anymore.

*Which means I definitely couldn’t face him.*

“Dad—”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” he barks, gripping the back of the chair so tight his knuckles turn white. “I need to tell you something.” His expression goes from angry to forlorn. “Something very serious.”

Given the laundry list of shitty things I’ve done tonight—and the fact that the girl I love is still in surgery—I’m pretty sure whatever he has to tell me can’t be any more *serious* than that.

“What?”

Reaching over, he squeezes my shoulder. “During your seizure, you swerved into the opposite lane and crashed into another car.”

Evidently, I was wrong before...it can get more serious.

*Way more serious.*

I don’t have a great relationship with God, but I say a silent prayer anyway.

*Two of them.*

One for Bianca to pull through her surgery with flying colors...and the second for whoever was in the other vehicle.

Putting more pressure on my shoulder, he looks down at the floor. “Hayley was driving the other car.”

My brain fills with confusion. “Hayley...my ex-girlfriend Hayley?”

He gives me a solemn nod. “Yes.”

I rub the knot forming in my chest. My horrible list of fuck-ups are piling up by the minute.

“I hope she wasn’t hurt.”

“Oak,” he says softly, almost like it pains him to say the next words. “She didn’t make it.”

My stomach lurches and the room tilts.

Sure, I’m a fuck-up—the biggest one I’ve ever known—but I’m not a...

Holy fucking shit.

*This can’t be happening.*

“She died?” My shout rings in my ears, crashing over the room like a tsunami. “I killed her?”

I peer up at my dad, begging, *pleading* with him to take the words back.

But he can’t.

*Because I killed her.*

My vision blurs and I take a breath, trying to steady myself.

It doesn’t work.

Because there’s no getting away from this.

No taking back what I did.

Guilt—the kind there’s not enough remorse for—fills my chest.

“I’m sorry,” my dad whispers, wrapping his arms around me.

I don’t understand why he’s apologizing to me.

*This is all my fault.*

“I kil—”

The lights above me flicker and an all-too-familiar fuzzy, buzzing sound fills my ears.



“He has epilepsy,” my father barks as footsteps stampede into the room.

“Take these goddamn handcuffs off him.”

I blink up at the ceiling, a wave of exhaustion rushing through me.

There are so many things I want to say—and even more I want to apologize for—but I can’t.

Because no amount of repentance will ever be enough.

I just want to close my eyes...sleep for eternity.  
Maybe when I wake up this will all just be a dream.  
Or a *beautiful nightmare*.

Fuck. I want to see her, so fucking bad.

Tell her the words I should have spoken before it was too late, and I fucked everything up.

*Tell her it was real between us.*

“It’s against protocol,” some man states.

“Fuck your protocol.” My dad rubs my head, just like he used to after I’d seize back when I was a kid. “You’re okay. You just had another seizure.”

It’s funny because, despite his small stature, my father is a shark inside the courtroom—a monster who will literally ruin your life with a simple closing statement—but deep down he’s got a heart as big as the ocean.

I used to think I inherited mine from him.

But now I know that’s not true...because people with hearts don’t kill.

“Is he okay?” a familiar voice calls out.

*Dylan.*

Fighting my fatigue, I peel my gaze away from the ceiling.

My cousin’s blue eyes are bloodshot and puffy, like she’s been crying.

*Probably because of the mess I’ve made.*

I open my mouth, but my dad beats me to it.

“I’m sorry, Dylan. But you can’t see him right now.”

Dylan shuffles her feet. “I just want to make sure he’s okay.”

“I understand that,” my dad says. “But visitation is for immediate family only.”

Dylan’s visibly offended and I don’t blame her one bit. My dad is being a royal douche to her.

“What the fuck, Dad?” I croak. “Dylan is family.” I look at the nurse who’s injecting a needle into my IV, hoping she has a little sway since I’m technically the patient. “I want my cousin to stay.” Turning my head, I focus back on her. “How’s Bianca?”

I don’t miss the flicker of uneasiness in her eyes. “She just got out of surgery—”

“Escort her out,” my dad interjects. “Now.”

“No,” I roar, but no one is listening to me.

“Dylan,” I shout as the officers begin herding her out the door. When our eyes connect, I say, “Tell her what we had was real.” I swallow hard. “Tell

her I lo—”

Dylan’s out of sight before I can finish my sentence.

I turn my fury on my dad. “Why the fuck won’t you let her stay?”

He frowns. “Because her loyalty lies with Jace and the Covingtons and I can’t take the chance of her spying on us to get more information for a potential lawsuit.” An expansive sigh leaves him. “I’m already preparing for Hayley’s family to go after us, and if Bianca doesn’t make it—”

Pain sparks in my chest, shooting through me like fireworks.

“What do you mean if Bianca doesn’t—”

And just like that, the lights above me flicker, that staticky, buzzing sound echoing throughout my ears again.



“Can’t you give him stronger medication?” my dad grunts at the nurse. “This is his fourth one in seven hours.”

It’s not the nurse’s fault I’m clustering.

Emotional stress is one of my triggers for seizures, and right now there isn’t enough medication in the world to stop my chest from caving in.

“We *are*,” the nurse responds, fiddling with my IV. “How are you doing, Oakley?” She gives me a sympathetic smile. One I don’t deserve. “You hanging in there?”

*Barely.*

“Thank you.”

It takes a good heart to show kindness to a piece of shit killer.

I’m so out of it, my voice is barely audible to my own ears, but I think she hears me because she gives me another small smile before heading for the exit.

“I have a meeting with your lawyer in an hour,” my dad informs me after she’s gone.

That’s...weird.

“Aren’t you my lawyer?”

He shakes his head. “No. It’s a conflict of interest and I don’t want to give them anything else to use against us.” A weary exhale leaves him. “I’m going to pull every goddamn string and kiss every fucking ass I have to in order to make a deal.”

The muscles in my chest draw tight.

*I don't deserve a fucking deal.*

“Dad—”

“But,” he interjects, his voice taking on that serious tone again. “I need you to give me some information I can use.”

“What kind of information?”

His eyes roam to the officers on the other side of the hospital room. “Can I have another minute with my son?” When they look like they want to argue, Dad adds, “I promise if you give me two minutes, I will get the truth out of him.”

Get *what* truth out of me? He already knows everything.

“Two minutes,” one of them agrees before they step out.

“What—”

“Who were you selling drugs for?”

Nah, fuck that. I ain't no snitch.

“Myself.”

My dad doesn't buy it. “Bullshit. My friend at the precinct told me the packets in your car all have a unique stamp on them. A unique stamp that belongs to some kingpin they've been trying to nail for years now.”

I want to laugh because Loki isn't exactly a *kingpin* in the drug game—not yet, anyway—but I do the wise thing and keep my mouth shut.

Disappointment flickers in his brown eyes. “You know, I was really hoping for once you wouldn't lie to me.”

Given he recently found out I fucked his wife behind his back, his dig is more than warranted.

However, I can't focus on that because he snatches my finger.

I try to yank my hand back, but I'm still in cuffs. “What the fuck—”

He presses the pad of my finger to the button on my now cracked phone screen.

“Goddammit, Dad, *stop*,” I bark as he rummages through my cell, looking for dirt.

Loki might not be kingpin status yet, but he won't hesitate to have someone shoot my ass for ratting him out to the cops.

Then again...it would be justified.

*An eye for an eye.*

He holds up my phone triumphantly. “Got all the information I need. Thank you for being so accommodating.” Determination illuminates his face

as he heads for the door. “Be mad at me all you want, Oak, but I will do whatever it takes to make sure you don’t end up rotting away in a jail cell.”

*Rotting away in a jail cell is exactly what I deserve.*



My guts twist with nerves as I walk toward the courtroom.

As if sensing my apprehension, my dad says, “Don’t worry. We made a hell of a good deal in exchange for you giving up Loki.”

Funny...because *I* don’t remember giving up anyone or making any kind of deal.

“Negligent vehicular manslaughter while intoxicated,” I whisper, repeating what he told me earlier when he informed me he *pulled some strings* and got me on the docket today.

“That’s right. It’s a wobbler, but—” Dad gestures to my actual lawyer. “We got them to agree to a misdemeanor.”

My lawyer slaps me on the back. “You’ll be on house arrest for six months...*tops*.”

*Just like a ton of other wealthy, white privileged kids with connections.*

My dad grins. “You’ll be fine. The time will fly by.”

*Jesus fucking Christ.*

No wonder Hayley’s parents are devastated.

Not only did I kill their only daughter—and put the girl I love in a coma that left her with amnesia—I’m about to walk without so much as a slap on the wrist.

Bile works up my throat as we amble through the courtroom doors.

*It’s not fair.*

“All rise for the honorable Judge Gennett.”

My muscles lock up, and a sick sensation slides down my esophagus as my lawyer starts talking.

*She turned twenty-one in May.*

*For reasons I never understood, she loved listening to Justin Bieber on the highest volume possible and chugged sugar-free Red Bull every morning for breakfast.*

*Fries were her favorite food, but she didn’t let herself have them often*



*because she claimed they made her thighs fat...but they didn't.*

The collar of my shirt hugs too tight around my neck.

*She told me she loved me over dinner at Sushi Sushi for our sixth-month anniversary.*

But I couldn't say it back...because I didn't feel it.

However, I wanted her to find someone who would.

But she never will...

*Because she's dead.*

While I'm standing here in a courtroom...two minutes from freedom.

Cocking my head, I spot Hayley's parents. They're huddled away in a far corner of the bench on the opposite side of the room, holding on to each other like they're all they have left.

*Because they are.*

Her father is trying his best not to cry, while his wife quietly sobs into a tissue.

*Hayley's never gonna graduate college and be a vet like she always dreamed.*

*Her mother will never help her daughter plan her wedding.*

*And her father will never walk his daughter down the aisle.*

Because I selfishly took the life they created.

And soon, I'm going to brush past Hayley's parents and go on living mine...

While their daughter remains buried six feet under.

How the hell are they ever supposed to find peace in that?

Easy. *They won't.*

"I hereby sentence you to six months of house arre—"

"No." My voice punches into the courtroom with the force of a bomb. "I don't want house arrest."

I've spent twenty-one years of my life creating messes that I've either let someone else clean up or run away from.

*Not this time.*

"What are you doing?" my father mutters, but I ignore him.

The judge blinks, no doubt caught off guard by my outburst. "Young man, from my understanding you made a plea agreement for six—"

"Fuck the plea agreement."

A few people in the courtroom gasp. Hayley's parents lift their heads.

"Excuse me, young man," the judge says tersely. "One more word out of

you and I'll hold you in contempt.”

“Do something,” my father hisses to my lawyer.

*Contempt isn't long enough.*

“I apologize, Your Honor,” my lawyer chimes in. “My client is going through a—”

For fuck's sake.

“I'm not going through anything,” I interject. “Hayley's parents are. So are the Covingtons.”

*Because of me.*

Confusion spreads over Judge Gennett's face. “Young man, I suggest you \_\_\_”

“Negligent vehicular manslaughter while intoxicated...that's what I'm charged with, right?”

The judge nods. “That is correct.”

“Can you charge me with murder instead?”

*Because I killed her.*

“Oakley,” my father snaps. “Stop talking. *Now.*”

The judge's mouth falls open. “Are you telling me you intentionally kill \_\_\_”

“No. I didn't, but—”

“I'm sorry, your honor, my client is under a lot of stress.” My lawyer clears his throat. “He isn't thinking clearly.”

The judge fixes his glasses. “Well, I suggest you figure out a way to de-stress him so he settles down, or I *will* hold him in contempt.”

Thinking quick, I search my brain, recalling the facts my lawyer rattled off about my charge earlier. “If charging me with murder isn't possible...can you give me the year?”

The judge sighs. “Young man—”

“Look, you're the judge, right? That means you get to override plea deals and can sentence someone to what the court allows for a particular charge.” I might not be a lawyer but being the kid of one means I do know some stuff. “Well, last I checked my charge is punishable by one year in prison in the state of California.” My insides tighten as I look him in the eyes. “And I'm asking you to sentence me to that year.”

It's not much. Still a slap on the wrist, but Jesus fuck...it's *something*.

“Oakley,” my father hisses, his face turning red with anger. “What the hell are you doing?”

The judge slams the gavel down. "Order in the court."

My father once told me there were three times when it was okay for a man to cry.

When the love of your life walks down the aisle to meet you at the altar.

When your child takes their first breath.

And when you bury your parents.

But he never mentioned the fourth...

*Taking a life that wasn't yours to take.*

And feeling so fucking guilty about it there's no amount of drugs or alcohol in the world that will ever numb the pain.

"Please," I plead, my insides churning with shame. "Give me the year. Hell, give me a *hundred* years."

He slams his gavel down again. "Young man, I've repeatedly asked you to settle down. This courtroom is mine, not yours." He pins me with a look. "I'm hereby sentencing you to three hundred and sixty-five days at the Blackford Correctional Center." He turns to a man wearing a police uniform. "Take him away."

I lock eyes with Hayley's parents as they slam cuffs on my wrists. "I'm sorry."

*So fucking sorry.*

# Chapter 1

## Bianca

### Past...

“Did Mom come out of her room?”

Jace blows out a heavy breath. “No. She—” He hesitates. “She’s still sick.”

We both know it’s a lie. Our mom isn’t sick.

*Not physically anyway.*

No, what she has robs her of happiness, her husband a wife, and her children a mother.

What she has is pure evil.

Her *sickness* is something I don’t understand, but I wish I did so I knew how to help her.

*The only thing I know how to do is love her.*

Throwing my bookbag down, I race up the staircase.

“Bianca—” Jace starts to scold, but I brush him off.

She’s been in her bedroom for four whole days now.

*Enough is enough.*

I knock on the door, not bothering to wait for a response before entering.

As usual, she’s curled up in a ball under the covers.

Only, she isn’t sleeping...she’s clutching her phone.

No doubt waiting for my father, who is still away on a business trip, to call.

Whenever it rang, she perked up like the sun.

As if his voice was the cure for all her pain.

Removing my shoes, I crawl into bed with her.

We have an unbreakable bond that no one can destroy, and when she’s hurting...so am I.

“I miss you,” I whisper, draping my arm around her.

Lifting her head slightly, she gives me a small smile. “I didn’t know you were home from school already.”

It doesn't surprise me. Whenever this *sickness* happens, she seems to lose all concept of time.

I trace my finger over the curve of her nose.

My mom is the most beautiful woman I've ever seen.

*And the saddest.*

"Bianca." She laughs, pushing my hand away. "That tickles."

It doesn't. She just hates me drawing attention to the bump on her nose.

However, the imperfection is my favorite feature of hers. *It makes her real.*

"Do you want me to bring you up some food?"

"No, baby girl. I'm good."

My heart sinks. "Oh."

She hardly ever eats when she's sick.

I trace the arch of her eyebrow with my finger and kiss the bump on her nose, trying not to let my disappointment show.

*It will only make her feel worse.*

Rolling over, I get off the bed. "I'll let you get some sleep."

I'm about to walk away, but she wraps her arms around my waist, tugging me back to her. "How was your day?"

"Fine," I lie.

"Come on," she urges. "Tell me the truth."

Somehow the woman always knows when I'm full of baloney. "During recess, Julianna said I was too ugly to be a ballerina, and everyone laughed."

Julianna is popular...and mean.

And unfortunately for me, I'm her target.

My mother swears my *awkward phase*—a horrible one that includes teeth that are growing in crooked and a mass of frizzy hair—won't last, but I'm not so sure.

She cups my face in her hands. "Don't listen to her. You're beautiful."

"I don't feel beautiful."

A wrinkle forms between her brows. "I already told you. What you're going through won't last forever. I went through an awkward phase too. But then—"

"But then you turned out beautiful and everyone loved you and you became a famous actress." Annoyed, I look down at the carpet. "What if that doesn't happen to me? What if I'm ugly forever and—"

"Baby girl, you aren't ugly. Julianna is just a little bit—" she catches

herself before she finishes that sentence. “Unfortunately, there are tons of Juliannas in the world. But the best way to deal with someone like that is to show her it doesn’t bother you.”

My eyes prickle with tears. The girl is ruining my life. “I’ve already tried, Mom.”

*Tried and failed.*

And every day that passes, it’s getting harder and harder to pretend it doesn’t hurt.

Visibly frustrated, she rubs her temples. “Okay, fine. You want to know a secret?”

I give her a nod. I’ll take any advice she’s willing to give me.

“Julianna won’t stop picking on you because she’s a bully who likes to pick on those she perceives as weak.”

*Ouch.* “I’m not weak. How do I get her to stop?”

Sighing, she closes her eyes. “I’m officially getting the worst mother of the year award for this.”

“Come on, Mom,” I press. “Tell me.”

Another long sigh. “If you want to make a bully back down you have to beat them at their own game. If she makes fun of you, then *you* make fun of her right back and expose her insecurities in front of everyone.”

“How?”

“Everyone has insecurities, baby girl. Study someone long enough and you’ll figure out what theirs are.”

I think about this for a moment and realize there may be something to this after all. “She likes it when everyone tells her how pretty she is and how good she is at ballet...even though she’s not.” Pursing my lips, I cross my arms. “I’m a way better dancer than she is.”

I might not be in ballet, but I have more rhythm in my pinky finger than Juliana has in her entire body.

Grabbing the comb off the nightstand, she motions for me to sit in front of her so she can brush my hair. “Then I guess we’ll have to sign you up for ballet classes, buy you the cutest costumes, and make that brat eat her words.”

Hope surges through my chest. “Really?”

She parts my hair in three sections and proceeds to French braid it. “I can sign you up for classes while you’re at school tomorrow and we can go shopping for shoes and leotards this Saturday.”

“You promise?” I ask skeptically as I pass her the hair tie from around my wrist.

Sometimes she said she would do things but didn’t end up following through because of her sickness.

However, she never broke a promise.

*They were too valuable to her.*

She kisses my cheek. “I promise.”

I couldn’t wipe the smile off my face if I tried. “You’re the best mom ever.”

She secures the hair tie at the end of my braid. “Only because you’re the best daughter *ever*.”

A frown mars her pretty face when she checks her phone.

“Still waiting for Dad to call?”

That sadness is back again. “Yeah.”

“You really miss him, huh?”

My parents had a love story that could rival a fairytale.

Mom was working as a famous Bollywood actress in India when my dad went there on a business trip with his father.

They were sitting in a restaurant one night when he happened to look up at the table across from him.

It was love at first sight...for the both of them.

A few days later Mom dumped her long-term boyfriend, got engaged to my dad, and left behind her career to move to America and marry him.

Unfortunately, the abrupt marriage created some tension between her and her family.

She hasn’t seen them since the wedding, and for some reason my father forbids us to visit them.

Her frown deepens. “Promise me you’ll never fall in love.”

My parents have their issues and sometimes my mom says things that don’t make any sense to me. Things like—*men were toxic, and you needed to destroy them before they destroyed you*—but deep down I know she loves my father.

However, her new thing is making me promise never to fall in love.

“Why?”

Usually, I reassured her and vowed to do whatever she wanted, but I’m starting to grow curious.

Every fairytale made it seem like love was the best feeling in the world. I

don't get why my mom doesn't want me to experience it.

Drawing her knees to her chest, she whispers, "I don't want you to make the same mistakes I did."

"What mistake—" My stomach knots as it occurs to me. "Am I a mistake? Are Jace, Cole, and Liam—"

"No," she quickly assures me. "You and your brothers are the *best* things that ever happened to me."

That's comforting...sort of. "Then why is falling in love so bad?"

"Falling in love isn't bad. It's *who* you fall in love with."

"I don't understand."

"You don't now, but one day you will." She cradles my face in her hands. "Love gives someone the power to break you...and if you give the wrong man that power...he'll shatter your heart and ruin you."

*Yikes.* That doesn't sound very nice. "Did Dad do that to you?"

He wasn't home often because he was always busy with work, but whenever he walked through the door it was always with a bouquet of roses for her.

And he *always* looked at her like she was his entire world.

Panic claws at my chest. I don't want my parents to divorce. Megan Frank's parents did last year, and she said it was the worst.

"Dad loves you—"

"I know he does."

"Then—"

The sound of her phone ringing cuts me off.

Instantly, her face perks up. "I have to take this." She must notice my uneasy expression because she adds, "Everything is fine, baby girl. *Promise.*"

A weight lifts off my chest as she answers her phone.

"Hello, my love."

I get off the bed and scamper for the door, giving her and Dad some privacy.



# Chapter 2

## Bianca

*“Promise me you’ll never fall in love.”*

My mother’s words reverberate throughout my head as I stare down at my engagement ring.

I haven’t had a memory like *that* in over eight months.

It’s strange I would have one on the day I’m supposed to try on wedding gowns for the first time.

Almost like a bad omen.

*No.*

I halt that thought before it has time to take root and fester.

I love Stone and he loves me.

*We’re perfect for each other.*

Everyone thinks so...even my brothers.

Which is saying something because they used to despise him.

Taking a deep breath, I get off my bed and walk over to the tiny desk in the far corner of the room.

I lucked out when it came to the dorming situation at Duke’s Heart and managed to snag one of the only single dorm rooms on campus.

Of course, that will all change next year after I’m married and I move into Stone’s apartment...with his mother.

I force another breath through my lungs as I grab my knapsack.

It’s the first day of my second semester of college and I don’t want to be late for class.

I’m about to walk out the door, but the glint of my engagement ring catches my eye.

It’s a simple gold band with an equally simple, small diamond. Stone told me we could upgrade to a bigger diamond after he graduates from med school, but I told him not to bother.

I love my ring.

*I love him even more.*

With shaky fingers, I bring my cell phone to my ear.

“Luxury Bridal, how can I help you?” the woman answers.

I clear my throat before speaking. “Hi, my name is Bianca Covington. I have an appointment to try on wedding dresses later today.”

“Ah, yes. I have you down for five-fifteen.”

I swallow. “Is there any way I can reschedule? Something’s come up.”

“Sure, sweetie. Do you know when you’d like to come in? I have an opening later this week, and another one next Tues—”

“Do you have anything later than that?” I blurt out before I catch myself. “How about next month?”

“Sure do. We can schedule you for February twenty-fifth. Is five-fifteen still okay?”

“Yup. Thanks so much,” I rush out before hanging up.

I love Stone...I really do.

I just wish I knew why the second he placed a ring on my finger and I said yes...

it felt like a noose was tightening around my neck.

# Chapter 3

## Oakley

*Just one sip—the voice in my head urges. One little sip isn't gonna hurt anyone.*

Slamming the door of the minibar, I walk back over to my bed, recalling what I heard at the AA meetings I've recently started attending.

One sip leads to several sips, and several sips leads to a full glass...

*Which led to me killing an innocent girl I once cared about and fucking up the life of the girl I still love.*

Stifling a groan, I lay down on the bed.

*I need to get the fuck out of here.*

I got out of jail almost three weeks ago and I've been stuck in this hotel room ever since—thanks to my dad.

Or rather, *Crystal*.

She and my dad are going through a nasty divorce and fighting over custody of Clarissa Jasmine—or C.J. as I like to call her because her real name is not only a shitty one—it's a mouthful.

I was supposed to stay with my dad after I was released, but Crystal threw a fit over an ex-con being anywhere near her child.

Given my dad wants full custody of C.J., he got spooked.

Ergo, I'm trapped here.

Contemplating crawling out the motherfucking window because I'm losing what's left of my goddamn sanity.

As if on cue, I hear the latch on the door click open.

A moment later my dad walks in, bearing gifts.

“Okay,” he says, gesturing to the two paper bags he's holding. “I got you gummies and oil.”

*Halle-fucking-lujah.* About damn time.

Truth be told, I had no intention of touching the stuff once I got out of jail, but CBD is the only thing I've found to help reduce my seizures that doesn't give me a fuckload of shitty side effects.

Fortunately, my doctor agreed and issued me a medical marijuana card.

Unfortunately, my dad didn't trust me to go to a dispensary by myself—and since it's legal in California now—he went for me.

“I'll take a gummy.”

He opens the package. “Just one, Oak.”

“I know, Dad.”

He pins me with a look. “I'm serious. I'm only doing this because your doctor agrees—”

“Got it,” I snap, ripping the gummy out of his hand.

Almost immediately the guilt sets in. My dad's done a lot for me and I'm being a dick.

“How's C.J.?”

That puts a smile on his face. “She's good.” His smile grows. “She's so smart. This morning she recited her ABC's when I dropped her off at daycare.”

She definitely inherited her smarts from our dad.

*Too bad I can't say the same.*

The only thing I inherited from him was his fondness for Jack Daniels.

“That's awesome.”

“Yeah, she's doing this Baby Einstein thing Crystal—” He stops mid-sentence, just like he always does when he mentions her name in front of me.

And yet, I have no one else to blame but myself for making shit so fucking complicated.

Although my dad never blames me for it. He's too busy taking all his anger out on Crystal.

When I asked him why her instead of me, he said it's because she was the adult and I was the child.

When I pointed out that I was hardly a *child* and it was me who made the first move and he has every right to hate me too, he told me he couldn't ever hate me because I was his kid.

Therefore, his love was unconditional.

*No matter how much of a fuck-up I am.*

He clears his throat, changing the subject. “I'll see if I can sneak C.J. by again later so you can see her.”

“I'd like that.”

Sure, she likes to shove tiny fistfuls of her Cheerios into my mouth and has a habit of grabbing my cheeks whenever she wants my attention, but seeing her—even for a few minutes at a time—never fails to put a smile on

my face.

“How’s the job search going?” Dad asks, plopping down in a chair across from me.

“The last three I applied for turned me down.”

Just like the first three.

Evidently, *just got out of jail* looks terrible on a resume.

Digging into the second paper bag, he tosses me a fast-food burger. “Well, I have some good news.”

Raising an eyebrow, I unwrap my burger. “What?”

“I ran into one of my old clients who happens to be the custodial manager at Duke’s Heart, and he said he’s looking to hire someone full-time.” He takes a bite of his own burger. “When I mentioned that my son was looking for work, he told me to have you stop by today so he can interview you for the open janitor position.”

I place my burger down. “Janitor?”

I’m not a pretentious douche but the *custodial arts* isn’t something I ever imagined partaking in.

Not to mention, Duke’s Heart isn’t exactly a place I want to be.

*It’s where she is.*

Correction—where *they* are.

He wipes his mouth with a napkin. “It might not be glitz and glam, but a job is a job—”

“I know,” I say quickly, because he’s right and I’d be a dumbass to turn down the offer. Besides, the campus is huge, so I doubt I’ll run into her. “What time does he want me there?”

“Twelve.” He looks at his watch. “Which means you have thirty minutes to get ready, so finish your burger and hop in the shower.”

I take a bite and swallow. “Dad?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks.”

“Don’t thank me yet, it’s up to you to get the job.”

I know.

He takes a sip of his soda. “I might have also gotten you an apartment.”

This is news to me. “You did?”

“Don’t get too excited, it’s nothing fancy. Just a studio on the other side of town...but it’s something.” He shoves some fries into his mouth. “I’ve already paid the security deposit and the first month’s rent. You can move in

tomorrow.”

A weird feeling spreads through my chest. I’ve never been good at this kind of shit, but I seriously fucking owe him.

“Dad?”

He averts his gaze. “I know, Oak.”

My dad not only saves my ass when I fuck up and puts my life back together afterward, he saves me from having to be gracious about it.

“I’m sorry I hurt you.”

It’s barely a whisper, but I know he hears it because he clears his throat. “There’s still one more thing we have to talk about.”

“What’s that?”

I’m not sure what to make of his expression. “You’ve been seizure-free for a year now.”

“And?”

He huffs out a breath. “You still have sixty days left on your probationary period before they reinstate your driver’s license, but we can apply for a hardship license so you can travel back and forth to work.”

“Not interested,” I quickly tell him.

I have no intention of getting behind the wheel again.

Because the last time I drove...

*I killed someone.*

He heaves an exasperated sigh. “If you get this job, you’re going to need a reliable form of transportation.”

“I’ll take the bus.”

I take them to my AA meetings every day, I see no reason I can’t take one to and from work.

“What happens if you miss one, wake up late one morning, or they stop running for whatever reason?”

I guzzle my bottle of water and stand. “I’ll wait for the next one.”

“What if you have to work a night shift? Buses don’t run past seven in this town.”

*Shit.* He has a point.

“I’ll walk.”

He pinches the bridge of his nose. “It’s ten miles one way.”

I shrug. “I’ll take an Uber.”

“You’re barely going to be making enough to pay for your rent and food. Taking an Uber twice a day is expensive.” He folds his arms across his chest.

“I know you’re scared. I get it. But there has to be some kind of compromise \_\_\_”

“Compromise? Hayley’s *dead*, Dad.”

“I know,” he says softly. “And as terrible as that is, you can’t keep punishing yourself because you made a mistake. Your life still goes on.”

He doesn’t *get* it.

Then again, how can I expect him to?

He’s not the one who killed someone.

“Dad—”

“Goddammit.” His nostrils flare on an inhale. “I haven’t asked you for a damn thing since you’ve been out. But, I need you to do this. If not for yourself, then for me.”

“Why? Why is me driving so important to you?”

“Because I don’t want you to keep punishing yourself,” he screams. “Hayley died that day...but so did you.”

*He’s not wrong.*

The party stopped the day I became a murderer.

The Oakley who used to joke, smoke, and fuck his problems away while living life to the fullest is long gone.

In his place is a man drowning in remorse.

*Because it’s what I deserve.*

That said—my dad’s right. He hasn’t asked me for much...or anything, for that matter.

However, the thought of getting behind the wheel of a car again isn’t something I can get down with.

Agitated, I scrub a hand down my face. “Can we shelf this conversation for now so I can nail this interview and get a job?”

I can tell the lawyer in him wants to argue some more, but the father in him drops it. “Fine.”



“Hi.” I stick out my hand. “I’m Oakley. Wayne Zelenka’s son. I’m here for the interview.”

The older man—who doesn’t even bother introducing himself, or shaking my hand—motions for me to follow him into an office marked *maintenance*.

“You know how to use a mop?”

“I think I can manage.”

He throws a dark gray jumpsuit at me. “Put this on. I’ll get you a fancy name badge next week.”

I blink. “Does this mean I got the job?”

“That depends.” He sticks a toothpick in his mouth. “Can you start today?”

*Does a bear shit in the woods?*

“Yeah.”

He shoves a mop into my hands. “Your shift ends at eight, but you can take your lunch break at three-thirty.” He narrows his eyes. “I have two rules, kid.”

“What’s that?”

“Don’t steal from me and don’t show up late.”

I start putting on my jumpsuit. “Got it.”



# Chapter 4

## Bianca

“Hey, you.” Stone greets me when I spot him outside my classroom.

Last semester we had the same break in classes so we could have lunch together, but this semester our schedules are completely opposite, so all we have are a few measly minutes to catch up before I grab lunch by myself and he heads off to another class.

Rising on my tiptoes, I give him a quick peck on the lips. “How is your day going so far?”

“Good.” Wrapping an arm around my waist, he pulls me in for another kiss. “Excited to pick out a wedding dress later?”

Guilt punches me in the gut, but there’s no way I can tell him about the memory that prompted my sudden case of cold feet without him getting offended and flipping out.

So, I lie to spare his feelings.

*And an argument.*

“About that.” I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. “The bridal boutique called me earlier and said they accidentally overbooked. The earliest they can get me in now is February twenty-fifth.”

“No big deal. We’re not getting married until August, so you still have plenty of time to pick out a dress.” Glancing at his watch, he mutters a curse. “Hate to cut this short, Bourne, but I gotta go. I’m late for class.”

“Love yo—” I start to tell him, but he’s already walking away.

After sparing one more glance in his direction, I start my hike to the cafeteria.

The campus is huge, but the food they serve here makes the lengthy walk and wait worth it.

I usually stick to my typical turkey bacon club sandwich, but I’m craving something a little healthier today, so I opt for an apple and veggie wrap.

After grabbing my food and paying, I trek off to my favorite place.

The lake.

I was surprised to find out they had one on campus, but the moment I

discovered the small piece of tranquil paradise nestled away from all the buildings, I fell in love.

Usually, I come here with Stone, but given our new schedule changes, I'm on my own.

Apparently not though because some guy is sitting on my bench eating a sandwich.

Yes, I know a bench is public property, but I've come to think of this as my spot.

The quiet place where I can get away from it all and clear my head.

Well, in between Stone droning on and on about how hard med school is and how he has no time.

Stifling a groan of irritation, I march down the hill and tread over to the guy. There's an empty space next to him so he should have no problem sharing the bench with me.

"Do you mind if I—"

My words fall by the wayside the moment he comes into view.

He's wearing some kind of gray jumpsuit, but it does little to hide the muscles lining his tall, lean frame. My breath catches as I take in the rest of him. Not only is his face flawless, with prominent cheekbones and full lips, he's rocking some dark blond scruff along his chiseled jawline that's the same shade as his hair.

I'd say he looks like a typical California surfer, but he's so much hotter than that—not that I'm focused on his appearance because I have a fiancé I'm in love with.

I should look away because I'm practically gawking, but his eyes keep me prisoner. They're a gorgeous blue hue—however, it's the turmoil lurking in them that renders me speechless.

He looks lonely. *Miserable*, actually.

Almost like he needs a friend.

With that thought pressing me, I find my words. "Can I sit here?"

A whirlwind of emotions scatter across his face as he looks around the empty lake in disbelief, almost like he thinks he's being punked.

Whatever the case, it's clear he doesn't want me around. "Sorry for bothering you, I'll leave—"

"Stay."

The simple, single word comes out like a plea.

As if he needs me.

So, I do.

However, trying to strike up a conversation with him is hard, because he goes quiet after that.

Which means all the talking is left to me. *Awesome.*

“It’s kind of crazy how no one really comes here.”

Then again, that’s part of the appeal. It’s the one place on campus that isn’t bustling with students and obnoxious people talking over each other.

*The one place I can hear my own thoughts when the world gets too loud.*

“My fiancé, Stone, told me about this place last semester,” I continue. “He suggested we eat lunch out here because he’s not too fond of being around people.”

Which is strange, I’m now realizing because he’s going to be a doctor. *Interacting with humans is kind of a requirement.*

“His schedule changed this semester though, so we don’t see each other as much as we used to,” I explain. “He’s in the premed program. Things are kind of hectic for him.”

That turmoil is back in his eyes when I look at my new friend again, but he remains silent.

*Weird.*

I fiddle with my engagement ring. “I’m supposed to be getting married in August.” I mentally kick myself when I catch my blunder. “I mean, I *am* getting married in August.”

August eighteenth to be exact.

*Exactly two years after my accident.*

Stone picked the date. He said we should turn a tragedy into something positive since it brought us together.

The guy looks at me then, studying me intently. I have no idea what he sees, but it has him frowning before he peels his gaze away and focuses on the lake.

“Are you married?” I ask but then realize that’s a stupid question because he can’t be much older than I am and he’s not wearing a wedding ring.

Keeping his eyes trained on the lake, he shakes his head.

“I never planned on getting married so young,” I confess because for some strange reason I’m unable to keep my mouth shut.

“Actually,” I amend. “I’m not really sure what my plans were because I was in a car accident and I have something called retrograde amnesia.”

Beside me, he stiffens.

“I know,” I carry on. “It sounds like a big deal, but—I don’t know. I think it was a blessing because the old me was a really shitty, awful person.”

“What makes you say that?” he utters unexpectedly. “If you can’t remember who you were, how do you know what kind of person you used to be or what might have shaped you to be that way?”

I think about this for a moment and realize he would be right.

If it weren’t for the few glimpses of my former self I’ve had.

“Well, they don’t happen often, but sometimes I get these little memory flashback things. Bits and pieces of who I was...but not enough to form a whole picture.”

*Just enough to tell me I was a horrible human being.*

“It’s kind of like a puzzle,” I whisper. “A broken puzzle with tons of missing pieces.”

*Which means there’s no way I’ll ever be whole again.*

It’s something that should bother me, but I’ve learned to come to terms with it.

I have a great life with some wonderful people in my corner.

Two brothers who love me, a father who’s trying to be a better parent, Dylan and Sawyer who feel more like sisters than friends...

And a fiancé who loves me more than the air he breathes.

But I’d be lying if I said there wasn’t a small part of me that feels like something major is missing.

*A vital piece of my heart that’s gone for good.*

And if I’m really being honest with myself...I’m scared shitless I’ll never find it again.

I flush with embarrassment when a tear rolls down my cheek.

I don’t even know why I’m being so dramatic and crying right now. Hell, if anything I should be saying all this to my psychiatrist Dr. Wilson instead of some random guy.

But I won’t.

Being a psych major myself, I know the inner workings of things. And whenever I’m truly honest, you can bet he’s writing something important down on his paper. Like assessments and diagnosis.

Either way, his judgments will have an impact on my life.

*Because it will label me.*

Talking to a stranger candidly like this feels safe...because even if he’s judging me, I doubt I’ll ever see him again, so what I tell him doesn’t matter.

“I don’t know why I’m so sad,” I choke out as another tear makes its way down my cheek. “All I know is something feels wrong.”

*Like my universe is out of balance.*

His blue eyes fill with worry as he turns to face me. “Bianca—”

My chest caves in.

Not only does the stranger know my name, he says it like it has a deeper meaning to him...

*As if he knows me.*

However, I can’t focus on that, because someone is shouting a slew of obscenities behind us.

Less than a second later, my brother Jace comes into view, looking like he’s ready to tear someone’s head off.

I’m not sure why, but his angry glare is directed at the guy sitting on the bench with me.

“What the *fuck* are you doing here?”

For a second I think he’s talking to me because why in the world would Jace be so livid with some random guy.

Gaping at him, I get off the bench. “Eating lunch—”

“You have two seconds to get the fuck away from her or I’ll beat your face in right here, right fucking now.”

*Good Lord.* Why the hell is Jace acting like such a psychopath?

The guy on the bench should be scared—my brothers are terrifying—but he merely stands up and says, “I’m leaving. And just so we’re clear, I didn’t intentionally go out of my way to find her. It just happened.”

He’s not wrong. That’s exactly what occurred.

However, I don’t see what the big deal is about us having a freaking conversation.

“What’s going on?”

“Right,” Jace scoffs, ignoring me. “You seriously expect me to believe that?” He gets close to his face. “I *know* you, motherfucker.”

That’s news to me. “Well, would someone mind filling *me* in because—”

“Then you know I didn’t say shit,” my new friend bites out. “We were just—”

“Stop it, Jace,” Dylan screams before she starts running down the hill.

“No,” Jace roars. “The asshole just couldn’t stay away from her.”

I’m getting really tired of him talking about me like I don’t exist.

But even more tired of not knowing why he’s so riled up.

I don't miss the way Dylan's eyes do a quick sweep of the guy when she reaches us. "What are you doing here, Oakley? And why are you dressed like that?"

*Oakley?*

I briefly recall Cole telling me he used to have a friend named Oakley, but that was all he ever said.

"My dad got me a job as a janitor," the guy—whose name is apparently Oakley—answers.

"Oh. That's go—" Her face pales when she catches her boyfriend's furious expression. "Shit."

I blink in confusion. How the heck do *they* know each other?

"You guys know—"

"What the fuck is this?" someone who sounds a lot like Cole shouts.

Holy shit. For an area that's usually serene, it seems awfully overpopulated with my irate family members.

"I caught him talking to Bianca," Jace explains.

Cole's eyes narrow into tiny slits. "You motherfucker—"

"Everyone, stop," I shout because I honestly can't take it anymore. "What is going on? Why is everyone so mad?" I peer up at the guy who looks like he wants nothing more than to escape this shit show, and quite frankly, I can't blame him. "How do you know my name?"

Oakley opens his mouth to speak, but Jace beats him to it.

"Say one word, asshole, and I'll lay you the fuck out." His eyes narrow into tiny slits as he shoves him. "She's happy now. And the last thing she needs is you coming back to fuck up her life again, so you better stay the hell away."

*Fuck up my life again? What does that mean?*

"Jesus fucking Christ." Oakley holds up his hands. "Despite what you think, I'm not here to stir up any shit or cause problems."

"Then leave," Cole chimes in. "Now."

"No," I protest when he starts walking away. "Who are you?"

The look he gives me makes my heart clench. "No one."

And then he's gone...trekking up the hill that leads back to campus.

While I'm left trying to figure out why the dull, uneasy ache is back in my chest.

*And why it disappeared when he was here.*

"Someone better start talking," I tell them. "Right now."

“Don’t worry about it,” Jace says. “It’s taken care of.”

If that was the case, this unsettling feeling wouldn’t be burrowing in my gut.

I look at Cole because I want to make sure I have the few facts I know straight. “You once said you had a friend named Oakley. Was that him?”

Cole’s jaw works. “Yeah.”

My gaze bounces between my brothers. “Then why do you two hate him so much?”

They stay silent...which pisses me off.

I look at Dylan next because she’s always been honest. “Dylan?”

I can tell she wants to cave, but the death glare Jace shoots her has her mouth clamping shut.

“Fine,” I say. “If no one is going to tell me what’s going on, I’ll just find him and ask—”

“Bianca,” Jace starts to argue as I walk away, but I’ve had enough.

“Screw you,” I scream. “One second I was eating lunch while talking to a nice, innocent guy and the next you attacked him like a crazy person yet refuse to tell me why.” Frustration rises in my throat. “You guys are clearly keeping something from me—”

“He’s not a nice, innocent guy, Bianca,” Jace seethes. “He’s the piece of shit who drove drunk and high with you in the car and almost *killed* you.”

# Chapter 5

## Oakley

Right *break*, left *clutch*—I remind myself as I straddle the Harley and stick a helmet on my head.

It's been a while since I've ridden one, but it's not long before it all comes back to me and I'm cruising down the highway.

I had no intention of ever driving again, but it turns out my dad was right the other day...the buses don't run past seven in this town.

Given my shift ends at eight and the walk home to my new apartment is over two hours...I had to come up with a good solution that didn't involve putting other people's safety in jeopardy.

*Just mine.*

Fortunately, my dad's favorite hobby was the answer.

Before he married Crystal, he was a big motorcycle fanatic who used to take his Harley out every weekend.

Hell, he loved his *baby* so much he taught me how to drive a bike well before he taught me how to drive a car. Therefore, asking to borrow one of his Harley's was a no brainer.

The way I see it, if I crash into someone while I'm riding a motorcycle, the only person I'll potentially kill is myself.

Ergo, it's the perfect resolution.

Too bad I can't seem to figure out one for how to deal with the Covingtons.

*Or how to help her.*

Jace says Bianca's happy now...but she didn't look very happy the other day.

Then again, her new life is none of my business.

*Because it's not my ring on her finger.*

It's his.

My chest coils as I speed down the highway, heading toward the campus.

She might love him now...

*But she loved me first.*



Even when I hated her.

### Past...

Baby shower.

Showers for babies.

So fucking stupid. What kind of baby needs a shower when they aren't even born yet?

A surge of pain permeates my chest.

*A baby that isn't mine.*

Stumbling out of my car, I feel around my pockets for my house key but come up empty.

*Fuck it. I'll break a window and tell Mr. Covington a bird flew into it.*

*How could I ever love you? You're such a screwup.*

Crystal's last words to me infiltrate my head.

*Fuck that whore.*

I loved her. Gave her everything I had left to give, but it wasn't good enough.

She used me.

Then *left* me.

*Just like my mother.*

Frustrated, I pound my fist on the front door of the guesthouse, the world around me spinning like my own personal cyclone of hell.

*Every woman I love ends up betraying me.*

And I have no one to blame but myself.

I turn the knob, surprised when it opens. I must have forgotten to lock it when I left.

Staggering inside my apartment, I dump the contents of my pockets onto my kitchen table.

A lighter, my favorite orange bowl, a bag of Mary J—the only bitch I can trust—and some pills.

Without a second thought, I pop one in my mouth and swallow.

It's only ecstasy so it's not enough to fuck me up the way I need right now, but it will do.

*Anything to take the pain away.*

*Anything to get me back inside my safe room.*

*The place where everything is all Gucci, baby.*

The place where my demons can't find me because I locked the door and threw away the motherfucking key.

It's only then I notice a small figure buried underneath the covers on my bed.

I scan my brain, wondering when I invited Morgan to come play, but I honestly can't recall.

*Half a bottle of Jack and some E will do that to you.*

I undo my belt and step out of my jeans, fisting my dick through my boxers.

"Hey, boo," I greet her as I slide into my bed.

She doesn't respond, but it's okay.

I know a great way to wake her *and* my cock up.

Closing my eyes, I drape my arm over her body and cup one of her tits.

They're firmer and bigger than I remember. *Shit.*

It's not Morgan...

*It's Hayley.*

The only girl in my life who didn't leave me.

Because she didn't have the chance. I kicked her the fuck out before she could.

But every so often—on nights where I'm really fucked-up—I rope her back in just to remind myself how my life could have turned out.

That I could have had a sweet girl.

That I could have been a good boy...

*Just like my mom told me to be before she left me forever.*

Groaning, I roll on top of her.

I need to get lost inside her so I can forget myself.

Her skin is so soft and creamy. A sweet apple scent invades my nostrils as I kiss down her neck.

*She smells different*—my brain registers, but I don't care.

With the way I'm feeling, I'm liable to fuck the seventy-year-old lady who sells me my black and milds at the gas station.

She utters a low moan, her chest heaving as her hips buck against my cock.

Hayley's not usually so forward, but I'm glad she's not scared to take what she wants.

*That makes two of us.*

I tease one of her nipples through her bra.

Arching her back, she digs her nails into the back of my scalp.

*Christ.* That's what I'm talking about.

I trail my tongue along her cleavage. "You're giving me that ass tonight."  
I bite the top of her tit. "You hear me?"

She freezes and the disappointment in my chest feels like a brick.

There's no doubt in my mind it's Hayley now.

*My innocent angel.*

It took me almost six months of dating her exclusively before she gave it up...but I liked the chase.

However, things turned stale between us shortly after I took her virginity, and it became apparent we were on completely different playing fields.

She wanted it sweet and gentle while I...

Wanted to fuck.

*Show her my scars.*

But Hayley wasn't interested in seeing them.

*No one is.*

Everyone in my life just wants the funny jokester who's always there to make them feel better.

And I do it without protest...because I don't want the people I give a shit about to abandon me.

Giving Hayley what she wants, I squeeze her tits gently even though I really want to flip her over, grab her hair, and feed her ass my dick from behind.

Make her bleed for me.

Burn her from the inside out so I leave my mark.

*Ensure she'll never forget me.*

"More," she rasps, her voice huskier and needier than I've ever heard it before.

I work my way up her body and crash my mouth against hers as she wraps those long legs around me.

Only they don't seem quite as long as I remember.

The thought alone should be enough to stop me, but the way she's kissing me...

*Jesus fucking Christ.*

This girl can't get enough. It's like she's sucking my damn soul into her body.

The moment she nibbles my lower lip, whatever thread I was hanging on

to snaps.

Our kiss turns messy and I shove my tongue inside her mouth, devouring her.

My hand goes to her throat, threatening to squeeze. “Turn around and spread that pussy so I can eat you.”

She opens her mouth, but I shove my tongue inside again, giving myself one more taste.

Her greedy tongue meets mine thrust for thrust, fighting for control.

She’s so different tonight—wicked, even, but I fucking love it.

Hell, I’m so hard right now I’m surprised my cock piercing doesn’t shoot across the room like a slingshot.

Maybe I was wrong to cheat on her with Crystal.

Maybe I was wrong to break her heart...even though letting her go was the right thing to do.

Maybe things can work out between us.

Maybe we had to break apart to find each other again.

Maybe...

“Oakley,” she whimpers.

Her voice feels like poison pumping through my system.

*No.*

When I open my eyes, my worst fears are confirmed.

*Wicked indeed.*

I jump off the bed like my balls are on fire.

And if Jace and Cole ever find out about this...hell, they might be.

I knew Bianca had been looking at me differently lately—*like I’m her next goddamn victim*—but I never thought she’d take it this far.

Shame courses through me like a boulder rolling downhill.

I almost fucked my best friends’ baby sister.

*For fuck’s sake.* She’s barely sixteen.

Grabbing my hoodie off the bed, I cover the erection poking through my boxers and turn on the light on the nightstand.

“What the fuck are you doing here?”

Bianca has the audacity to look offended as she throws the covers off, revealing the hot pink panties and bra barely covering her banging body.

*Goddammit.*

Biting my knuckle, I reach over and turn off the light, forcing my dick not to react to the sight of her.

*Cute cuddly puppies and ugly nuns.*

The stubborn brat flicks the light back on. “I live here, remember?”

“No,” I remind her, pointing to my front door. “You live out *there*.”

Actually, I’m pretty certain she resides in hell, but that’s beside the point.

I pay rent—not much, but it’s something—to live in her father’s guesthouse.

Not to be seduced by minors wearing hot pink panties that I want to tear off with my teeth.

Goddammit. *Cute cuddly puppies and ugly nuns.*

It’s bad enough I have to watch her go for her swims in her little bikinis every morning before she runs off to school, but sneaking into my bed in the middle of the night?

I never thought Bianca would do me dirty like that.

My dick throbs with need. *Shit*. Bad choice of words.

That’s when it dawns on me.

Bianca doesn’t do shit like this for no reason. There’s always a motive behind it.

Despite myself, I give her the benefit of the doubt because she’s never fucked with me before. *Not like this*.

“What kind of trouble are you in?”

She looks at me like I’ve sprouted another head. “Trouble? Why—”

“Because you’re blackmailing me.”

She blinks, like she doesn’t understand what I’m implying, before her lips twist into a malicious scowl. “Wow.” Slowly, she starts crawling over the bed, heading straight for me. “That’s what you really think?”

I grind my molars so hard I’m surprised they don’t turn to dust. “I know you, remember?”

“You’re right.” Before I can stop her, she runs her pink talons down my stomach. “But you’re forgetting something.”

Smacking her hand out of the way, I growl, “What’s that?”

She climbs out of my bed, backing me into the wall behind me. “You kissed *me*.” Irritation prickles my neck when her hand makes its way down my stomach again. “And by the looks of things, it appears you were enjoying our little make-out session. *A lot*.”

“You’re right...I was.” I wrap my hand around her wrist, halting her right before she grabs my junk. “Because I thought you were Hayley.”

I have no idea what to make of the expression on her face.

I can't tell if she's pissed, or genuinely hurt.

Who the fuck am I kidding? There's a reason I dub her baby Satan.

Her gorgeous looks are every bit as lethal as she is.

*Nothing about this wicked witch is genuine.*

The sharp sting of her palm slapping my cheek has me biting back a groan.

Jace once joked that crazy bitches turned me on, and he wasn't wrong. *However, even I have my limits.*

I'm about to tell her to leave, but like an animal that's found its prey she rises on her tiptoes and slams her mouth against mine.

A second later the snake flicks her tongue.

I quickly come to my senses and push her away.

A little too hard because she falls back onto the bed.

The heated stare she gives me has me contemplating if it's worth ruining my friendship with Jace and Cole.

*Shitballs.*

The fact that she would even put me in this position to begin with is fucked.

She knows I consider Jace and Cole my brothers. *My family.*

The little manipulating succubus.

Rage fills my veins as I tug her off the bed. "Get the fuck out."

In the back of my mind, I know I'm probably being too rough with her, but she provoked the beast.

"You started it," she seethes as I wrench her toward the door.

Under *false* pretenses.

"That may be true." I twist the knob and push her outside. "But right now, I'm fucking ending it."

*For good.*

I find her t-shirt near my front door and toss it at her. "Leave. *Now.*"

Her lower lip trembles. Damn, she's good.

Just like my mother, Bianca wears her manipulating, scheming, vindictive traits like a crown of jewels and I want no part of it.

"Oakley—"

"Pull this shit again and I'll tell Jace and Cole."

It's an idle threat. I might be an honorary member of their family, but I'm not blood. Bianca has them both wrapped around her little finger and I know they'll believe whatever version of events she decides to give them.

Tonight might earn me an ass-kicking but it won't destroy our friendship because I didn't do anything with her intentionally.

*I never would.* Not even with my worst enemy's dick.

"Goddammit, Bianca. What the actual fuck is wrong with you?" Disgust rolls through me. "You have no right sneaking into grown men's beds in the middle of the night." I grab her chin, forcing her to look at me. "Do you have any idea what I would have done to you?"

Bianca doesn't have an innocent bone in her body, but it doesn't take away from the fact that I've watched her grow up before my very eyes.

My stomach churns with degradation.

I can still remember the little girl with frizzy hair who wore glasses and had a mouth full of braces.

The girl who used to cry whenever I had a seizure because she got scared...but then would dry her eyes when it was over so she could make me grilled cheese and tomato soup.

*The girl who would never do something like this to me.*

She smirks seductively. "As a matter of fact, I do." Her nostrils flare. "Don't you dare stand there and act like you didn't want it."

So much for trying to reason with her.

My laugh is callous. "Once I realized who was in my bed?" I get dangerously close to her face. "Not even a little."

I'll never go there with her. *Ever.*

Baby Satan's big brown eyes become glassy. "Oakley."

For fuck's sake. Does she really think those crocodile tears will work with me?

"Give me one good reason why—"

"Because I don't want you," I roar, the tendons in my neck straining with rage. "I'll never fucking want you."

*Because she's exactly like the first bitch who broke my heart.*

Which means I need to stay far away.

*For good.*

# Chapter 6

## Bianca

I toss and turn in the twin-size bed in my dorm room, trying my hardest to fall asleep...but it's pointless.

My mind keeps firing off questions I don't have the answers for, refusing to settle down.

This whole time I thought Hayley was driving the car I was in during the accident...but as it turns out, it was this Oakley guy.

A guy I can't recall ever meeting before today.

And given I have no memory of him...I'm not sure *why* I was with him in the car to begin with?

I massage my pounding temples, but when that doesn't help, I reach across my nightstand for the prescription bottle.

Grabbing my water bottle next, I pop a capsule into my mouth and swallow.

I've been having a lot of trouble sleeping lately due to anxiety, so my doctor prescribed me some pills to make it easier.

Truth be told, I hate taking them because they make me feel like a zombie the next day, but I have a statistics quiz in the morning, and I need all the rest I can get.

Rolling over in bed, I force my eyes to close.

Because after I pass my quiz tomorrow...

*I have every intention of getting to the bottom of this.*

## Past...

I can feel him watching me.

He's liable to slit his throat before he'll ever admit it...but every so often those gorgeous blue eyes slide my way.

Even though I'm not the girl he's supposed to be fixated on.

*That girl would be Morgan.*



As if on cue, her gaze joins his.  
No surprise there. My bitch is thirsty.  
*And he has no idea.*

Fighting back a smile, I lick my lips and adjust the strings to my black one-piece bathing suit.

I'm seriously regretting not going with my orange bikini—Oakley's favorite color—but I don't like showing the scar on my lower stomach to many people.

Besides, it's a happy occasion since we're supposed to be celebrating my birthday and all.

Even though I don't turn eighteen for another few days.

However, Jace and Cole made plans with their girls, who happen to be *besties*—insert eye roll—to go on some kind of couples trip next week.

Which means I had to settle for a goddamn backyard BBQ pool party.

Not that I'm bitter or anything.

*No, I'm fucking pissed.*

I've been waiting my whole life to turn eighteen and neither of them give a shit.

Cole I'm not so angry at because his fiancée Sawyer is the closest thing *I* have to a real friend. But Jace?

I *hate* that bitch of his with a passion that's out of this world.

If she never led Liam—my brother who committed suicide...

Oh, I'm sorry. Did that little tidbit make you uncomfortable?

Well, I suggest you buckle your seatbelt, honey. Because we haven't even cracked the surface of my fucked-up life.

Anyway, if Dylan had never led Liam on and agreed to go to the junior high dance with him the night he committed suicide, Liam might still be here.

Needless to say, I'll never forgive her.

However, she makes Jace happy—sickeningly happy—so I dig deep and find a way to tolerate her most of the time.

Because I'll do anything for my brothers.

Even when they're royal douchebags.

"Burgers and steaks are almost done," Jace announces as he flips one over on the large grill.

Narrowing my eyes, I clear my throat. *Loudly.*

Smirking, Jace adds, "Including the birthday girl's veggie burger."

“Well, wonders never cease,” I mutter. “For once you didn’t forget about me.”

I’m happy for Jace and Cole, but it’s hard not being the main girl in their lives anymore. And by hard? I mean it hurts like hell.

Jace frowns. “Bianc—”

I don’t get to hear the end of his sentence because someone turns the raft I was happily floating on over and I fall into the pool.

Given I was unprepared, I get a mouthful of water and cough as I reach the surface.

Immediately, I zero in on the assailant. *Cole.*

Go freaking figure. He’s always pushing people’s buttons.

Still coughing, I punch his throwing arm as hard as I can. “Dick.”

He shrugs innocently. “What? You looked hot. I was helping you out.” His smirk matches Jace’s. “Although *now* you look like a racoon.” He cocks an eyebrow. “Why do you have that shit on your face anyway? You’re in the pool.”

As much as I love him...there are times I hate him.

*Seriously fucking hate him.*

I’m wearing makeup for the same reason every other girl does.

To look good enough to impress a stupid boy.

A stupid boy who happens to be both my brothers’ best friend.

A stupid boy who stole the thing beating in my chest with a single kiss.

A stupid boy who claims he wants *nothing* to do with me.

*Even though we used to be friends.*

With an irritated grunt, I make my way toward the pool steps and march into the guesthouse.

Otherwise known as Oakley’s home.

Yeah, I know. *Complicated.*

Take my word for it. There is nothing worse than knowing the one person you want, the one person you can’t have lives in your back yard.

Part of me wants him to move out because the reminder sucks balls, but the bigger part of me—the dumb senseless part ruled by an even dumber organ—wants him to stay forever.

Either way, the close proximity makes it easy to keep tabs on him.

I’m closing the door to the bathroom when Morgan slips past it.

I open my mouth to tell her to fuck off, but I can’t because she slams hers over mine.

*Fucking hell.* Here we go.

I've told her time and time again that if she wants to dine on my pussy and get me off that's cool, but we're *not* in a relationship.

"I missed you," she whispers.

I roll my eyes so hard I swear I see my brain.

"You saw me yesterday," I remind her.

Her face scrunches. "I saw you, but I didn't really *see* you."

Oh, she means my *cunt*. "My brothers are right outside."

She attacks me with her lips again, only this time I open my mouth and let her tongue brush against mine before I pull away.

Because the more she wants me...the less she wants *him*.

"I'll be quick. Promise."

"You have five minutes," I agree. "And since it's my birthday, you better make it good."

Dropping to her knees, she moves the bottom of my bathing suit to the side. "Don't worry, sexy. I got you."

A moment later she spears my pussy with her tongue.

What started off as a way to manipulate her last year quickly turned into...well, *this*.

Back when I was in tenth grade Morgan used to hate my guts. But then in typical me fashion, I took her spot as upcoming cheerleading captain and kicked her off my damn squad.

Once my junior year and her senior year rolled around and she realized she was a nobody, she begged me to let her back on the squad.

I told her if she was willing to do *anything* to earn her place she had to meet me at the marina at the stroke of midnight.

I had every intention of fucking with her because I honestly didn't think she'd agree to the terms, but Morgan surprised us both when her head dipped underneath my cheerleading skirt and she feasted on my freshly waxed hoo-ha like it was her last meal.

Hell, the girl enjoyed it more than *I* did. And given how experienced she was, it was definitely *not* her first time eating some coochie.

Of course, I promptly whipped out my phone—intending to score some blackmail on her for safekeeping—but *that's* when I noticed the parking lot wasn't so abandoned after all.

Stone DaSilva—the younger brother of the biggest piece of shit on the planet, Tommy DaSilva—was enjoying the show.

And making a little recording of his own.

I inwardly shudder.

The things I had to do to get him to erase it are things I never want to think about again. *Fucking douche donut.*

I look down at Morgan. “You’re gonna have to do better.” I grab the back of her neck. “Suck it.”

Her hot mouth suction around my clit. *Much better.*

I should probably feel bad about taking advantage of her, but I’ve been open and honest with Morgan about what this is—and what this *isn’t*—from the beginning.

It’s not my fault she keeps coming back to my cunt like a moth to a flame.

Morgan’s a full-blown undercover lesbo—which is awfully ironic because her father is some rich senator who openly hates gay people—but it’s shitty that she doesn’t feel like she can be who she really is.

I’d probably have more respect for her if she was.

Maybe Oakley would too, because he uses her for his needs just as much as I do.

Then again, Morgan seems to enjoy being used.

*Poor girl didn’t get enough affection from her parents.*

It’s almost comical how much a fucked-up childhood can turn you into an even more fucked-up adult.

*Not to mention all the kinky shit it can stir up.*

Take Oakley for example. His mom abandoned him and his dad to be a dope whore when he was four.

According to Oakley, she was a beautiful tall blonde.

Can you guess what Oakley’s *type* is?

That’s right. Gold star for you.

I grab a fist full of Morgan’s blonde hair. “Make me come, slut.”

Normally, I don’t slut shame unless it’s deserved, but it turns Morgan on and makes her get me off that much quicker.

Plus, it helps me get all my resentment about her screwing my man out so I don’t have to cause her bodily harm on the daily.

I call our little arrangement a win-win.

I also call it *temporary* because she’ll be going off to college after the summer.

I have no doubt she’ll find a hot chick who likes munching carpets as

much as she does.

And then she'll be out of my hair—and Oakley's—for good.

"That's it," I whisper as she works me. "Good girl."

My legs begin to tremble as ripples of pleasure rip through me.

And then my mind does that thing. That thing where it seems to separate from my body.

I call it a protection mechanism, but psychology calls it *disassociation*.

I'm not sure why I do it whenever I orgasm with someone other than myself, but if I had to guess?

I'd say it was my way of ensuring they don't get all of me.

Sex—not that I've had a cock inside me *yet*—is nothing but a physical stimulation that humans are fundamentally programmed to want.

The moment my orgasm is over, I fix my bathing suit and head for the door without so much as a thank you.

"Bianca," Morgan whispers, her voice trembling as I turn the knob.

*Nope*. Ain't nobody got time for a stage-five clinger.

My stomach dips the moment I close the door behind me.

On second thought, I should have taken my chances with Morgan because I've been spotted.

Sawyer's big brown eyes cut to mine. I'm about to compliment her on her figure-flattering bathing suit, but she hisses, "Seriously?" Wide-eyed, she juts her chin toward the front door. "Oakley is right outside."

Sawyer promised my secrets were safe with her, but I can tell they're slowly eating her alive because she's close friends with him too.

"It's not my fault she got hungry."

She pinches the bridge of her nose. "You have to tell him."

I have every intention of informing Oakley about Morgan's obsession with my cunt.

*If* the fucker ever decides to talk to me again instead of constantly avoiding me.

"I will...when the time is right."

She shakes her head. "Not good enough. The longer this goes on behind his back the worse it will hurt him."

I raise a brow. *She's got to be kidding me*.

"Hurt him?" A laugh flies out of my mouth. "You know he's not actually into her, right? They're just using each other."

Sawyer does that little nervous shuffle with her feet. "I have no idea how

he feels about her. All I know is sneaking behind his back is wrong. He deserves to know—”

“Who deserves to know what?” Oakley interjects as he waltzes inside like he owns the place.

Given he’s renting the guesthouse and all...I guess he sort of does.

I glare at Sawyer, warning her to keep her trap shut.

My friend tries to clear the anxiety out of her throat but fails as she gestures to the envelope in her hand.

“I booked a spa day for me and Bianca for her birthday...but the only appointment I could get us was during Cole’s first game next season.” She looks at me accusingly as she shoves the envelope in my hand. “Bianca thinks I should lie and make him think I went and left early, but I told *her* that lying to people you care about isn’t cool.”

With that, she scampers off.

I have to stifle another laugh. There’s a reason my brother’s nickname for her is Bible Thumper. Not only does she regularly attend church—because she actually enjoys it—she’s one of the most generous, caring people on the planet.

With the exception of her stint with Adderall a little over a year ago, lying isn’t something you’ll catch her doing.

But I can’t worry about her conflicted feelings right now, because *he*’s standing right in front of me.

Eyes as blue as the ocean, dark blond hair that hangs just above his ears, well-defined cheekbones, perfect chiseled jaw, and a full bottom lip just begging to be nibbled on—he is utter perfection.

“Hi—”

“Have you seen Morgan?”

If I was *anyone* else, he’d have a conversation with me and Morgan would be the furthest thing from his mind.

But shit’s different between us now.

All because I caught feelings after a kiss that was never meant for me.

And the only thing *he* caught was the need to distance himself from me like I was poison.

“She’s in the bathroom.”

*Wiping my pussy juice off her mouth.*

An awkward silence descends until the bathroom door opens and Morgan comes bouncing out.

“Bathroom’s all yours, bitch,” she seethes, knocking her shoulder against mine.

I stick out my foot as she walks past me, relishing when she trips on her way to Oakley.

“I don’t need it. I was in there before you, remember?”

Morgan blinks, clearly caught off guard before she recovers. “Whatever.”

Rising on her tiptoes, she folds her arms around Oakley’s neck and plants a kiss on his lips. “What are we doing tonight?”

“Not sure.” He pulls her in for another kiss and I can’t help but notice the side-eye he gives me as he leans in. Like he’s intentionally trying to hurt me. “But I want more of these lips.” Reaching down, he grabs a handful of her ass. “You taste good, boo.”

*I bet she does.*

Smirking, I hold his gaze. “On second thought, maybe I should go fix my makeup since I never got a chance to...given I was getting my pussy licked and all.”

Morgan goes rigid.

Confusion spreads across Oakley’s face.

My smirk widens as I back into the bathroom and slam the door.

*Mission accomplished.*



Needless to say, things are the epitome of awkward after that.

Well, for Oakley and Morgan.

I’m happier than a pig in shit because I’m positive Oakley’s going to dump her ass before the night is over.

*Happy Birthday indeed.*

All smiles, I trot over to the grill and take a big bite of my veggie burger.

I wasn’t always a vegetarian, but ten years ago Liam decided he wanted to become vegan because his bleeding heart grew tired of people killing and eating animals.

The vegan stage didn’t last long though—the boy loved milk and cheese too much—but he pledged to stop eating meat altogether.

Jace and Cole would rather cut off their left arms than give up steaks and

burgers, but I had no problem joining him in solidarity.

Because he was my big brother.

*My favorite person in the world.*

Given he's dead, I suppose I could eat whatever I want, but breaking my promise to him feels wrong.

Absentmindedly, I reach for my St. Christopher pendant and the feather I wear on a necklace, but a familiar voice zaps me out of my thoughts.

"Happy birthday, beautiful!" Hayley cheerfully yells as she and some guy walk through the gate into my back yard.

Out of the corner of my eye, I notice Oakley tense up. *Good.*

Hayley is Oakley's ex-girlfriend. Only unlike Morgan who was a mega cunt to me back in the day, Hayley's actually a sweetheart.

Something tells me Oakley will always look at her as the proverbial *one who got away.*

Which makes her an even bigger threat than Morgan, and I need to keep her *far away.*

It's just one of the reasons why I've taken her under my wing and have her believing we're *besties.*

*Besties who hook up every now and then.*

Because the more she wants me...the less she wants Oakley.

And the more I corrupt her...the more dirt I'll have on her.

*Dirt that will hurt him.*

I smack a quick kiss on Hayley's cheek. "Hey."

My eyes flick over to the guy standing next to her. He's average height. Medium build. Dark eyes and hair. Not bad looking by any means, but far from my type.

*However, he'll do.*

"Who's your friend?"

She gives me a knowing smile. "Zack."

"Hey," he says. "Hayley's told me a lot about you."

*Has she now?*

Zack holds out his hand, but I dismiss it. "Good things I hope."

He licks his lips, appraising me from head to toe. "Very good things."

Yeah, the three of us are *definitely* going to have some fun tonight.

I'm about to take Zack's hand, but Jace beats me to it.

He shakes it so hard he practically rips Zack's limb off. "I'm her older brother."



As if on cue, Cole slaps Zack's back. *Hard.*

"So am I."

Annoyance bubbles in my chest. *Fucking vultures.*

Wincing, Zack nods. "Hi. I'm..." His voice trails off.

"My new boyfriend," Hayley cuts in, coming to his rescue.

Jace and Cole exchange a glance.

"Then I suggest you keep those eyeballs on your girl instead of my baby sister, *pal*," Jace growls before turning back to the grill.

"Unless you want to lose said eyeballs," Cole threatens before taking a ferocious bite of his burger.

Poor Zack looks like he's about to shit himself. *Pussy.*

"All right, dial the testosterone down, boys," Sawyer jokes, sidling up to her fiancé.

"Don't mind them," Dylan adds as she playfully swats Jace's behind and kisses his shoulder blade. "They're grumpy when they're hungry."

The anger in Jace's eyes is quickly replaced by lust. *Gross.*

Sawyer plates two burgers and hands them to Hayley and Zack. "Here. They're really good."

Cole shoots her a death glare, but she rises on her tiptoes and kisses his nose. "Relax, Colton."

My brother softens like butter in the midday sun.

If either of them are expecting a thank you from me for running interference they'd have better luck spotting a unicorn shitting glitter.

More uneasiness ensues when Morgan and Oakley walk over and load up their plates.

"Hey," Hayley practically squeaks to her ex.

Oakley beams, dimples and all. "Hey. How you been?"

What the actual fucking fuck?

I've done *nothing* wrong to him, yet he's treated me worse than the crud on the bottom of his shoes for the last two years.

But Hayley—his freaking *ex*—says hello to him and he acts like she painted a goddamn rainbow in the sky.

It's not fair.

He's the *only* one I want...and the only one I can't have.

So help me God, I might just kill the bitch tonight.

I throw my paper plate and my half-eaten burger on the ground.

It's not even my actual birthday yet and it's already one of the worst ones

I've ever had.

I'm so tired of not being good enough for him.

So tired of bleeding my heart out for someone who hates me.

*All because of a kiss.*

My mom was right.

*No drug in the world screws you up more than love does.*

"Maybe you two should give Bianca her present," Sawyer urges my brothers, shooting me a sympathetic look.

I don't want her sympathy.

*I just want my family back.*

And for the guy I want to stop treating me like I'm evil incarnate.

Jace and Cole exchange another glance before Jace wipes his hands off with a towel.

He looks nervous.

So does Cole.

Which means their present must be kick-ass and something I actually want.

Hands on my hips, I glare at them. "What is it?"

The suspense is killing me.

Jace blows out a heavy breath. "Well, after some consideration Cole and I decided you—"

"Have our permission to get a tattoo," Cole finishes with a big grin.

"A *small* one," Jace grits through his teeth.

"And nowhere skanky," Cole adds.

Irritation races over my skin. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

The way their faces twist in bewilderment makes it clear they're not.

"I'm eighteen," I remind them, taking several steps forward. "Which means I don't need anyone's *permission* to do what I want to my body."

Back when I was sixteen Jace, Cole, Dylan, and Sawyer all got matching butterfly tattoos in memory of Liam.

I begged Jace to take me to get one, but he refused.

He said I was too young. Even though he got his first tattoo when he was sixteen.

*Christ.* I am so sick of them constantly treating me like I'm a baby.

It's like everyone has blinders on and no one can see or hear me...even though I'm standing in a room screaming my lungs out.

"Liam would have gotten me something amazing," I whisper. "Something

I actually wanted.”

Probably something to do with psychology—my favorite subject.

Because Liam knew me.

*He wanted to.*

Everyone else is too scared to get inside my fucked-up head, so they don't bother.

Everyone else is so preoccupied with their own scars...they don't give a fuck about mine.

Everyone else keeps me at a distance...because they can't handle me.

*Fuck everyone.*

The pain etched on their faces tells me my words pierced through them like a silver bullet. *Good.*

They dealt with their guilt over Liam's death and got their happily ever after's in the process.

All while leaving me behind in this hellhole.

Alone.

*Hurting.*

Incapable of telling my secrets to a single soul.

*Because I'll break what's left of our fucked-up family.*

I love them enough I'd never do that to them.

Too bad they don't love me enough to see past the façade.

*The broken little girl living in the shadows.*

All they see is the wicked bitch who will manipulate the hell out of your existence and break you before allowing you to get too close.

On instinct, my eyes flick to Oakley.

*Fuck him.*

I'm going to make him regret every second of hating me if it's the last thing I fucking do.

No one says a word, but I can feel Dylan scowling at me. I'm about to walk over and punch that scowl right off her face, but my dad walks outside.

“Sorry for being late.” He chuckles nervously. “It's awfully quiet for a party. Everything okay?”

The fact that he's even here right now is mind-boggling.

It's no secret he spends more time at work than he does with his kids.

So much so I'd listen to Jace before I'd ever listen to him.

“What are you doing here?”

Good thing he was smart enough not to bring his girlfriend Nadia, or it

would have been a straight-up shit show in this bitch.

He looks at Jace. “Jace—”

“I invited him,” Jace utters, appearing uneasy.

I want to point out that it’s not really an invite considering it’s *his* house and all, but there’s something way more important happening here.

No one hates our father more than Jace does, so the fact that he invited him to be part of this is...strange.

My stare snags on my older brother. “Why?”

“Because it’s your birthday.” He averts his gaze. “I wanted everyone who cares about you to be here to celebrate.”

And just like that I feel like an asshole.

Because that *is* something Liam would have done.

I don’t particularly want Dad here, but Jace reaching out to our father is the equivalent of him walking across burning coals barefoot.

“Oh.” I peer up at our dad. “Hi, Daddy.”

His face lights up like the Fourth of July, those green eyes—eyes that look exactly like Cole’s and Liam’s—twinkling. “Hi, sweetheart.” Reaching over, he ruffles my hair like he used to when I was a kid. “Happy Birthday.”

I bite my tongue as not to point out that my actual birthday is still three days away.

“Thanks.”

I don’t know what to make of the look on his face. “I can’t believe you’re eighteen. Seems like just yesterday we were taking you home from the hospital.” A ghost of a smile curves his lips. “Your mother...” He swallows hard, not willing to finish that sentence.

My mother always wanted a girl.

She had to birth three boys before she got her wish, and when she finally did...she almost died during childbirth from the blood loss.

Luckily, she didn’t.

Unfortunately, I only had eight years with her before she did.

There’s so much agony in his expression it steals my breath. “God, you look so much like her.”

I stiffen.

Cole pales.

Jace’s jaw tics.

Before she fell in love and Daddy whisked her off to America, my mother was the most gorgeous and talented Bollywood actress of her generation.

With her tan, flawless skin, big brown eyes full of depth, high cheekbones, slightly upturned nose, long dark hair, full lips and dazzling smile...she was utterly perfect.

I consider myself fortunate to have ended up inheriting her looks, and you bet your ass I use them to my advantage.

*Beautiful girls have it much easier in life.*

And despite what my mom did...I know she wanted the best for me.

However, she also wanted me to be smarter and stronger than she was.

Which—I can only assume—is why she made me promise not to fall in love.

*Never let a man steal my heart because he'd ultimately shatter it and ruin me.*

Men were toxic, and sooner or later they would fuck you over.

Therefore, it was important to use them while they used you and suck whatever you could out of them before it was too late.

Clearing his throat, my father takes what looks like a jewelry box out of his pocket.

“I got you something.”

I try to hide my annoyance as I snatch the box from him. Lord knows the man has given me tons of diamonds and jewels throughout the years and I don't want any more.

I'm about to open it, but he halts me. “Wait.” He glances around at everyone. “Let's take a walk out front.”

I eye Jace as we all start trekking to the front of the house. “What's he doing?”

He shrugs, appearing just as confused as I am. “I have no idea.”

We're almost to the driveway when my father looks at me. “You can open it now.”

Begrudgingly, I do.

Trepidation crawls up my spine as I finger the black key fob with a Mercedes logo on it.

*Please tell me he didn't.*

Sure enough, there's a pink Mercedes convertible parked in the driveway.

Instantaneously, panic claws at my chest and I reach for my pendant.

He knows I can't drive.

He knows I'll *never* drive.

I can't...I don't...

*I don't want to die like she did.*

“What the hell is wrong with you?” I croak.

Everyone looks baffled...everyone but Jace and Cole because for once, this is something they understand.

*Pink Mercedes.*

A Mercedes...just like my mom's.

My stomach rolls as the sound of metal crushing against metal assaults my ears.

A fresh new wave of panic grips me by the throat and my knees start wobbling. *I'm gonna die.*

“I don't—” our father starts to say until Jace cuts him off.

“Bianca doesn't drive.”

“I know that, Jace. But I think it's about time she learned. I found a top-notch driving instructor—”

I throw the key fob at him. “Take it back. I don't want it.”

I look over at Hayley. “Let's go. *Now.*”

Tears prickle my eyes as I march over to the white Acura with her and Zack in tow.

“Bianca, *stop,*” Jace barks. “Don't let him ruin your day.”

It's not just him. It's everyone. *Everything.*

“Come on, Bianca,” Cole yells. “Don't leave.”

“Get back here, young lady,” our father shouts. “I did not give you permission to leave.”

Oh, *now* he wants to pretend to be a dad.

“Neither did I,” Jace growls.

Raising my middle finger in the air, I kick the pink piece of shit before I climb into the passenger seat of Hayley's car. “I'm eighteen, remember?”

Once again, my mother was right.

You can go through life being the most beautiful specimen on earth...yet feel completely unnoticed and alone.

People only see what they want to see.

*And no one wants to see me.*

Fuck them. Fuck this.

*Fuck everything.*

# Chapter 7

## Bianca

I ended up showing up late for class and missing my statistics quiz.

Fortunately, my professor was kind enough to let me stay after and take it, but I'm pretty sure I bombed it anyway.

*"If you can't remember who you were, how do you know what kind of person you used to be or what might have shaped you to be that way?"*

Oakley's words from yesterday echo through my head as I place my exam on the professor's desk and gather my things.

I thought I had enough pieces to decode who I was, but as it turns out...I was wrong.

Blowing out a shaky breath, I recall what I learned about my former self last night.

The most surprising fact? *I was a virgin.*

Which obviously means the first time Stone and I had sex last year was my first time having sex...ever.

It's something I should be happy about because he's going to be my husband, but I can't shake this weird feeling I have.

*I wish it was special.*

Not that it was bad by any means, but right before it happened all I could think about was how it wasn't a big deal because I must have done it plenty of times before.

*But it was a big deal.*

So is finding out that I had some kind of sick, twisted obsession with this Oakley guy and pretty much stole his girlfriend.

*Both of them.*

My heart clenches.

Given Hayley died and he obviously cared about her...he has to be hurting.

I'm not sure why I was with him the night of the accident—because if the memory I had last night is anything to go on, he wanted nothing to do with me—but I really want to find out.

“Are you okay?” Stone questions.

A jolt runs through me when I look up. I was so out of it I didn’t even realize he was waiting for me outside of class.

“Yeah.” I force a smile. “I’m fine.”

He gives me a puzzled look. “Are you su—”

“Actually,” I interject, because I hate keeping stuff from him. “Not really. I had a memory last night.”

Taking me by the elbow, he leads me out to the courtyard. “What happened?”

“Well,” I begin. “It was my birthday.” A weird feeling prickles in my chest because talking about your past hookups with your fiancé is really awkward. “Long story short, Morgan and I hooked up and Oakley caught us —” It suddenly dawns on me that he might not know who Oakley is. “Oakley is—”

“I know who Oakley is,” he bites out with a scowl. “I also know the prick is here on campus.”

I blink in confusion. “How—”

“I ran into Cole this morning and he told me what happened.”

*Well, shit.*

“Oh.”

“I’m pissed you didn’t tell me yourself—”

“You’ve been really busy lately.”

It’s not like I intentionally kept it from him, there was just no time to fill him in on everything with his crazy schedule.

“I get that.” He cups my cheek. “But if he bothers you again, you better tell me—”

“He wasn’t bothering me,” I snap before I catch myself. “I mean, I understand why you’re concerned, but it wasn’t like that. He’s ...”

*Not the bad guy everyone keeps saying he is.*

At least he didn’t appear that way yesterday.

“He’s what?” Stone presses.

“He was sitting by himself when *I* approached him. Not the other way around.”

Stone’s eyes darken. “What do you mean when you approached him? Are you talking to random dudes behind my back now?”

*Jesus Christ.* Of course, Stone would think that.

He has a jealous streak about a mile long.



“No,” I defend. “There was an open seat next to him on the bench when I went to eat lunch at the lake yesterday and I asked if I could sit down.”

I don’t know what to make of his expression, but it’s not a pleasant one. “Well, if that’s the case, I don’t want you eating lunch by yourself anymore.”

It’s all I can do not to roll my eyes. “You’re kidding, right?”

I’m nineteen for crying out loud. I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself which means I’m allowed to eat lunch with whoever I damn well please.

He points to his face. “Do I look like I’m kidding?” He must sense my irritation because his expression softens. “I’m not trying to be an asshole here, Bianca, but put yourself in my position. This guy not only killed an innocent girl, he almost killed *you* and you expect me not to be concerned for your safety?”

I get what he’s saying, but I’m too hung up on what else he said. “You knew Oakley was driving the car when we got into the accident?”

Frustrated, he drags a hand through his hair. “Yeah, for about two whole hours now.”

*Oh.*

“I guess Cole must have told you?”

He nods. “I wish your brothers brought me in the loop earlier, but I get why they kept it a secret from you.” Rage twists his features. “You were better off not remembering that piece of shit.”

A mixture of anger and annoyance rolls through me.

“Let me get this straight. You think it’s okay that they kept something this important from me?”

Because I don’t.

He blows out a heavy breath. “Yeah...maybe. I don’t know, Bourne.” He shrugs. “I think they were in a difficult situation and they did what they thought was right, you know?”

I guess...but it still doesn’t sit well with me.

“I know you’re upset, but try to look at the positive.” Bringing my hand to his lips, he kisses the spot above my engagement ring. “If all that bad shit didn’t happen...we might not have found each other.” Tipping my chin, he kisses me softly. “But we did.”

My phone rings, but I make no move to pick it up because Stone’s tongue slips past my parted lips.

My body sags against him and I soak up every second of his kiss. It’s

been so long since we've had time to be together and I miss it.

He chuckles softly against my lips when my phone rings again. "You gonna answer that?"

### **Past...**

"You gonna answer that?" Hayley asks as my phone rings for what feels like the millionth time in the last four hours.

I hold down the button until Jace's name disappears and the screen goes black. "Nope."

We're currently sitting on the hood of her car facing some gigantic hiking trail on the outskirts of a forest.

I've never been here before, but Zack said it was a chill place to hang and get wasted.

Not that I ever get wasted. Not only did I lose my mom in the car accident, I lost a functioning kidney.

Which means I don't mess with alcohol.

Zack, who's standing in front of us, takes a hit off the joint he's holding. "I still don't understand what the deal is. That car is sweet. I'd be kissing my dad's ass if he ever bought me a Mercedes."

I've only known him a few hours, but already I hate him.

*Annoying prick.*

"Her mom died in a car accident when she was a kid," Hayley tells him, as if that explains everything.

It doesn't. Not even close.

Nodding sympathetically, Zack gives my knee a squeeze.

Fortunately, Hayley had a denim mini skirt in her trunk along with a spare pair of flip-flops, so I slipped that on over my bathing suit.

I glare down at the hand that's still squeezing my knee. "You want to lose that hand?"

He doesn't look at all put off. "Come on. Don't be shy, beautiful. Hayley already told me the deal."

Slowly, his hand creeps up my thigh.

Crossing my legs, I lock his hand in place. "Care to enlighten me?"

Smirking, he says, "That you two like to mess around and—"

"Zack?"

"Yeah?"

“I’m gonna need you to shut up and do something more productive with your mouth.” I take the whiskey bottle Hayley’s holding. “Now.”

His eyes turn hooded. “Spread your legs, sexy.”

“Hard pass.” I look at Hayley. “But how about you lick her snatch... while I watch.”

Zack isn’t half as dumb as he looks because he doesn’t protest.

Shifting on her hood, Hayley tugs down her panties. “Finally.”

I watch as Zack’s head disappears between her legs. He’s eager to please, but the look on Hayley’s face tells me he’s not doing a very good job of it.

There was one time a guy—I think his name was DeShawn—made her come in under three minutes.

It looked like so much fun I had him test his oral skills out on me next.

Totally worth it.

But that was the one and only time I let one of our guys touch *me*. Usually, I just sit back and watch them screw Hayley.

But I’m not in the mood for any of that tonight.

I eye the half bottle of Jack Daniels in my hand.

I’ve never gotten drunk before but with the events that unfolded today, I’m thinking now might be a good time to try it.

“That’s it. Right there.” Hayley groans in frustration. “No. To the left.”

I stifle a laugh. “Maybe he needs a little incentive.”

“The *other* left,” Hayley all but whimpers.

*Damn.* This is pitiful.

“Make her come like a good boy and I’ll show you my pussy.” Winking, I look at Hayley. “And make her kiss it.”

That seems to do the trick because Zack goes at her like a champ.

Moments later she’s crying into the night sky and shaking so hard the entire car vibrates.

Zack’s hazy eyes zero in on me. “Your turn.”

I start to spread my legs but pause. “Is your dick hard?”

He grabs the outline of his unimpressive erection through his pants. “Hell yeah it is.”

“Show me.”

He unzips his pants, revealing a long and very skinny dick.

Reaching down, I move my bathing suit to the side, baring myself. “Like what you see?”

He licks his lips. “You gonna let me hit that?”

“Nope.” Reaching over, I grab the back of Hayley’s head. “This isn’t for you.” I bite my lip as she plants a soft kiss on my clit. “Just her.”

Hayley likes it when I make her feel special.

Zack looks like he’s going to pass out. “Man, that’s so fucking hot. You gonna give me a taste?”

I quickly fix my bathing suit and push Hayley’s head away. *Show’s over.* “Not in this lifetime.”

He’s visibly insulted. “Why are you being such a fucking tease?”

“Because I have something called standards.” I take a swig of the bottle and cough because it burns going down. “Now fuck my friend before we leave you and your pencil dick out in these woods.”

His mouth drops open. “What the fuck is your problem?”

“Right now? *You.* So I suggest you either do what I asked...or walk the fuck home.” I take another swig and it burns just like the first one did. “Choice is yours, asshole.”

Pants around his ankles, he looks between the both of us. “You bitches are fucked-up.”

That might be true, but at least I’m not a dumbass like he is.

“You have a hot girl ready and willing to fuck you and your pathetic cock and you’re standing here calling *me* a bitch.” I look at Hayley. “Call someone else. This loser and his stick dick don’t deserve what we’re offering.”

Hayley starts to get up, but Zack moves closer. “No.” In one fell swoop, he pries her thighs apart and thrusts inside her. “I’ll show you *stick dick*, you fucking cunt.”

I smirk as I take another sip. This time it goes down easier. “Is that all you got? If so that’s fucking sad, dude.”

He sputters another curse, his thrusts picking up speed.

“You’re welcome,” I mouth to Hayley, but she’s too busy getting plowed the way I’m craving to be fucked.

If I ever did ever let anyone fuck me that is.

Unfortunately, my pussy is as picky as I am and won’t settle for just anyone.

It’s why I let Hayley do all the dirty work for me.

She gets to have some fun, and I get the satisfaction of knowing she’s no longer Oakley’s pristine angel.

Picking up my phone, I snap a quick picture of them and add it to my

blackmail folder.

Sighing, I take another sip of the amber liquid. “You’re gonna have to do better than that, *Zackie*.”

He fucks her so hard the car rocks.

Evidently, he does know how to work that thing after all. *Good for him*.

Head buzzing, I leave them to their fuckfest. “I have to pee.”

Neither of them say a word as I wander into the forest to find a place to pop a squat.

Using the flashlight on my phone, I locate one next to a tree.

After doing my business, I pull some hand sanitizer out of my purse and turn to walk back to the car.

Only, I can’t...because all I see are trees.

I have no idea where I am or how to get back.

*No big deal*. I’ll just call Hayley.

I dial her number and bring my cell to my ear, but it goes straight to voicemail.

I sit down on a nearby log so I can think, but it’s pointless. My head is buzzing and everything around me is moving in slow motion yet rushing past me at the same time.

“Guess it’s just you and me, buddy,” I declare to the bottle before I take a large gulp and place it down.

I peer at my surroundings. It’s not so scary out here. Kind of peaceful actually.

Hell, if I had a sleeping bag, I’d contemplate spending the night.

I go to reach for the bottle again, but it feels...scaly.

I scream, nearly jumping out of my skin when I see the small black snake coiled around it.

I bolt out of there, running as fast as my legs can carry me.

Which isn’t very fast because holy shit. *Everything* is spinning.

And...is that a cliff?

I bet if I walked to the edge of it...my death would be peaceful.

Unlike my mom and Liam who definitely didn’t go peacefully.

I stare down at all the jagged rocks I’d hit on the long way down.

I can’t even see the bottom. *Not so peaceful after all*.

Then again, maybe it’s what I deserve?

Jace and Cole are happy now. They have Dylan and Sawyer to take care of them.

I bet they'd hardly even miss me.

*Not like I miss them.*

"You promised," I scream to the stars as tears lodge in my throat.

Liam swore he'd never leave me, and she vowed to take me to India for my eighteenth birthday for our mother-daughter trip...

*But here I am...all alone.*

"They broke their promises."

"What?" a voice that sounds a whole lot like Oakley's barks in my ear.  
"Who? What the hell are you talking about?"

I stare at my phone in confusion because I don't remember calling him.

"They...I don't—" my words come out so slurred I'm probably not making any sense. "It hurts." I can taste the salt from my tears. "I can't do it anymore, Oakley."

"Where are you?"

"Standing on the edge of a cliff."

Wondering if I'll end up in heaven or hell.

*If I'll ever get to see them again.*

"Jesus Christ." Oakley exclaims. "What cliff? Where?"

It's funny how he's pretending to care when we both know he doesn't.

"I don't know."

It's the truth. This is Zack's spot, not mine.

"I swear to God if you don't tell me where the fuck you are—"

"I'm not sure. Near a forest somewhere. I think I passed a waterfall thing. But there was a snake wrapped around my bottle and I ended up running." Another wave of dizziness washes over me. "Now leave me alone so I can find my bottle of snake, you fucking asshole."

"Yeah, you're definitely trashed."

"Don't tell my brothers."

They're overprotective enough and if they find out about this, they'll no longer let me hang out with Hayley.

I *have* to keep scoring blackmail on her.

"I'm pretty sure I know where you are, but I'm gonna need you to do something for me."

"What?"

*I'd do anything for him.* Anything in the whole wide world.

"I need you to get the fuck away from that cliff."

"Why?"

I need to know he cares.

Or better yet...why he *stopped* caring.

“You’re not stupid. You know why, Bianca.”

He hasn’t called me by my real name in forever. Usually, he refers to me as Satan or Lucifer.

He *used* to call me his baby girl. *Just like my mom.*

“You called me Bianca.”

An irritated groan breaks free. “I’m on my way. Do me a solid and get the fuck off that cliff before something happens and Jace and Cole kill me.”

With that, he hangs up.

I fish around my purse for the mini bottle of Malibu rum Hayley asked me to hold earlier.

It’s no Jack Daniels, but it will help numb the pain.

*Hopefully.*



“Holy shit.”

“I know,” Stone murmurs against my mouth. “I love kissing you.”

Kissing him is nice and all, but that’s not what I was referring to.

I can’t believe I was standing on a cliff *drunk* in the middle of the night.

And out of all the people in the world I chose to call when I was at my lowest...

I called *him*.

That has to mean something, right?

“What time is your next class?”

Stone glances at his watch. “In about fifteen.” Leaning down, he whispers, “I can be quick if you want to go back to your dorm.”

*Ugh.* I’m officially the worst fiancée in the world for turning him down.

“Can we take a rain check?” I gesture to my phone. “I’m supposed to meet Sawyer and talk about wedding planning stuff.”

Sawyer did call me before, but she can wait.

Especially since I know she’s just going to apologize over and over for lying to me.

“Fine.” Sulking, he gives me a quick peck on the lips. “But only if you spend the night at my place.”

“Deal.”

With that, I stalk off.

In search of the guy who can give me some answers.



# Chapter 8

## Oakley

Something I learned about college kids?

They're messy as fuck.

Every classroom I clean never fails to have a shit-ton of stuff left behind.

Wrappers. Soda cans. Water bottles. Empty chip bags.

*A half-smoked joint.*

Want and need tangle in my chest as I bring it up to my nose and inhale.

It's the premium shit.

*Goddammit.*

And just like that...an image of Hayley permeates my brain.

CBD gummies and oil for my epilepsy are one thing...but smoking this joint will undoubtedly lead me down the rabbit hole of doom.

After giving it one more lengthy sniff, I chuck it in the garbage can.

The shit must be even better than I thought though because when I turn around...

She's standing there.

Her long dark hair is in a ponytail and she's wearing a plain white t-shirt and cargo pants—something the Bianca I know wouldn't be caught dead wearing in public—but she's still as gorgeous as ever.

Grabbing my broom, I focus on sweeping the floor. "I'll be out of here in a minute."

She takes a step forward. "I was hoping we could talk."

I give her the only answer there is.

*The one I have to give.*

"No."

# Chapter 9

## Bianca

*No.*

Not—maybe later. Or—let me check my schedule.

Just flat out *no*.

And then he has the audacity to brush past me like I don't even exist.

Screw that.

Refusing to take his *no* for an answer, I follow him into the next empty classroom.

“Not for nothing, but don't you think you kind of owe me? After all, you were the one driving when we got into the accident.”

I'm not trying to be a bitch, but he's given me no choice.

He freezes mid-sweep. “I never meant to hurt you.”

His voice is so genuine, so full of remorse, my heart clenches.

“I wasn't trying to make you feel guilty,” I tell him honestly, because something tells me he's doing a great job of that himself. “I'm just looking for a little clarity.”

Finally, he turns. “About what?”

I open my arms wide. “I don't know...*everything*.” Realizing I need to be a little more specific I add, “Why was I in the car with you? Where were we going?”

There's so much sorrow in his eyes my heart does a painful flip.

Head down, he goes back to sweeping. “It doesn't matter.”

*The hell it doesn't.*

“Look,” I start, trying to reason with him. “I know my brothers are scary, but—”

That earns me a rough laugh. “I'm not scared of your brothers.”

That would make him the first and only guy in Royal Manor who isn't.

It also makes me very confused.

“Then why won't you tell me—”

“Because it doesn't fucking matter,” he snaps. “You have a new life now.” He gestures to the door. “Quit talking to me and go live it.”

There's an edge to his tone...one I can't make sense of.

However, it's clear he's not going to budge. Which means I need to try a new tactic.

"Okay, if you don't want to tell me about my past...can we spend a little time together?"

I'm hoping if we do it will trigger another memory, given I've had not one but *two* of them in the span of twenty-four hours since meeting him.

He looks at me like I've sprouted another head before dismissing me entirely.

"No."

*Holy hell.* It's like that's his favorite word.

I'm not going to give up so easily, though so I attempt to reason with him again.

"Fine, but if I tell you about the flashback I had, can you at least confirm some things for me?"

*Sweep. Sweep.*

"I'm sure your brothers can do that."

I'm so frustrated with him it's taking everything in me not to rip my hair out.

"Please," I beg, even though it's sad that I even have to in the first place. "I can't trust Jace and Cole anymore since they lied—"

"Your brothers love you," he quickly bites out, coming to their defense.

Well, then.

I did not see *that* coming. Especially after the way they treated him yesterday.

"And I love them," I say, guilt rising in my chest. "But if you know them—and it's pretty freaking obvious you do—you know how stubborn they are. Therefore, they're not going to tell me anything they don't want to."

Plus, it's not like they know everything anyway. Based on the memory I had last night, it's clear I've kept certain things from them.

Guilt sneaks up again.

*I've kept a lot of important things from them.*

When it's apparent he's still not going to cave, I go for gold. "I was standing on a cliff in my flashback...drunk out of my mind. But I called *you*...not them." I shrug helplessly. "Which means you're probably the only person on the planet who can help me get my memories back."

Scowling, he rakes a hand through his hair. "I'm sorry for putting you in

a coma and giving you amnesia—it's something I'll never forgive myself for." His eyes take on a sad glint. "But I'm not the right person to help you with this, baby girl. Trust me."

It's not so much his words...it's the sheer devastation on his face that forces me to fold.

For reasons I'll probably never understand now, talking about the past hurts him.

"Okay," I whisper in defeat.

You can't force someone to talk to you and give you answers if they don't want to.

I start heading for the door, but pause. "For what it's worth I'm sorry I hooked up with Morgan behind your back. That was a shit thing to do to you."

There's a hint of amusement on his face, but it quickly disappears.

"You have nothing to be sorry for."

"Actually, that's not true." Shame tightens my chest. "I was *really* awful to Hayley." I hold his gaze. "I know you cared about her...I'm sorry for your loss."

# Chapter 10

## Oakley

“I ’m sorry for your loss.”

She is aware that I killed her, right?

I open my mouth to tell her that, but she’s gone.

It’s just as well though.

Gripping the broom handle, I mutter a curse.

She’s so confused—so goddamn lost—it makes me want to chase after her and tell her everything.

But I can’t.

Jace’s words from yesterday echo through my head.

“*The last thing she needs is you coming back to fuck up her life again.*”

Despite the way my chest hurts when I think about her marrying Stone and the intense feelings I’m positive I’ll always harbor for her.

I want the best for Bianca.

*Even if it means staying the fuck away for good.*

## Past...

“Is it cool if I cut out early?”

My boss, Cobra looks around the half-empty bar and shrugs. “Pour me a shot of Henny and it’s a deal.”

I never planned on becoming a bartender at *No Name*, but I had no *choice* after all the questions started rolling in.

“What are you doing for money?”

“Why don’t you go to college?”

“How are you going to support yourself?”

I make good money working for Loki, but given I promised Dylan and my friends I was done with him after Sawyer landed in the hospital, I needed a cover-up job.

Cobra wasn’t going to hire me because I’m not twenty-one until next

month, but my fake ID and being paid off the books was a win-win situation for the both of us.

Not that *No Name* is an upstanding establishment.

*Far from it.* This shithole is as shady as it gets, but it serves its purpose.

After pouring Cobra his shot, I head out.

I shouldn't be in a rush to rescue the little wicked princess—especially after finding out that she's been hooking up with Morgan behind my back—but she's Jace and Cole's little sister.

Their family is already plagued with enough tragedy it could qualify as a Shakespeare play and they sure as shit don't need any more.

I press a few buttons on my dash as I back out of the parking lot.

A moment later Hayley's voice fills my car.

"Hey, you."

I can't trust Bianca or the alcohol in her system to tell me how the hell she ended up wandering off into the woods drunk, but I know Hayley will clear a few things up for me.

"Question."

She laughs. "Answer."

I make a sharp left. "Why is Bianca lost in the woods? I thought she was with you."

How they became friends is anyone's guess given they're so different from one another—like the devil and an angel—but they've been thick as thieves for a hot minute now.

I can hear the apprehension in her voice. "Yeah...she was. Until she flipped out like a crazy bitch tonight."

*As opposed to any other night?*

I pull a clipped blunt out of my cupholder and light it. "What happened?"

She sighs. "I'd tell you, but I don't want to make shit weird between us."

"You can tell me anything, Hayley. You know that." I veer onto the highway. "Judgment-free zone between us."

Always has been. We might not be a couple anymore, but I'd still do anything for the girl.

"I know." There's another long sigh. "Everything was fine when we got here but then I had to go to the bathroom. When I came back, I caught her and Zack messing around."

*Well, shit.*

"Damn. I'm sorry, boo."

Can't say I'm surprised though. That fucker not only looked like an herb, everyone with a set of eyes could tell he was checking out Bianca from the moment he walked into the Covington's back yard.

"Not your fault," she says. "Anyway, we got into a fight and she ended up wandering off into the woods. I've been trying to call her and make sure she's okay, but she won't pick up."

Sounds like Bianca all right. *Stubborn brat.*

"Well, she's not your problem anymore. I'm on my way to Ocean Falls."

She hesitates a beat before she utters, "Ocean Falls? Why? We went to Royal Manor Forest."

"Are you sure?"

Bianca mentioned something about passing a waterfall and Royal Manor Forest doesn't have any of those.

*Ocean Falls* on the other hand not only has some pretty sweet waterfalls and is surrounded by a large forest and hiking trail, they have a few cliffs overlooking the dope beach below.

Which makes it the perfect spot to smoke some ganja and chill.

"Positive, babe." She groans over the extension. "That idiot is so directionally challenged she wouldn't know her ass from her elbow." She laughs. "It's a good thing she won't be driving any time soon, huh? She'd kill all of us."

Following my gut, I get off the next exit and head toward Ocean Falls.

"Right—" An incoming call cuts me off mid-sentence.

*Morgan.*

"Sorry to cut this convo short, but I got to go. My gir—" I stop myself before I can finish that sentence.

That trifling bitch isn't my girl anymore. Hell, she never was.

"Morgan's on the other line."

The disappointment in Hayley's voice is tangible. "Oh."

*Whoop, there it is.* The awkwardness that only happens when one of us brings up the person we're currently chilling with.

Suffice it to say there will always be lingering feelings between us.

Then again, she's the only girl I've ever labeled my girlfriend.

And for a short time—before Crystal used me for my sperm and shattered the thing in my chest—I thought we were good together.

I'd be lying if I said I didn't wish things ended up differently between us, or that I didn't feel guilty about cheating on her.

She didn't deserve that. *No one does.*

"Oak?" she questions before I hang up.

"Yeah?"

"Do you want to grab lunch later this week? It's been forever since we hung out and I really miss you."

I'm smart enough to know that lunch with an ex has *bad idea* written all over it.

However, I still want her in my life as a friend.

"Yeah," I agree. "Call me this week with a place and time."

"Cool. Have a good night."

"Peace."

With that, I hang up and call Morgan.

"Hey—"

"Lose my motherfucking number."

She starts to protest, but I tap the end call button on my dash.

We were only friends with benefits, so I didn't give a shit if she hooked up with other people, but shorty did me dirty and *not* the way I enjoy.

Therefore, fuck her.

*Fuck them both.*



# Chapter 11

## Bianca

“Thanks,” I tell the Uber driver before I step out of the car and start trekking toward Stone’s apartment building.

Stone won’t be off work for another hour, but I have a key to let myself in.

I’m so busy trying to give the Uber driver five stars and a tip while digging in my purse for the key, I end up barreling into someone on my way up the stairs.

My purse goes flying and so do the contents in it...but I can’t focus on that right now because all I see is *him*.

Oakley looks equally surprised by my presence as I am by his.

I eye him warily. “What are you doing here?”

He gestures to the big box he’s holding. “Moving in.”

That’s...interesting.

“Oh.”

I bend down to sweep my stuff back into my bag...at the same time he does.

Our heads meet with a loud crack.

“Fuck,” he growls.

“Shit,” I hiss, my hand flying to the spot where it throbs.

And then before I can stop myself, I laugh because this would be the monkey wrench life decides to throw at me right now.

Seriously. What are the odds that the one guy who can help me but refuses to would be moving into the same apartment building as my fiancé?

*Evidently good, because it’s freaking happening.*

“What floor is your apartment on?” I blurt out.

He stares down at me for several seconds, as if debating whether or not to tell me.

Finally, he says, “The third.”

I jut my chin up the stairs. “I’m on the fourth.” And then, because my mouth refuses to put a cork in it, I add, “Well, not me...my fiancé. Although

I'll be moving in with him and his mom after we're married."

His expression turns darker than a storm cloud. "Right."

Awkwardness lingers in the air between us.

"Well," I say, brushing past him. "Have fun moving in. If you need any help, or change your mind about talk—"

"I won't," he says curtly.



**Past...**

I'm swinging my legs over the edge of the cliff when my phone rings. Hayley's name flashes across my screen.

Annoyed it's her and not Oakley, I chuck it into the universe, laughing when it goes silent. *Whoops.*

There's a beach on the horizon, and by the sounds of the violent ocean waves slapping against the boulders and rocks, I'm guessing there's a storm brewing.

I look down into the abyss of darkness.

*I wonder how long the fall is.*

Would I have a heart attack and die before I reached the bottom? Would the crows swoop in and eat the flesh off my bones, or would the waves be kind enough to carry my corpse out to sea before then?

Moving closer to the edge, I dangle my flip-flops from my toes and finish my last sip of rum.

*Prince Charming isn't coming to rescue his wicked princess after all.*

Knowing Oakley, he got distracted by something more important.

*Drugs, or another ho.*

It doesn't matter though, because the alcohol swirling through my system gives me the courage to follow through with my plan.

"See you soon, Liam."

Just so we're clear. I know exactly what you're thinking. *This girl is a suicidal hot mess who should be locked away in a mental institution.*

However, there's one teensy little problem with your assessment there, Dr. Freud.

I don't actually want to die.

I just want to stop missing them.

*Turn the agony off.*

A jittery breath escapes me as one of my flip-flops disappears into the night.

A moment later, the next one follows suit.

*It's now or never.*

I can't help but wonder if Liam was this scared when he fastened the noose around his neck and jumped off the chair in his closet.

Did he have a moment of regret before he lost consciousness?

Did he think about his family before his last breath was wrung out of his lungs?

Did he know how much it would destroy us?

How much it would kill *me* when he selfishly took every broken piece of my heart with him as he left this world?

Big, ugly sobs wrench out of me.

I'm so hollow inside if someone placed their ear to my chest they wouldn't hear a thing.

*Just the reverberating echo of my pain.*

Fortunately, it will all be over soon.

Swallowing the ball of nerves lodged in my throat, I lean forward and open my arms.

I've always wanted to go sky diving, and if I close my eyes, this will be exactly like that.

*Minus the parachute.*

My head whirls as I slowly slip off the ledge.

Dying isn't nearly as painful as I thought it would be.

Except for the sharp pulling sensation under my armpits.

"Jesus fucking Christ," Oakley grunts.

Sand and rocks scrape the underside of my thighs as he lugs my drunk ass from the cliff.

"I told you to stay *away* from there," he roars, refusing to ease up on his death grip.

Confused by his presence, I glance up. There are not one, but *two* Oakley's. *Yum.*

"I didn't think you were coming. Either of you."

The expression on his face tells me he's not amused.

"Stand up," he grits out. "Now."

*Tsk, tsk, tsk.* You'd think he'd know me better than that.

No one orders me around.

"Nah. I'm good right here." I pat the ground beside me. "Come join me."

The little vein in his forehead makes an appearance. Given he's always so chill, it's kind of funny how much I can rile him up.

Then again, I love pushing all his buttons.

In one fell swoop, he yanks me off the ground. "I *wasn't* asking."

I notice he's wearing his *No Name* t-shirt and it occurs to me that he must have rushed straight here from work.

Not that it matters, the seedy bar across town he works at two nights a week is only a cover-up for his *actual* job.

Drug runner for a scumbag named Loki.

He has Dylan, Sawyer, Cole, and Jace all believing he stopped dealing after Sawyer ended up in the hospital, but that was a lie.

He's just become more secretive about it.

Given they all go to college and he doesn't, it's fairly easy for him to conduct his double life with his friends being none the wiser.

"Start walking," he commands like a drill sergeant.

Swear to God, I want to punch and fuck the son-of-a-bitch in equal measure.

I shoot him the dirtiest look I can muster. "No can do."

"Why?" He crosses his arms over his chest. "Are your legs broken?"

"No." I point to my now dirty feet. "But I'm not walking through a forest without shoes."

An irritated sigh leaves him as he mulls this over.

A moment later he turns around. "Let's go."

And here I thought I was the drunk one. "What part of *I don't have shoes* don't you understand?"

Oakley rolls his shoulders, and I can't help but notice the way his muscles flex. He's been working out with Jace and Cole a lot lately and it shows.

"Hop on."

*Shit.* He doesn't have to tell me twice.

"Just so we're clear, that was an invitation to hop on your cock later, right?" I enquire as I jump on his back.

Craning his neck, he glares daggers at me. "One more word out of you and I'll toss your ass off that cliff."

I'm about to ask him to do me the favor, but then I'd lose out on my little

piggyback ride so I wisely shut my mouth.

We begin trekking through the wilderness and I'm not sure if it's the alcohol or because I've had a shit night, but I can't take this tension between us anymore.

"Why do you hate me so much?"

I loathe the way my voice cracks, but I have no control over what's coming out of my mouth right now.

*No handle on my emotions.*

It feels like an eternity before he answers.

"I don't hate you."

*Lies.* "Don't bullshit a bullshitter, Oakley."

He drops me so quick I nearly bust my ass.

"Fine. How about the fact that you keep screwing around—"

"That was *after*," I tell him. "I started messing around with Hayley and Morgan *after* you started hating me. Months after we...you know. Not before." I draw in a shaky breath. "We used to be cool, Oakley. I used to be able to talk—"

"Then *why*?" he snarls. "Why do you keep fucking with me?"

"I'm not..." I swallow hard and try again because lying to him always feels wrong. "You know why."

If I can't have him...no one else can either.

I'll keep playing his skanks like my personal fiddles until he finally realizes he has no loyal bitch left in his corner but yours truly.

"Un-fucking-believable." His jaw works as he pulls a joint from his ear and lights it. "You are un-fucking-believable."

"It takes two to tango, remember? Therefore, instead of being mad at me, maybe you should be mad at *them* for dining on my pussy like it's their personal buffet all the time."

"I don't have time for your shit," he huffs as he stalks off. "Find your own way home."

"You know, there is a simple solution to all this." I hold my arms out wide. "How about a threesome?"

*Fuck that noise.* I'd happily cut those bitches throats and drown them in their blood before I'd ever share him.

I just want to know if he'll take the bait.

Turning around to face me again, he digs his finger into his temple. "You're fucking *psychotic*. You know that?"

Oh, I'm aware.

You don't study psychology since elementary school in hopes of working in the field one day without being able to diagnose yourself first.

Trust me, I'm as fucked-up as they come.

However, if he really wants a reason for all my animosity toward him? I've got one.

"You looked at me like I was lower than dirt and then tossed me out like I was garbage," I utter as a flicker of pain infiltrates my chest. "I snuck into the guesthouse because I was having a bad night." *Missing him so much it hurt to breathe.* "I never went there to seduce you, asshole. So don't fucking flatter yourself."

*It's the truth.* Not that I was mad when we hooked up—far from it—but it wasn't the reason I ended up in his bed.

Although it was the reason I took off my clothes afterward.

Either way, his rejection when I was at my lowest and seeking comfort and human connection stung like hell.

Frowning, he rakes his fingers through his hair. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

My sadness is quickly replaced by rage. *Screw him and his pity.*

"Shut the fuck up."

"Bianca—"

It's too late. I'm already slapping his face and kicking his shins as hard as I can.

I don't even realize I'm crying until he's pulling me into his arms.

"I know it hurts, baby girl," he whispers against my hair. "I'm so fucking sorry he's gone."

And just like that, I'm back in my mom's car, clinging to Liam's hand for dear life because I can't make it through the pain.

Only, it's not Liam.

*It's Oakley.*

But no amount of *sorrys* in the world will bring my brother or mom back.

And no amount of consoling will ever unleash the secret I'm forbidden to tell.

I clutch the collar of his t-shirt, breathing in his trademark scent. Marijuana and citrus soap.

I close my eyes as he tightens his hold around me. Like I'm the only one

that matters to him.

His touch shouldn't feel so good, but it feels like my salvation.

Like nothing and no one can harm me because I'm safe with him.

It's comforting in a way I haven't ever felt before.

"I—"

*I want to tell him so bad.* Tell him things I've never told anyone.

Things that shaped me into the fucked-up person I am today...but I can't.

Instead, I slam my mouth against his.

"Goddammit," he grunts as he pulls away. "No."

"Why?" I yell. "Why does it scare you so much to want me?"

Everybody wants me...yet *he's* the only one who won't admit it.

His stare is downright murderous. "The only thing that scares me is how pathetic you are."

With that, he stalks off.

My cheeks flame with humiliation as I run after him, the twigs and branches biting into my bare feet. "I don't have any fucking shoes on, *asshole.*"

"Not my fucking problem, *lucifer.*"

From citizen high to citizen low.

I don't know why he ruffles my feathers the way he does, but I'm so fucking sick of it I could scream.

But I won't give him the satisfaction.

Instead, I square my shoulders and tread through the woods, refusing to make so much as a peep.

Not even when sticks and stones slice through my flesh.

Oakley wants me.

He might refuse to acknowledge it, but I feel it in my bones.

However, that was the last time I play nice and make the first move.

By the time I'm through with him, he's going to be so blind with his want for me, the fucker won't be able to see straight.

He'll be down on his hands and knees begging for a taste.

And when I'm the one turning *him* down and spitting in his face...it will be sweet, sweet victory.

By the time I trudge over to his BMW, he's already gunning the engine.

I want to wipe the smirk off his gorgeous face as I climb inside.

"Have a nice walk, princess?"

I give him a smirk of my own. "It was lovely."

For the briefest of moments, uneasiness flashes in his eyes before he reverses out of his parking spot.

“I can’t believe Hayley left without calling me.” Shrugging, I study my nails. “Then again, the last time I saw her, Zack—her new boyfriend—was fucking her so hard on the hood of her car they probably left indents, so I can’t really blame her.”

The hand clutching the steering wheel tenses before he presses a button and turns the music up.

Buckle up, baby.

*Because there’s plenty more where that came from.*



# Chapter 12

## Oakley

*F uckity fuck fuck.*

It seriously blows that my new apartment is in the danger zone, but there's fuck all I can do about that right now.

"Everything okay?" my dad questions as he walks up the stairs.

"Yeah...no." I give him the box I'm holding so he can take it back to his car. "The stuff in this one isn't mine."

Given it's a bunch of shoes, it can only belong to one person.

Crystal.

Peeking inside the box, he mutters a curse. "Crystal asked if I could drop off some of her things at her new apartment. I must have gotten the boxes confused."

"No biggie."

He blows out a breath. "Is there anything else you need before I head home for the night?"

Dude's already bought me a futon and a television. Plus, he paid the first month's rent *and* he's loaning me one of his bikes.

Ergo, my dad's done more than enough.

"Nope. I'm all set."

He nods. "I'll call you tomorrow after work. Get some sleep."

"Dad," I call out when he starts walking away.

"Yeah?"

"Thanks for saving my ass."

He smiles like it's no big deal. "It's what parents do." He starts to walk away again, but stops abruptly. "Just make sure you get the ass I saved to a meeting tonight."

"I plan on it," I tell him as he jogs down the stairs.

I'm about to head inside my apartment, but a book on the floor catches my attention.

The muscles in my chest tighten when I notice the title. *Elephants on Acid.*

## Past...

Satan keeps her manipulating trap shut the entire car ride home, which suits me just fine.

Why I let this girl get under my skin is anyone's guess, but tonight was the last *favor* I ever do for her.

Irritation prickles the back of my neck as I roll down my window and light up a joint.

"Get out."

I have a few drop-offs tonight so the sooner she's gone, the better.

I expect her to protest, but to my surprise she grabs the joint from my fingers and brings it to her lips.

I'm about to snatch it back, but the next words out of her mouth stop me in my tracks.

"I've never gotten drunk before." A frown mars her face. "I've never smoked weed before either." She takes an apprehensive puff. A second later she starts coughing up a storm. "Shit."

I can't help but laugh. "Everyone coughs their first few times."

I have no clue what to make of the expression on her face.

There are times when she straight-up looks like she has the weight of the world on her shoulders.

It makes no sense to me.

She's rich, she's beautiful, she's smart—*dangerously* smart—she could have anything—*anyone*—she wants in this world.

Yet there are times she looks so lost...so full of pain...it takes my breath away.

However, I know better than to get too close.

Her brothers have their issues and I sure as fuck have mine, but at least we still have traces of humanity.

Bianca has *none*.

The girl is a black widow, luring unsuspecting victims into her web.

And the moment she captures you...she'll fuck you and your life up before she devours whatever remnants are left.

*A soul as black as the night sky.*

*Lips as red as the blood she's out for.*

I make a mental note to jot that shit down in my notebook later.

"I have somewhere to be," I inform her, hoping she takes the hint.

Her face tenses as she goes back for a second hit, almost like she's trying her hardest not to cough as she inhales.

*Fucking hell.* The girl is as stubborn as she is lethal.

She smiles smugly as she hands it back to me, but I make no move to take it.

“Keep it.”

*Whatever gets her out of my car.*

Her eyes drift to the pink Mercedes that's still parked in the driveway. “Best birthday present I received.”

“It's a nice car.”

*Too bad she'll never drive it.*

“That's not what I was talking about.” Her expression turns somber. “It's probably the weed, but I can't remember the last time I felt safe enough to let my guard down in front of anyone.” Leaning over the center console, she kisses my cheek, lingering for a second too long. “Thank you for rescuing me.”

The sincerity in her voice punches me in the chest.

*Don't fucking do it*—I tell myself, but it's too late. I'm already opening my glovebox and handing her the bag.

“Here.”

She eyes it warily as she steps out of the car. “What is it?”

“Look inside and find out.”

I hadn't planned on getting her anything for her birthday, but I was picking up some rolling papers and the title caught my attention.

Once I realized it was about psychology my attention went out the window, but I thought Bianca might enjoy it given she wants to be a psycho-*something* one day.

“Elephants on Acid?” she questions. “You got me a psychology book?”

“Happy almost birthday.”

Reversing out of the driveway, I press a button on my dashboard.

“What's up?” Jace answers.

“Baby Covington is home safe and sound,” I inform him.

The relief in his voice is tangible. “Thank fuck. Where was she?”

“Chilling with Hayley.”

“Chilling with Hayley where? And why the hell didn't she pick up her phone?”

“Don't know,” I lie. “All I know is they got into an argument and she

asked if I could pick her up.”

He sighs. “I wish she would have called me, but I’m glad she’s safe. Thanks, man. I owe you.”

“No problem, brother. Enjoy your trip.”

*A trip no one invited me to go on.*

“Thanks. I’ll hit you up when we get back.”

“Sounds good.”

A text comes through as I hang up.

**Hayley:** How does Thursday night at *Sushi Sushi* sound?

**Oakley:** Works for me.

**Hayley:** Great. Can’t wait to see you, babe.

And I can’t wait to see her.

*So I can ask her why the fuck she lied to me.*

# Chapter 13

## Bianca

“You’ve been really quiet tonight,” Stone comments as we slip into bed.

His observation draws me from my thoughts. “Sorry. I’ve just been...”

*Ruminating about another man.*

“Thinking,” I settle on.

He drapes an arm around me. “Talk to me, Bourne.”

I want to. I just don’t know how to tell him what I’m feeling without making him angry.

“It’s starting to bother me.”

The fingers that were stroking my arm stop. “What is?”

“Not remembering who I used to be,” I admit. “I thought it was for the best...but I’m not so sure anymore.”

There’s a sharp flare of irritation in his eyes. “Is this about Oakley?”

I have to be honest with him. “I don’t know...maybe?” I feel his entire body tense as I continue. “I can’t help wondering why I was with him the night of the accident.”

*And why I feel this unexplainable pull toward him.*

“Does it really matter?” A long sigh escapes him. “I’m not trying to be a dick, but even if you got all your memories back, it wouldn’t change anything.”

I mull this over for a moment and realize he has a point.

No matter what I may find out about my past, it won’t change my future with Stone.

However, I’m so tired of feeling like a computer with erased files.

Tired of everyone I care about keeping me in a safe little box and only giving me tiny crumbs of information about myself that I have to fight for.

Tired of having no control over my life because I don’t have all the facts.

I don’t want to upset Stone or make him feel like he has any cause for concern though, so I simply say, “I guess not.” I draw tiny circles over his stomach. “But if you knew anything important about my former life, you’d tell me, right?”

I need to know he'll always be honest with me.

No matter how uncomfortable the truth may make him.

He presses his lips to my temple. "You know I'd never lie to you, Bourne."

He's right. Stone's always been honest with me so I have no reason to start doubting him now.

"I know." Taking a deep breath, I decide to tell him something else that's been weighing on my mind. "Don't freak-out, but Oakley moved into your apartment building. I ran into him on the stairs earlier when he was moving in."

I expect him to say something, but he doesn't.

When I peer up, I see he's fast asleep.

Being careful not to wake him, I flick off the light and curl up beside him, trying my hardest to ignore this crushing feeling in my chest.

The one telling me my heart is holding on to a secret...

*And figuring out what it is could change everything.*

### **Past...**

My brothers appear to be just as confused as I am when they walk through the front door.

"Do you have any idea what this is about?" Jace questions.

I shrug. "Nope."

"Fucking weird," Cole mutters.

Amen to that.

Earlier our dad sent us a group text declaring we were having a family meeting tonight and it was imperative that we all be there.

Given he's always at work and he hardly speaks to us...it came as one hell of a surprise.

"I hope he's not sick," I whisper, because even though we aren't close the thought of losing my only remaining parent isn't something I can deal with.

"Let's get this shit over with," Jace utters.

United, the three of us make our way into the kitchen.

Where we find Dad and Nadia sitting at the table.

Immediately, we all stiffen.

Whatever this is about, one thing's for sure. *It's not good.*

Jace is the first to speak. "Why the fuck is *she* here?"

I can tell our dad wants to yell at him for his language and his dig at his girlfriend, but he lets it slide.

“Sit down, kids. Nadia and I have something very important to tell you.”

A sick feeling rolls through me.

Beside me, Jace and Cole bristle.

“I’ll stand,” Jace says.

“Me too,” Cole chimes in.

“Ditto,” I add for good measure.

A horrifying thought occurs to me just then.

“You better not be pregnant,” I blurt out.

Nadia practically chokes on her drink.

I don’t know much about the woman—hell, I don’t want to—but even I have to admit she’s pretty. Beautiful even.

Given she’s clearly from India, just like my mom—it’s safe to say my dad has a certain type.

*Or maybe he’s just trying to fill the hole Mom left in his heart.*

If that’s the case—I can’t blame him.

However, I’m not cool with the two of them procreating.

*I’m the baby of this family goddammit.* And if this bitch thinks she’s just going to waltz in uninvited and start popping out additions to it, she can kiss my squat-sculpted ass.

“Nadia’s not pregnant,” my dad quickly says.

I start to relax...until I hear his next words.

“We are, however, getting married.”

Reaching for her hand, he kisses it.

I can’t help but notice the ugly, gaudy diamond on her left ring finger.

Jace—who always has something to say—stays silent. However, it’s obvious he’s not pleased with the news.

None of us are.

“When?” Cole bites out.

Dad and Nadia exchange a glance. “We haven’t decided on a date yet, but sometime within the next year or so.”

Without a word, Jace exits the kitchen.

A moment later the front door slams shut.

Cole snorts. “Wow.” His eyes land on Nadia. “Enjoy living in a dead woman’s house with the husband you stole.” He glares at Dad. “Congrats, man. Make sure to have your whore sign a prenup.”

With that, he walks out.

Nadia's face falls.

Dad looks at me, his eyes begging, *pleading* with me to show some compassion.

But I can't.

Because it hurts.

So fucking much.

"You'll *never* take her place," I tell Nadia, and I mean it with every fiber of my being.

Despite her mistakes and the secret I'm forced to keep—I will always love my mother.

There's not a person on this earth who could ever put a stop to that.

Tears clogging my vision, I run out the patio door. I'll spontaneously combust if I have to spend another minute trapped in here with them.

*God, I miss her.*

I miss her smile, her laugh, her smell...the way she hugged me so tight—like I was the most important thing to her.

But mostly?

I hate how it's all starting to fade away.

Every day that passes my memory of her withers more and more.

If I'm not careful...one day I'm going to wake up and every trace of her will be gone.

"You have a lot of nerve," Oakley calls out.

I was so lost in my thoughts, I didn't even realize he was out here.

However, I'm not in the right state of mind to go toe to toe with him right now.

"Look," I start as he stalks over. "I'm really not in the mood—"

"I don't give a shit," he snarls. "Not only did you hook up with Hayley's new boyfriend behind her back...you videotaped her touching herself and put it on a fucking porn site." Face twisting in disgust, he takes a step forward, cornering me like I'm his prey. "What the fuck is the matter with you?"

I blink, not understanding what he's talking about.

Yes, I recorded Hayley touching herself.

Hell, I recorded her doing lots of sexual stuff.

However, I didn't put those videos on a porn site.

*Not yet anyway.*

Ice runs through my veins as it dawns on me.



There's no way Hayley would know I planned to do that.

Not unless she talked to *him*.

Holy shit.

This is bad. *Real fucking bad.*

Hand clutching my stomach, I utter, "I don't know what Hayley told you, but—"

"She told me *everything*," Oakley spits.

Somehow, I doubt that...because if she did?

There's no way Oakley would be looking at me like I'm the most despicable person he's ever come across.

And he certainly wouldn't be taking her side.

"Oak—"

I can't finish that statement because he takes another step forward causing me to lose my footing and teeter back...but not before grabbing his shirt.

A second later we both fall into the pool.

I sputter up water as I come to the surface. I barely have a chance to gather my bearings before an equally drenched Oakley is swimming toward me.

Face full of anger, he punches the water. "If you think I'm gonna stand by and let you ruin the lives of all the women I care about, you're even crazier than I thought you were."

I ignore the thick rush of jealousy pushing through my veins because what I have to tell him is important.

I might have taken those videos, but I never put them up on any porn sites.

I also never hooked up with Zack.

Which means the bitch is lying her ass off.

And the fact that he would believe her over me...hurts.

*Far more than I thought it would.*

"Hate to break it to you, Oakley, but your precious Hayley—"

Eyes narrowing, he backs me against the wall of the pool. "You better stay the hell away from her."

His voice is so full of malice my insides twist.

I jut my chin in challenge. "And if I don't?"

Long fingers hover around my throat, ready to squeeze.

"Do it," I dare.

Hand still wrapped around my neck, he leans in until his lips brush over

my ear. “Is that what it will take?” His warm breath and deep voice caress my skin as he slides his palm down my torso and hitches my leg around his waist. “If I give in and fuck you will you stop your bullshit?”

The answer stalls in my throat when his mouth finds my collarbone.

My heart kicks up as his teeth nip at the column of my throat, sending a pulse of heat between my legs.

I claw at his back when he grinds against me and I can feel how much he wants this.

*Wants me.*

“Yes,” I concede, my mind and heart racing as his hips meet mine again. “F—”

A callous laugh cuts me off. “Too bad, baby girl.” His smile is downright vicious. “It will *never* fucking happen.”

A moment later, he trudges out of the pool.

*Taking my heart and pride with him.*



I’m not too proud to admit my anger is fueled by pure jealousy.

The fact that he would protect Hayley, yet won’t even give me the chance to explain my side of things—not that I can tell him—has me shaking with rage.

*And the need for revenge.*

Fortunately, I spot the perfect opportunity to exact it when I watch from my bedroom window as Oakley leaves the following afternoon.

After stealing the spare key out of a kitchen drawer...I slip out the patio door and trot over to the guesthouse.

Armed with lighter fluid and matches.

Oakley might care about Hayley...but there’s something else he cares about even more.

*Weed.*

I do a quick sweep of the living room but come up empty.

Gritting my teeth, I make my way into his bedroom.

The king-sized bed is unmade and there are random articles of clothing on the floor, but it’s the small notebook on his bed that snags my attention.

The one he never lets anyone see.

My mouth drops open when I take a look inside.

*Traces of you  
Traces of me  
What a beautiful tragedy we could be.*

Heart in my throat, I quickly flip to another page.

*I'm dirty  
You're clean  
All the lines in between  
If only I'd let you in  
Maybe then I'd truly be seen.*

Holy shit. Oakley writes poems.

And I don't mean a few words that rhyme.

His words make you feel something.

I have to remind myself that not only would it be wrong to steal his notebook so I can read them all—but I need to get this little mission over with before I lose my nerve.

I quickly place the book back where I found it and search all the nooks and crannies of his room, looking for his stash.

I find it in a hamper in his closet—and holy shit—there's *a lot* of it.

After hauling what easily feels like three pounds of marijuana to his bathroom, I set to work dumping it in his tub and pouring lighter fluid all over it.

Then I strike a match and drop it.

*Take that, bastard.*

I'm all smiles as I watch the flames flicker...

Until I notice the tub is melting, and the fire is growing.

*Shit.*

Panic crawls up my spine as the bathroom starts to resemble a Post Malone concert.

I can't even turn on the faucet because the fire is so bad.

Grabbing a towel, I try fanning the flames down, but that only makes them worse.

My stomach roils. *Oh, God.*

The terror trapped inside my esophagus is the size of a softball.

“Jesus,” someone who sounds a lot like Oakley barks as their arm goes around my waist. “What the fuck, Bianca?”

“I didn’t mean to do this,” I tell him on an exhale as he yanks me out of the house. “I only meant to burn your weed.”

“It’s fucking *fiberglass*,” he barks before he grabs the fire extinguisher next to the grill and goes back inside.

*Oh, shit.*

I hear sirens looming in the distance when Oakley comes back. “It’s out.”

“I’m sorry—”

“Holy shit,” Jace yells as he runs over to us. “What the fuck happened?”

An equally alarmed Cole sprints out behind him. “Are you guys okay?”

“Yeah,” Oakley says. “Bathroom is fucked, but I managed to put the fire out before it destroyed the rest of the guesthouse.”

“That’s good.” Jace blows out a breath. “But how the hell did it—” Pausing mid-sentence, he inhales deeply. “Why does it smell like Coachella?”

Cole sniffs the air. “Jesus, Oak.” He sniffs again. “You trying to get the whole town high?”

Oakley glares at me.

Placing my hands on my hips, I leer at them. “What are you guys even doing here anyway?”

“We were here to smoke and chill with Oak.” Cole snorts. “But I guess that’s out of the question now.”

Oakley opens his mouth to speak, but a slew of firefighters rush into the back yard.

Along with our dad.

“Is everyone okay?”

I blink. “What are *you* doing here?”

“I was on my way home when the fire trucks passed me, and I got an alert on my phone.” Taking a deep breath, he makes a face. “Is that marijuana I smell?”

We all stay silent.

Dad scrubs a hand down his face as the firefighters run inside the guesthouse. “Look, Oakley, I was young once too, I get it. But I can’t have

you getting so high you become reckless and start fires inside my guesthouse  
—”

“It wasn’t him,” I blurt out. Not only because I don’t want Oakley taking the rap for something I did, but because I don’t want him getting kicked out. “It was me.”

Three sets of eyes widen in surprise.

“What do you mean it was you?” my dad questions.

“Well,” I start. “I found Oakley’s weed and set it on fire in the bathtub.” I hold up a finger. “In my defense, I didn’t know the tub was made of fiberglass.”

That was definitely a not-so-pleasant surprise.

Mouth agape, my dad stares at me.

“Dude,” Cole comments. “Not cool.”

Jace pinches the bridge of his nose. “Why the hell did you do that?”

I shrug. “Because he pissed me off.”

Looking up at the sky, my dad sighs. “Bianca, sweetheart, you could have seriously hurt yourself and others.”

Batting my eyelashes, I put on my sweetest, most innocent face. “I’m sorry, Daddy. It will never happen again.”

My act works because he totally melts, and my brothers concede.

I can practically feel Oakley’s broody gaze boring holes into me.

Fortunately, the firefighters come to the rescue.

“The bathroom is destroyed, but the fire is out and everything else is intact.”

“Thank you,” my dad tells them. “I appreciate it.” He looks at Oakley. “I’ll be away on business this week, but I’ll hire a crew to rebuild the bathroom while I’m gone.” He takes out his phone. “In the meantime, you can take one of the spare bedrooms in the house.”

I can tell Oakley wants to argue, but he’s in no position to.

*Turns out my plan worked even better than I expected.*

# Chapter 14

## Bianca

I'm on edge as I walk into the little coffee shop on campus.

Dylan and Sawyer have been blowing up my phone begging me to meet them so we can talk, but I haven't wanted to because I've been so angry.

I thought we were friends. Hell, more than friends.

I considered them my family and knowing they've been keeping this lie from me seriously hurts.

However, I'm willing to hear them out because I care about them and being on the outs sucks.

I find them sitting at a booth in the corner, looking as sad as I feel.

"Hey."

Their faces perk up when they spot me.

"Hey." Sawyer moves down, making room for me. "How are you?"

"Okay," I lie.

The moment my butt hits the booth, Dylan pushes a steaming paper cup toward me. "We got you your favorite. Mocha macchiato with a splash of coconut milk."

I eagerly take a sip. I might be mad at them, but not enough to turn down free caffeine.

Sawyer thrusts a small plate in my direction next, and I'd be lying if I said the yummy goodness on it didn't make my stomach growl. "And a chocolate croissant."

Bringing it to my mouth, I take a hearty bite and try not to moan because it tastes incredible.

However, there are more pressing issues at play.

I wipe the flakes off my mouth with a napkin. "Now that you've both softened me up with treats, why don't you tell me the real reason you guys wanted to meet."

I know why. I just want to hear them say it.

Sawyer's face falls. "We're sorry for lying to you."

"Really sorry," Dylan chimes in. "We honestly never meant to hurt you."

I glare at her. “I take it your dad never went back to prison, did he?”

Guilt colors her pretty face. “No.” She slinks down in her seat. “Not to my knowledge anyway.”

My stare bounces between the two of them. “I know you love my brothers, but did it ever occur to either of you that keeping the truth from me would hurt me? Especially after we’ve grown so close.”

“Not really,” Sawyer says.

When my eyes turn hard, she quickly adds, “Not because we don’t care about you, but because we *do*. We thought we were doing the right thing. The doctors said not to push you and every time you found out something new that happened in your past, you were devastated.”

“It was hard watching you fall apart,” Dylan says. “So when Jace told us not to tell you about the accident in order to give you a fresh start and let you heal...we didn’t object. You didn’t need any more confusion in your life, you know?”

“I get that,” I whisper.

Yet, being left in the dark still infuriates me.

I take another sip of my drink. “Jace isn’t always right, though.”

Dylan gives me a small smile. “He isn’t. But he loves you, Bianca.”

“So does Cole.” Grabbing a napkin, Sawyer dabs her eyes with it. “We all do.”

Next thing I know, Sawyer’s a blubbering mess beside me.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about the accident. I just didn’t want to cause you any more pain.”

Sawyer’s always been a softie, but seeing how distraught she is over this has me wanting to throw my arms around her.

Dylan’s face falls. “We were trying to protect you.” Reaching over the table, she squeezes Sawyer’s hand. “We hope you can forgive us.”

My heart sinks. Even though I’m still upset with them, I know their hearts were in the right place.

“I forgive you,” I tell them. “Just don’t lie to me again, okay?”

Dylan’s face lights up. “Deal.”

Sawyer blows her nose. *Loudly*. “I’m so sorry.”

I can’t help but laugh as I wrap her up in a hug. “God, you’re such a mush.”

She snuffles. “I hate knowing I hurt you.”

I pick up another napkin and wipe the mascara streaks staining her

cheeks. “You didn’t do it on purpose.”

I’m taking another sip of my macchiato when the flashback I had last night flits through my head.

Now that we’ve made up, I’m really hoping they can fill in some gaps for me.

“So,” I begin after Sawyer’s settled down. “I’ve been having some flashbacks.”

Dylan and Sawyer exchange a glance.

“What kind of flashbacks?” Dylan questions.

I fiddle with the croissant on my plate. “Ones involving Oakley.”

It’s obvious I was obsessed with him even though he kept turning me down.

Nonetheless, I can’t help but wonder why we were in the car together.

Did I need him to save me from another cliff incident?

Were we driving to the store?

Running away together?

The last one is highly doubtful given he hated me and all, but still.

The possibilities are endless, and I can’t stand not knowing.

“Do you guys know why I was in the car with him that night?”

Sawyer shakes her head. “I have no idea.”

Dylan looks down at her coffee.

“Dylan?” I prompt. “What do you know?”

She blows out a heavy breath. “I care about you, Bianca, but it’s really not my place to tell you certain things.”

“What *things*?”

She closes her eyes. “Look, we weren’t friends then, so you never told me anything about your relationship with Oak, and he hasn’t told me all that much either.” Leaning back, she folds her arms. “But even if he did, it still wouldn’t be my place to spill. It’s his.”

“Well, it’s not like I can ask him anything since he refuses to talk to me,” I point out.

Frowning, she peers down at her coffee cup. “Maybe that’s for the best.”

I vehemently disagree.

“Or *maybe* you can persuade him to stop being so stubborn and speak to me?”

She shakes her head. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

She can’t be serious.



I grit my teeth, failing to hide my irritation. “Let me get this straight. You won’t answer any of my questions, but you also won’t ask him to talk to me? I thought we were friends, Dylan?”

“We are.” Her forehead creases. “And as your friend I don’t want to lie to you. Therefore, I can’t answer questions about your history with Oakley. He’s my cousin and I love him, but I also love you and Jace which puts me in a *very* difficult position given your brother hates him and he’s responsible for your accident.” She looks down at the table. “I’m really sorry, but it’s exhausting being pulled in three different directions all the time, so it’s best I don’t get involved.”

I hate that she won’t give me anything, but it’s clear she’s not going to back down so I have no choice but to respect her wishes.

“Fine.” Turning to Sawyer next, I utter, “We were close back then. What do you know about my relationship with Oakley?”

Sawyer nearly chokes on her coffee. “Nothing.”

Exasperated, I look up at the ceiling. “For fuck’s sake, Saw—”

“I’m being serious,” she states. “You never said a word to me about it.” She takes another sip of her coffee. “Trust me, I was just as surprised as you were to find out about you two.”

Once again, I feel like I’m on a merry-go-round that doesn’t end. “Find out *what* about us?”

“I don’t know,” Sawyer insists. “I mean—I once overheard you two arguing about you sneaking into Oak’s bed in the middle of the night and him turning you down. But other than that, you never confided in me about your relationship with him.”

It’s all I can do not to scream. I knew the old Bianca was private, but not divulging anything to Sawyer—or *anyone* for that matter—about Oakley has seriously screwed me.

That’s when it dawns on me. Sawyer might not know about my relationship with Oakley, but maybe she knows about my friendship with Hayley.

Specifically, why I hated the girl so much.

After taking a lengthy sip of my macchiato, I decide to hit them with it.

“Oakley situation aside, there’s something else that’s been bothering me.”

Dylan stops eating her muffin. “What’s up?”

“I only get bits and pieces from my random flashbacks, but the few pieces

I have make it clear I didn't like Hayley very much and I was blackmailing her for some reason."

Their eyes widen in shock.

I wince. "I'm hoping one of you might know why?"

Dylan shakes her head. "I don't have a clue. I didn't know Hayley very well, but she seemed like a sweet girl. I can't think of a single reason you'd go after her."

"Except for the fact that Oakley and Hayley spoke regularly, and they still cared about each other," Sawyer mutters.

When we both look at her, she holds up her hands and says, "Again, I have no idea what your relationship with Oak was like, but given you were pissed he turned you down, and you went so far as to hook up with Morgan behind his back...who's to say you weren't also blackmailing his ex-girlfriend Hayley because you were jealous?"

"Yeah, you're right." My heart sinks. "I was just hoping there might be something else."

Something that didn't make me feel like a total asshole.

"I'm sorry, Bianca. I wish I could help, but I don't really know much about your relationship with Hayley either." Sawyer looks sheepish. "Although there was this one time we were at a party and Hayley showed up. You weren't happy to see her, yet you made it a point to become fast friends with her. When I asked you what was up, you told me to keep *your friends close and your enemies closer.*"

Dammit. That totally sounds like something I would do.

Well, not me...*her.*

I rub my temples and groan. "Sometimes I seriously hate the old Bianca."

I ruined this poor girl's life all because I was jealous.

*And now she's gone.*

Sawyer squeezes my hand. "Don't be so hard on yourself."

"How could I not be? I became frenemies with Hayley in order to gather some intel I could use to terrorize her."

Oakley had every right to be upset about it.

It doesn't matter that I didn't upload the videos.

I'm still the lowest of the low and I'm certain there's a special place in hell for someone like me.

Dylan frowns. "You're not the same person you were back then, Bianca.

The fact that you feel bad about it now says a lot.”

I reach for my purse and stand since my next class starts in fifteen minutes. “Maybe, but it still doesn’t make me feel any better about blackmailing her over a guy.”

And it’s not like I can find her and apologize for any of it...

*Because she’s dead.*



**Past...**

“Hey.”

I peer up at Morgan through my sunglasses. “Hi.”

Earlier today she texted me that there was something *super important* she needed to talk to me about, so I told her to come over.

I gesture to the raft I’m currently floating on. “As you can see I’m busy, so make it snappy.”

She blinks. “Seriously?”

Ugh.

Annoyed, I get out of the pool. “What do you want, Morgan?”

Her green orbs peruse the length of my body before she looks up at me. “I think I’m ready.”

Grabbing my towel off the back of a chair, I stare at her. “Ready for what?”

Drawing a breath, she takes a step forward. “For this...*us*.”

Color me confused.

I raise an eyebrow. “Us?”

Her teeth sink into her lower lip. “I want to be with you, Bianca. And now that I’m no longer pretending to be with Oak—”

I stop her right there, because holy hell. “Morgan...no.” Deciding to be honest with her, I give her the truth. “There’s someone else I’m into.”

And if she utilizes even a fraction of her brain power, she’ll have no problem figuring out who that someone is.

Her face falls. “Oh.” She shuffles her feet. “I didn’t...I mean I guess I should have. I feel so dumb.”

Well, shit.

Despite my well-earned reputation as a stone-cold bitch, I do pity her.

In my defense, I warned her not to catch feelings for me, but she went ahead and did it anyway.

Which means I'm in the awkward position of having to deal with the fallout.

"Look, Morgan," I start. "It's not you, it's me."

"Come on, Bianca—"

"It's true," I insist. "You're a good catch and someday you're gonna make some girl really happy. It's just...that girl isn't me."

Glassy-eyed, she shakes her head. "I'm so stupid."

*No argument there.* However, I'm not completely heartless.

"I'm sorry I hurt you," I tell her honestly. "Despite how we started, that wasn't my intention."

"Bianca?"

"Yeah?"

She sucks in a deep breath. "I feel it's only fair to warn you that she's not into you." Her expression turns serious. "You really need to watch your back around her...and your heart."

I have no idea what she means. "Who are you talking about?"

"Hayley." She tilts her head. "That's who you're into ...right?"

Given I want to know all the dirt, I don't bother correcting her. "What do you know about Hayley?"

She laughs, but there's no humor. "Well, for starters, the girl is *always* blowing up Oakley's phone at all hours, so she's obviously not over him." Her teeth sink into her bottom lip. "And sometimes she—" her voice trails off.

"Sometimes she *what*?" I prompt.

"Well...sometimes she says really mean things about you. Like how you're always so rude to everyone." She starts ticking things off with her fingers. "She also said you make fun of people with disabilities. And you never tip the waiters and waitresses when you go out. Oh, and you sleep with a *bunch* of guys—"

"That's not true," I all but screech.

I'm not exactly Miss Mary fucking Sunshine—but I always make sure to tip the waitstaff and I don't sleep around.

Not that there's anything wrong with girls who do.

But most of all? I would never *ever* in a million fucking years make fun of anyone with a disability.

*Christ.* No wonder Oakley thinks so low of me.

The bitch has been sabotaging me behind my back this entire time.

I'm so angry, I'm seeing red as I brush past Morgan. "Thank you for telling me."

"Where are you going?" she calls out.

*To handle this shit for once and all.*



"Do you have an appointment?" the woman at the front desk questions.

"No, but I called earlier, and you said you could get me on the schedule today."

"Okie dokie. Let me check you in." Not bothering to look up, she presses a few keys on her keyboard. "What's your name?"

"Bianca Covington."

*That gets her attention.*

Not that I'm surprised. Given my father is the owner of Trust Pharmaceuticals, my last name is the equivalent of gold in the medical community.

Smiling tersely, she presses a few more keys. "All checked in. However, Dr. Young is running a little late this afternoon, so it will be a bit."

*I have all the time in the world.*

I find a seat far away from the crotch goblin sitting on the other side of the waiting room.

Evidently not far enough though, because she walks up to me.

The little girl with messy pigtails—who looks to be about eight years old—gives me a big toothy grin.

Well, what's left of her teeth, because a few are missing.

"Hi."

I avert my gaze because if you don't make eye contact they'll eventually go away.

Hands on her hips, she looks me up and down curiously. "Where is your baby?"

Oh, for fuck's sake.

“Where is your *mother*?”

Her cheerful demeanor evaporates. “I don’t have one anymore.”

“Oh.”

*Join the club, kiddo.*

Twisting one of her pigtails around her finger, she gestures behind her. “My dad went to the bathroom.” Cupping a hand over her mouth she leans in like she wants to tell me a secret. “But I think he’s talking to Dr. Young without me.”

I swallow hard. “Because of your mom?”

Her eyes wander to the floor. “I really miss her.”

*Me too.*

Folding her arms, she purses her lips. “I don’t like coming here.”

I instinctively stiffen. “Why?”

She shrugs. “Sometimes talking about mommy makes me cry.”

Yeah, I get that.

Feeling a kinship between us, I tell her a secret of my own. “Well, you don’t have to talk about anything you don’t want to. You can ask to play games or bring a coloring book and draw instead.”

She looks shocked. “Really?”

“Yup. Therapy is your time.”

“Won’t he get mad?”

“He shouldn’t. But, if he does, ask to see a different psychiatrist because this one sucks.”

This new knowledge lights her up like a Christmas tree. “I like you. What’s your name?”

“Bianca.”

“Hi, Bianca.” She holds out her hand triumphantly. “My name is Angelica.”

I shake her hand. “Hi.”

She gives me another toothy grin. “You already said that.” Her eyes widen when she looks down at my bracelet. “Wow. That’s nice.”

I want to point out that it’s a fifteen-thousand-dollar white gold and diamond *Cartier* bracelet so it’s a lot more than *nice*, but a man in a suit walks over to us.

“Young lady, what did I tell you about talking to strangers?”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell *him* that maybe if he didn’t leave his kid unattended, she wouldn’t, but Angelica stomps her foot and whines,

“She’s nice, Daddy. And so pretty...just like Mommy was.”

Angelica turns to me. “Maybe you can be my new mommy?”

Her father turns ten different shades of red. “Angelica, please stop harassing her.” He looks at me apologetically. “I’m so sorry. My wife passed away seven months ago, and she’s been looking...” His voice drifts off.

For another female to fill the void.

Unfortunately for Angelica and myself, it’s one that can never be filled.

He tugs on her hand. “Come on, let’s go get some ice cream.”

Angelica protests, tears welling in her big green eyes. “No—”

“Hey.” I drop down to my knees so I’m eye level with her. “You want to see something really cool?”

Wiping her nose with the back of her hand, she snuffles. “What?”

I take off my bracelet. “This bracelet has superpowers.”

She doesn’t look like she believes a word I’m saying...until I lean in and whisper, “Not only does it protect you and make you stronger, but if you talk into it when you’re all alone, mommies can hear you all the way in heaven.”

Her eyes widen. “Really?”

I nod emphatically. “Really.”

“How do you know?”

“Because my mommy died when I was a little girl too.”

There’s an unspoken bond between us as I place the bracelet on her tiny wrist. Luckily, it’s adjustable so I’m able to make it fit.

Angelica’s lower lip wobbles, but I tap the bracelet and she sucks in a jittery breath, gathering her composure.

*Attagirl.*

The world will chew you up and spit you out at the first sign of weakness.

“See? It’s already working.”

Before I can stop her...she wraps her little arms around my neck. “Thank you.”

*Dammit.* A snot-nosed little brat shouldn’t be thawing the block of ice around my heart.

“Stay strong,” I remind her as I stand up.

Her father is visibly stunned.

“Bianca Covington,” the woman at the front desk calls out.

I hike my purse up my shoulder. “That’s me.”

I’m about to walk away, but think better of it.

“You care about your daughter, right?”  
The man’s eyes widen. “Of course I do.”  
“Then I suggest you find her a new psychiatrist.”  
His mouth drops open. “Dr. Young came highly recommended.”  
I look him in the eyes. “Trust me, she’s better off with someone else.”  
Pushing past him, I slip my game face on and march into his office.

*Stay strong.*



“What brings you here today, Bianca?” Dr. Young mutters.  
I cross my legs. “I’m pretty sure you already know.”  
Lust flashes in his eyes before he looks away. “I told you I wasn’t comfortable with you coming to my office anymore.”  
It takes every ounce of willpower not to reach over and strangle him.  
I leisurely run a finger up my thigh. “What can I say? I’ve never been good at following instructions.”  
He looks down at his notepad. “I’m aware.”  
Drumming my nails along the armrest of the chair, I give him a menacing grin. “How’s your wife?”  
His jaw bunches. “Bianca—”  
“What’s the matter, Doc? Afraid I’ll tell her and everyone else the truth?”  
He turns ashen. “You promised—”  
“I promised *nothing*,” I hiss.  
On second thought, he’s right.  
I promised I’d make him pay for what he did.  
I promised that one day I’d make him feel every ounce of pain he caused my family.  
*I promised I’d avenge her death.*  
The pathetic man looks like he wants to drop to his knees and cry.  
Good.  
“What do you want?”  
“I want my mother back, but that can’t happen...now can it?”  
Frowning, he rubs his forehead. “I told you I’m so—”  
“Sorry won’t bring her back.”



He draws in a heavy breath. “What can I—”

“I need more money.”

He looks at me like I’m insane. “I wrote you a check for two hundred thousand three months ago. Not to mention, your father is a goddamn billionaire.”

I stand up and walk over to him. “I’m aware.” I flash him some teeth. “And you’re right, I don’t need your money. I just want to ensure your murdering ass doesn’t get to have any.”

“I’ve told you time and time again. I didn’t kill—”

“You have one month to come up with five hundred thousand.”

His eyeballs nearly pop out of his skull. “You can’t be serious.”

“As a heart attack.” I tap my chin. “Or rather, a car going sixty miles an hour ramming into a tree and then rolling into a ditch.”

His expression turns solemn. “You know I don’t have that kind of money.”

“Not my problem.” I study my nails. “On second thought, it’s no biggie. I’ll just post those videos on every porn site I can think of.”

Turmoil colors his face. “You swore you wouldn’t do that. Don’t punish her for my mistake—”

The sharp sting from my hand slapping his cheek practically echoes in the small room. “My mother wasn’t a mistake.”

*She was a tortured soul.*

*A tortured soul who trusted him to fix her.*

*But he didn’t. Because he was too busy taking advantage of her.*

“Please, Bianca. I am begging you not to do this.”

I walk over to the door. “Just like my mom begged you before she killed herself?”

He slumps back in defeat. “I’ll see if I can take out another loan.”

“You do that.” I start to turn the knob, but pause. “Oh, and one more thing, Mark.”

“What’s that?”

“You better warn your cunt daughter to stop spreading lies about me or I’ll release every goddamn thing I have, and our little deal will be off.” I blow him a kiss. “I’ll text you with the time and place you can drop off the check.”

# Chapter 15

## Bianca

Holy shit.

Hayley's dad was Mr. Young, my mom's psychiatrist.

*And the man she was cheating on my dad with.*

Head whirling, I leave the classroom in a daze.

It's safe to say I know exactly why I was blackmailing him now. And that I was using Hayley to do it.

Not that it makes it right.

Part of me wants to call Stone and tell him about this new memory, but I can't.

*I can't tell anyone.*

I'm so out of it I don't realize where I'm walking to until the lake comes into view.

My heart stutters when I spot Oakley sitting on my bench eating a sandwich.

Stomach churning with nerves, I approach him as one would approach a bomb...with extreme caution.

"Hi."

His blue eyes widen and he pauses mid-bite.

"Can we ta—"

He's already walking away before I can even get the words out.

"Please," I plead as I watch him toss the remainder of his sandwich in a nearby garbage bin. "Just give me two minutes."

I can tell he wants to argue, but to my surprise he begrudgingly sits back down on the bench.

Whatever nerves I had disappear as I take a seat next to him. Despite his hostility toward me...I feel a comfort in his presence.

"I set your weed on fire," I utter, recalling one of my recent memories.

A flicker of amusement crosses his face. "That you did."

I give him a rueful smile. "Sorry."

He snorts. "It's fine."

Fidgeting, I wipe my damp palms on my jeans. “Do you still write poetry?”

I’ve clearly caught him off guard because the color drains from his face and he goes still.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to ups—”

“Bianca.”

He utters my name like he’s on his last breath and I’m his lifeline.

“Yeah?”

His lips part on a sharp inhale and his strong throat works as he swallows. “I thought you had amnesia?”

“I do.”

For the briefest of moments, the despair lingering in his gaze evaporates. “Then how do you know—”

“I had another flashback.”

And just like that, the sadness is back. “Right.”

It’s as though I sucked the wind right out of his sail. “I’m sorry.”

His jaw tightens. “Stop apologizing to me.”

I can’t help it. For some strange reason I feel like I should.

I have no idea why, though.

My attention drifts to the lake and the two ducks fighting over a piece of bread in the water.

“I have to ask you something really awkward.”

Anxiety lodges in my throat, because despite him turning down my advances in every memory I’ve had, I feel like he knows me.

*Intimately.*

“Did we ever...you know...hookup?”

We stare at one another for what feels like an eternity. The intensity burning in his gaze makes my heart race.

“Your two minutes are up.”

Without warning, he gets off the bench.

There’s a heavy tightness in my chest the moment he walks away.

Irritation rushes through me and before I can talk myself out of it, my feet follow him.

“Why won’t you answer me?”

He stops so short I almost collide into his back.

The hurt swirling in his eyes nearly brings me to my knees when he turns around.

A breath shudders out of my lungs and my heart propels into a hard gallop when he grabs my hand. It feels like there's a live wire connecting our bodies.

One that wraps around my neck and squeezes when he gestures to my engagement ring and bites out, "That's why."

Face twisting in a scowl, he drops my hand like it's acid and stalks off.

And this time, despite the inexplicable connection I feel between us...

I let him.

# Chapter 16

## Oakley

For a moment I thought she came back to me.

I should have known better.

The muscles in my chest draw tight as I continue sweeping up the trash in the hallway.

Even if Bianca wasn't marrying someone else, it still wouldn't change anything.

*She's gone...*

Because of me.

And now I have no choice but to man the fuck up and live with the consequences of my actions.

The sound of someone laughing callously has the tiny hairs on the back of my neck standing on end.

I know that laugh.

I've heard it a hundred times before.

Usually at the expense of whoever was dumb enough to piss Jace off.

A moment later my former best friend comes into view.

Eyes narrowed, he drops the soda bottle he was holding...even though the trash can is a mere three feet away.

"It's funny as fuck watching trash clean up trash."

His anger is more than warranted, but he's off his rocker if he thinks I'm going to stand here and let him hassle me while I'm trying to work.

I glare at him. "Pick that up."

He takes a step in my direction. "Fuck off."

*Goddammit.* Shit between us is fucked now, but it doesn't negate the fact that he used to be my best friend.

Jace was the one who took me under his wing and had my back when I was new in town.

The one I could talk to about all the fucked-up thoughts going on inside my head whenever I was having a shit day and missed my mom.

The one who took care of me whenever I'd get high and have a seizure.

At one point in my life, I would have done anything for him.  
Hell, I still would.

But it's obvious the feeling isn't mutual anymore because here he is...  
going out of his way to start shit with me.

He kicks the bottle down the empty hallway. "You pick it up,  
motherfucker."

I'd rather eat shit.

I take a step toward him. "You might be able to bully everyone else in  
your life, asshole, but you can't bully me. I ain't the fucking one."

His nostrils flare. "You ain't *shit*, bitch."

The fucker was clearly looking for a fight.

Well, now he's got one.

Something inside me snaps and I shove him. "You wanna fight me?"

I'm no longer mad. I'm fucking *enraged*.

At him. At the situation I'm in.

But mostly? At myself.

*Because I killed someone and lost the girl I love.*

"Take your best shot, mofo." I tap my chin in invitation. "Right fucking  
here."

He levels me with another cold glare as he winds his fist back.

I brace myself for the impact. *Because I want it.*

But it never comes.

"Stop it," Bianca screams in the distance.

A moment later, she squeezes herself between us. "Leave him alone,  
Jace."

He pushes her away. "Stay out of this." He winds his fist back again, but  
Bianca clutches her head and cries out, "Ouch. Holy shit that hurts."

That's all it takes for us to forget our feud and rush to her side.

My gaze darts over every inch of her, scanning for signs of injury.  
"What's wrong?"

"What happened?" Jace questions, his voice filled with concern.

It takes everything in me not to pummel him. "She might have hit her  
head when you shoved her."

Jace blanches. "Fuck." He looks at his sister. "Are you okay?"

She rubs her temples. "I don't know. I have a really bad migraine."

Without thinking, I reach out and touch her cheek. "Do you want me to  
—"

“Get the fuck away from her, asshole,” Jace bites out as he slaps my hand away. “Now.”

As if sensing another fight between us, Bianca looks at Jace and utters, “Can you walk me back to my dorm?”

Jace shakes his head. “No. I want to take you to the doctor and get you checked out.”

Finally, something we can both agree on.

Despite looking like she wants to object, she nods. “Okay.”

Jace drapes an arm around her shoulders, and they start ambling down the hallway. “Can you walk? Should I call an ambulance?”

“I can walk,” she assures him.

They’re almost to the end of the hall when she tilts her head and our gazes collide.

It’s a visceral punch to the gut when she gives me a small smile.

Forcing myself to stay away from her kills me, but keeping my distance is the right thing to do.

Because she hurt me in ways she doesn’t remember...  
and I hurt her in ways I can’t forget.

# Chapter 17

## Oakley

### Past...

The whiskey and ecstasy buzzing through my system is enough to almost knock me on my ass as I stagger through the front door.

“You live here?” the hot blonde I brought home from the bar squeaks behind me.

Technically I live in the guesthouse, but I don’t bother telling her that.

I’m too focused on dragging her up the staircase to my temporary room where I have every intention of bending her over and fucking her till she can’t stand.

However, the little hottie has different plans because she shoves me onto the bed and drops to her knees.

*Fuck yeah.*

“You gonna wrap those pretty lips around my cock,” I rasp as she drags down the zipper of my jeans.

“Holy shit,” she breathes as she looks her fill. “You have a cock piercing.”

*Gets them every time.*

She bites her lip. “I’ve never been with a guy with one of those.”

Propping myself up on my elbows, I grin down at her. “Well, you know what they say. There’s a first time for everything.”

Shooting me a seductive smile of her own, she utters, “Very true.”

A moment later she stretches her mouth around the head of my dick.

However, that’s not what grabs my attention.

That would be the petite figure I spot through the crack in the door.

*Bianca.*

Wearing a tiny white t-shirt and lacy panties, baby Satan’s glaring daggers at me...watching my every move like the little stalker she is.

But it’s the naughty look in her eyes—the one daring me to continue—that turns my dick to steel.



Grabbing the back of the girl's head, I urge her to take me deeper.  
I groan when she does, but it has nothing to do with her.  
It's the defiant way Bianca's holding my gaze the entire time. *Taunting me.*

Goddammit. I'm sick and tired of her shit.

"Stop," I bark.

The girl jerks in surprise, her movements coming to a halt. "What's wrong?"

I dig my wallet out and toss her some cash for a cab. "You need to leave."

Bianca shoots me a nefarious smile before she disappears.

Anger mixed with unwanted lust floods my veins.

*This isn't over, baby girl.*

Not by a long fucking shot.

The blonde is understandably offended. "Are you *serious*?"

Tucking my dick back into my jeans, I stand. "Yes."

And then I brush past her.

Because it's time to teach the little wicked princess a lesson.

*One she won't forget.*

# Chapter 18

## Bianca

### Past...

I 'm not mad.

I'm fucking  *furious*.

The fact that Oakley would bring another girl into my home so she could suck him off is...

Jealousy moves through me like a boulder rolling downhill as I march back into my room.

For a minute I debate turning around, grabbing the bitch by her hair, and personally tossing her out on her ass, but before I can, my bedroom door swings open and Oakley strides inside.

“What the hell do you want?”

Eyes narrowed, Oakley slams my door. “Did you enjoy the show?”

I tell him the truth.

“Her technique could use a little work.”

That only makes him more irate. “That so?” Grimacing, he takes a step forward. “Then why don't you show me.”

It's safe to say I'm effectively thrown. “You want me to show you the right way to get your dick sucked?” My smile is all teeth. “Sorry, sweetie. I don't do sloppy seconds.”

*Not even for him.*

“No.” He takes another step, closing the distance between us. “I want you to show me how much you want me.”

I swallow hard, not understanding what he means. “Wh—”

My breath hitches when he grips my t-shirt between his fingers. “Take this off.” His other hand curls around my hip. A hungry, desperate feeling rolls through me when he drags the pad of his thumb along the lace of my panties and his voice drops to a ragged whisper. “These, too.”

To say I'm shocked would be an understatement.

I decide to call his bluff anyway.

Finding the hem of my t-shirt, I whip it over my head and toss it on the floor.

Given I'm not wearing a bra, he gets a full view of everything.

Including my nipples which are hard enough to cut glass.

"Like what you see?" I taunt when his eyes drop to my tits and I see his Adam's apple bob.

"Get on the bed." His voice is rough, almost pained. "Now."

My heart beats like a drum as I sit on the mattress. "Anything else you want?"

"Yeah." Heat snakes down my body as he stalks toward me. "Take off those fucking panties."

Licking my lips, I peer up at him. "Make me."

In one fell swoop, his hands wrap around my ankles and he tugs hard, forcing me onto my back.

Whatever retort I had dies in my throat when Oakley kneels between my parted thighs and proceeds to pull down my thong...

With his teeth.

I want to pinch myself to make sure I'm not hallucinating because the sight of Oakley on his knees with my panties hanging from his mouth is so fucking hot, I'm surprised we both don't burst into flames.

His warm breath gusts between my legs as he sinks his teeth into my inner thigh. "Touch yourself." I shiver when he sucks the tender skin into his mouth hard enough to leave a mark. "Show me how wet you are for me."

I should turn him down. Tell him to go find the girl he brought home to fuck...but I can't.

*Because even the strongest girls surrender for the right boy.*

My belly clenches as I dip a finger inside my pussy, gathering the moisture on my fingers. I'm so wet it's almost embarrassing, but the hungry look in Oakley's eyes makes it worth it.

Goose bumps break out along my flesh when I remove my now glistening finger and he wraps his mouth around it, licking up my wetness.

The deep, satisfied groan he emits has my insides coiling with desire.

"I need more of that." Blood whooshes in my ears when he dips his head and grunts, "Spread your pussy for me, baby girl."

*Oh, God.* I'm so turned on I can barely see straight.

I need his mouth on me more than I need my next breath.

With shaky fingers I do what he asks, feeling more exposed than I've

ever felt in my whole life.

His lips hover above the spot I need him...so close yet so far away. "You want my mouth on your pretty cunt."

I nod.

His eyes darken. "Then beg for it."

We're far past the point of playing games, so I concede. "Please."

The corner of his mouth curls. "Please what?"

"Lick my pussy." I suck in a sharp breath when he kisses my pubic bone. "Make me come, Oakley."

Shooting me a punishing smirk, he spits on my exposed flesh.

Then he stands.

"Hard pass." Pure wrath swims in his blue orbs. "I'd rather chop off my motherfucking dick then ever touch your nasty snatch."

My heart stops as it becomes painfully clear this was nothing but a cruel joke.

There's a shit-eating grin on his face as he heads for the door and it only digs the knife in deeper.

Despite the way we manage to get under each other's skin...I honestly thought he cared about me.

*But he doesn't.*

Hell, he downright hates me.

Expelling a breath that hurts, I press my hand to my heart.

I can physically feel what little is left of the organ breaking.

"I'm nothing more than a punchline to you," I whisper, my voice cracking as I get off the bed. "A *nasty snatch* you can taunt and spit on before you toss it aside."

Back turned to me, Oakley freezes.

I feel so vulnerable, so defenseless.

He filleted me wide open for his enjoyment then left me to bleed out.

Tears clogging my vision, I continue. "You're the only one who sees me—the only one in the world who actually gets me—and *that's* what you think of me?" I pound on my chest. "I might be flawed and fucked-up, but I'm still a *person*, Oakley. A person with feelings. Feelings that are hurt because the guy she cares about—the guy she would do anything for—thinks she's garbage and hates—"

"I don't hate you," he says gruffly.

I'm about to tell him to stop lying because it's obvious he does, but I

don't have the chance...because he spins and crashes his mouth against mine.

Our kiss is the equivalent of fire meeting gasoline...destroying everything around us as he slowly—*meticulously*—fucks my mouth with his.

I try to breathe, but it's useless because he's siphoning every ounce of oxygen from my body...stealing my heart and soul with every sensual brush of his lips and desperate slide of his tongue.

Groaning, he snakes his hand between us, cupping me where I'm still wet and aching. "Jesus."

He eases me back onto the bed, his thumbs grazing my ribcage as his mouth descends down my body.

"Don't tease me again," I plead because I honestly don't think I can take it.

He presses a gentle kiss to my hip while I open for him. "No more teasing." His hot and hungry gaze lingers on my pussy as he glides his knuckle down my slit. "So fucking pretty."

The first stroke of his tongue is so sudden—so *greedy*—I jolt and nearly fall off the bed.

His hands press down on my open thighs, pinning me to the mattress as he feasts on me like a man deprived of food.

My body tightens like a fist when he latches on to my clit, suckling and pulling the sensitive bud with a cadence that has me pulsing violently underneath him.

I dig my nails into his scalp as ripples of pleasure shoot through me like tiny fireworks. "Oh, God."

His gaze darkens as he peers up at me. "Look at me when you come."

It's the only warning I get before he attacks my clit, finding a rhythm that has my thighs quivering and my mind spinning.

My orgasm is so fast, so powerful, it robs me of breath and sends everything around me spiraling. A strangled, broken sound leaves me as I stare down at him while he draws every drop of pleasure from my body like a dedicated musician playing his favorite instrument.

Emotion clogs in my throat. There was no hiding from Oakley—no withdrawing—no escaping.

*He took and I gave.*

The sound of him lowering his zipper buzzes in my ears.

And then he's hovering above me, the tip of his dick nudging my

entrance. "I want to fuck you."

Nerves bunch in my belly as I debate whether or not I should tell him.

But that's stupid I soon realize because of course I *have* to tell him.

There's no way he won't know.

I start to speak...but something strange passes in his gaze.

"You're not..." His expression twists in confusion, as though I'm a puzzle he's trying to work out, but can't. "Bianca, are you a virgin?"

I can't lie to him.

"A little," I whisper.

Closing his eyes, he drops his head.

"It's not a big deal," I say quickly.

I want it to be him.

*It needs to be him.*

Blowing out a breath, he cups my cheek. "You were right before. I *do* see you." Before I can stop him, he eases off me. "And you deserve more than this."

With that...he takes off.

And I lie there hating myself for holding on to something that pushed him away.



A small gasp leaves me when I feel a warm, wet feather touch glide over my pussy.

For a moment, I think I'm having another flashback, but after my eyes adjust to the darkness, I realize that's not possible because I'm in Stone's bed.

And he's under the covers...with his head between my legs.

*Shit.*

A bolt of pleasure generates inside me when his tongue finds my clit and he gives it a tentative flick.

However, just as I'm starting to enjoy myself, his mouth disappears. The pleasure that was building goes *poof* and I'm left frustrated and confused.

Stone once confided in me that he didn't enjoy reciprocating oral because the taste and smell was off-putting to him and it just wasn't his thing.

Needless to say, after hearing *that*, I felt weird ever bringing it up or

asking him to go down on me.

I'm not quite sure why he's doing it now, but I'm certainly not going to ruin the moment and ask while he's trying his best to please me.

His mouth returns to my pussy and he gives my clit another quick exploratory graze.

I want to tell him he needs to apply some suction and stay there a bit, but I don't want to make him feel like he's doing something wrong or discourage him.

Not that it would matter anyway because he withdraws his mouth again. A moment later his head appears from underneath the sheet and his cock is nestled inside of me.

"Fuck," he croaks.

A weird feeling hits me as he begins thrusting.

*I was sleeping.*

Granted he was trying to take care of me, but isn't it common courtesy to at least make sure your partner is awake before you take off their pants and go to town?

Guilt flickers in my chest when I take into account that I was having a sexual memory involving another guy.

For all I know I might have said something that led Stone to believe I was in the mood and he obliged.

"You're so wet for me tonight," he groans as his thrusts pick up speed.

Wanting to make it good for him, I wrap my legs tighter around his waist and moan.

His face screws up and he starts panting. "You feel so good." A giant shudder moves through his body. "Oh, fuck. Bourne...I'm coming. I'm coming so hard."

His lips meet mine in a long kiss as he collapses in a sweaty heap on top of me. "I love you."

I trace the curve of his cheek. "I love you, too."

Dipping his head, he kisses me again. "Did you come?"

I give him a small smile. "Yeah."

In the past...

*With another man.*

# Chapter 19

## Bianca

“We’re gonna be late,” Stone mutters as he barges through the door of my dorm room.

“I know,” I tell him. “I just need two more minutes.”

Ignoring his huff of annoyance, I turn back to the mirror and finish applying my favorite shade of lipstick.

Tonight we’re having dinner with a few of Stone’s new friends from the premed program he’s in. Given he never went out of his way to make any friends before now, it’s a pretty big deal.

I quickly give myself a once-over in the mirror. I wanted to be cute but sensible, so I chose a purple off the shoulder sweater dress and paired it with some black leggings and high-heeled boots.

I can feel Stone’s eyes on me as I put on some silver hoop earrings.

“Don’t you think that’s a little...you know?”

“A little what?” I question, not understanding what he means.

He sweeps a hand up and down, gesturing to my outfit. “Your dress. It’s too short.” His eyes fall to my bare shoulder. “And showing too much skin.”

I have to stifle a laugh because my dress is pretty tame compared to some of the other articles of clothing hanging in my closet at home. “You’re kidding, right?”

The terse way his jaw sets tells me he isn’t.

Visibly irritated, he glances at his watch. “It’s too late to change now. Just wear a jacket.”

Part of me wants to argue because he’s being ridiculous, but I know it’s only because he’s nervous seeing as he’s not the best at socializing and these new friends of his are important to him.

Swallowing my annoyance, I snatch a jacket out of my closet and put it on. “Better?”

He studies me for a long beat before walking over to me.

I expect him to kiss me and apologize for being an ass, but he brushes his thumb over my lips, smearing my lipstick.



“I hate when you wear that stupid shit.”

Before I can protest, he grabs my wrist and charges out the door. “Come on. We’re late.”



“That’s fascinating,” Ruth exclaims as she takes another bite of her food. “So, how many brain scans have they conducted on you since the accident?”

Looking down at my plate, I shift uncomfortably in my seat. I suddenly feel like a specimen being studied under a microscope and I hate it.

“I’m not sure of the exact number, but I’ve definitely had a few,” I murmur, silently praying Stone takes the hint and comes to my rescue.

Ruth brings her glass of water to her lips. “Well, I’d love to take a look at them one day.”

*For the love of God.*

I force a polite smile. “Sure.”

Studying me intently, Ruth’s boyfriend Eugene pushes his glasses up his nose. “From my understanding patients with long-term retrograde amnesia don’t always recover.”

*Well, isn’t he just a giant ray of sunshine?*

I stab my Caesar salad with my fork. “Right.”

Across the table, Stone’s friend Robby clears his throat. “I wouldn’t say it’s impossible, though.” He drums his fingers along his chin. “Although they do say distant memories are the first to return and the most recent ones return last. It’s also been noted in some medical journals that *if* memories come back, they tend to return within two years.” He looks at me. “How long has it been since the accident?”

I’m about to answer, but Ruth beats me to it. “Two years.”

“Technically, it’s been a year and a half,” I correct.

The three of them exchange a thoughtful glance, as though they’re having a silent conversation about me.

*Holy hell.* I came here to meet my fiancé’s new friends, not be evaluated like some kind of lab mouse.

Aggravated, I squeeze Stone’s hand under the table.

He drapes his arm around my shoulder. “What do you say we give Bianca a break and talk about something else for a bit?”

*Finally.*

“Sure,” Robby agrees, but I can tell they’re all a tad disappointed about the change in topic.

“So,” Ruth begins. “When is the big day?”

I pause mid-bite. “Big day?” I question at the same time Stone says, “August eighteenth.”

*Well, shit.*

“Oh, duh.” I smack my forehead. “Sorry. Crappy memory and all.”

At that they all laugh.

Except Stone.

He pinches my thigh. *Hard.*

It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell him to stop behaving like a child who’s not getting his way, but part of me feels bad because I know I’ve just embarrassed him in front of his friends.

“Wow,” Ruth declares. “The wedding is soon.”

*Too soon.*

“I know.” Smiling, Stone kisses my hand. “But we didn’t want to wait another second to start the rest of our lives together.”

Despite the ball of lead that fills my belly, I return his smile. “Yeah.”

“Well, I for one, love weddings. They’re so romantic and inspiring. What venue did you guys ch—”

I don’t hear the end of Ruth’s sentence because panic claws up my throat. Before I can stop myself, I fly out of my seat, desperate for an escape.

“I’m sorry,” I mutter. “I just remembered I have to make an important phone call.” Thinking quick, I add, “For the wedding.”

Stone starts to stand up, but I stop him. “It’s okay. Stay here with your friends. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

Heart beating double time, I quickly scurry to the first exit I see in the back of the restaurant.

The moment I’m outside, I draw in a cleansing breath, filling my lungs with the nighttime air.

*It’s just cold feet—I assure myself. Happens to everyone.*

“Are you okay?”

My head snaps up at the sound of his deep, familiar voice.

“What are you doing here?”

It’s been over a week since we last spoke and every time our paths cross on campus, he makes it a point to turn the opposite direction, intentionally

avoiding me.

Leaning against the building, Oakley shrugs one of his broad shoulders and brings what looks like an e-cigarette to his lips. “Escaping.” He angles his head. “What about you?”

I tell him the truth. “Same.”

He studies me intently, only unlike Stone’s doctor friends inside, it doesn’t feel like an invasion. “From what?”

I open my mouth to tell him, but think better of it because it’s not okay for him to treat me like I have leprosy one moment and then start prying about my life the next.

“For someone who wants nothing to do with me you seem awfully curious about my problems,” I point out.

His tongue finds his cheek. “You’re right.” Disgusted, he examines his e-cigarette. “These things fucking suck.” Without warning, he chucks it across the parking lot. “Enjoy the rest of your night.”

“Wait,” I call out when he starts to leave. “If you tell me what you’re escaping from out here, then I’ll tell you what I’m escaping from.”

For a moment he looks like he wants to protest, but to my surprise, he doesn’t. “Fine.” Brushing a strand of dark blond hair away from his eyes, he murmurs, “I was at an AA meeting and a few of the guys wanted to grab a bite to eat after. Everything was chill until they started talking about all the funny shit they did when they were either drunk or high.” He shoves a hand in the pocket of his jeans. “It suddenly occurred to me that the only good memories I have when I *wasn’t* trashed out of my mind are...” His voice trails off with a shake of his head. “Doesn’t fucking matter.”

“Are what?” I press, taking a step closer.

Something passes in his gaze. “With you.”

His words punch into my heart.

I’d give just about anything to know what those memories are.

“I’m so—”

“Your turn,” he interjects.

“Well,” I begin, rubbing my damp palms on my dress. “I’m here having dinner with a few of Stone’s friends from the premed program.” I make a face. “Let’s just say they’re way more interested in my amnesia and wedding plans than they are getting to know me.” I look down at my shoes. “Long story short, I had a mini freak-out and came out here because I needed air.”

I have no idea what to make of the look he gives me.

The silence stretches between us until the only thing I hear are cars passing in the distance and the pounding of my heart.

“I feel like I don’t belong anywhere,” I confess after another minute. “Like I’m stuck on the outside looking in on a world I can no longer remember with people who want me to be a certain way...but no matter how hard I try, I’m constantly failing to live up to their expectations.”

Namely Stone’s.

“I get that.” A long, weary sigh escapes him. “But other people’s expectations are their problem...not yours.” His eyes meet mine. “You don’t have to live up to what anyone else wants you to be, Bianca. Your life is *your* path.”

God, he makes it sound so simple...so effortless.

“That’s good advice,” I tell him. “You’re pretty smart.”

He laughs, but there’s no humor. “Trust me, baby girl. I’m not. I’ve just made a lot of mistakes.”

He’s so young yet it seems like he’s lived a thousand lifetimes.

*And carried the weight of each and every one of them on his shoulders.*

“Oakley?”

“Yeah?”

I draw in a breath, hoping like hell he’ll change his mind about us. “Can we—”

“No.”

His answer is clipped...*resolute*.

Frustration rises up my throat. “Why not?”

*Nothing*. Not even so much as a demand that I go away.

“Whatever,” I mutter as I hike my purse up my shoulder. “I’m not gonna stand here and beg someone to be my friend—”

My breath catches when he braces his arms on either side of my head, caging me in.

His voice comes out in a harsh rasp that matches the anger swirling in his blue orbs. “You know I almost killed you, right?”

I swallow hard as I peer up at him. “Yeah.”

It’s all I can manage because it’s a struggle to think when he’s this close. My breath comes out choppy as the air around us grows heavy.

Evidently, he feels whatever’s brewing between us too because his eyes darken as his gaze roams over every inch of my face, soaking me in. “Then why the fuck do you want me in your life?”

The truth pours out of me.

“Because I feel something when I’m with you. Something I can’t explain.”

Something that makes no sense.

All I know is the heavy feeling of dread in my chest goes away whenever he’s near.

A shiver breaks free when he drags the tip of his thumb along the scar on my neck. However, it’s the sheer pain filling his eyes that has my heart twisting like someone lodged a dagger into it.

“You should go back inside.” Mere inches from mine now, his face tenses. “With your fiancé.”

It’s like being submerged in a vat of ice water.

“Right.” I duck under his arm. “Have a good night.”

My hand is on the knob when I blurt out, “Unit one, room 206.”

“What’s that?”

“My dorm room.”

A sharp, irritated noise leaves him. “I’m not changing my mind.”

Undeterred, I hold his stare. “And I won’t change mine.”

Because for reasons I can’t explain...

*I need him in my life.*

# Chapter 20

## Bianca

### Past...

I mutter a curse when the windshield wipers turn on. “Shit.”

I try to turn them off, but that only makes the convertible roof slide up. “Dammit.”

“What are you doing?”

My head snaps up at the sound of Oakley’s rough, melodic voice.

It’s been almost a week since *that night* and we’ve barely spoken a word to each other.

He’s also moved back into the guesthouse, so there’s that.

“What does it look like I’m doing?”

The lopsided grin plastered on his face makes my insides swoop. “Well, it *looks* like you’re attempting to drive, but—” Peeking inside my car, he gestures to the button next to my steering wheel. “You’re still in accessory mode...you need to put your foot on the brake and press the button to turn the ignition on.”

He makes it sound so simple.

He also makes me feel like an idiot because I don’t know the first thing about driving.

It just seemed like such a shame to let a nice car rot away in the driveway, so I decided to pay it a little visit today.

“I knew that,” I insist, trying to hide my embarrassment. “I just didn’t turn the ignition on because I’m never going to drive this thing.”

*Ever.*

His brows furrow. “Right.” He starts to walk away but pauses. “If you ever change your mind and want to take it for a spin, let me know and I’ll go with.”

*Dammit.* He can’t put a proposition like that on the table and expect me to turn it down.

It’s like offering a starving person a six-course meal.

“For real?” I utter before I can stop myself.  
That lopsided grin is back again. “Yeah.”  
My heart dips when he walks away for a second time.  
“Oakley?”  
He freezes. “What’s up?”  
“I didn’t turn the ignition on because I have no idea what I’m doing.”  
For a moment I think he’s going to laugh or make fun of me like my brothers would, but he doesn’t.  
He ambles back to the car. “Move over.”  
Needless to say, I’m confused.  
“Why?” I question as I scoot to the passenger side.  
He opens the driver’s side door. “Because I’m teaching you how to drive.”  
I should protest and refuse. Remind him that the reason I’m never going to drive is because watching my mother die was the worst thing I’ve ever witnessed in my life and I’m forever paralyzed by anxiety.  
But I can’t.  
Because the thought of spending alone time with Oakley, even just for a little while...is worth trying to conquer my fear.



My heart is pounding a mile a minute and my palms are so sweaty I can barely grip the steering wheel without them slipping.  
“I can’t do this.”  
This was a *horrible* idea.  
“Yes, you can,” Oakley assures me. “Take your foot off the brake.”  
“What if I hit something?”  
He looks around the empty parking lot.  
Oakley suggested we come to Ocean Falls—the same place as my cliff incident—since it’s a privately-owned beach and usually empty.  
Turns out he was right, but it does little to ease my dread.  
“The only thing you could possibly hit is sand and water, baby girl.” He holds my gaze. “But you won’t...because you got this.”  
I don’t feel like I *got this*...not even a little.  
However, I hate appearing weak, especially in front of him.

“Okay, but if I fuck this up—”

He squeezes my shoulder, sending a bolt of heat rushing through my shaky limbs. “You won’t.”

My heart folds in on itself. The way he’s looking at me—as if he actually believes I’m capable of doing this is...

*Everything.*

Heart in my throat, I take my foot off the brake and switch it to the gas pedal.

“That’s it.”

Oakley gives me one of his gorgeous smiles. I’m so distracted by the deep dimple peeking out of his right cheek, I almost crash into a trash can.

However, Oakley’s still grinning, not looking the slightest bit worried about my near fumble. “Give it a little more gas.”

A thrill surges through me as the car picks up speed. “Holy shit. I’m *driving.*”

“Damn right you are.”

It takes everything in me not to cry, because I’m seriously fucking doing it.

With shaky fingers, I clutch my necklace.

*If only Liam was here to see me.*

And just like that, my heart is crumbling.

I slam on the brake, throw the car in park, and get out, fighting back tears.

Oakley’s hot on my heels. “Whoa. What happened?”

“He’s not here,” I choke out, gripping my pendant. “He wanted me to conquer my fear so bad...and now that I finally am...he’s not here to witness it.”

*Because he left me.*

Just like she did.

Oakley’s face falls, but unlike everyone else in my life—he doesn’t offer me bullshit words of encouragement or tell me Liam’s watching over me.

He simply takes my hand. “Come on.”

The secluded beach isn’t large, but the golden sand along with the giant stones and boulders grazing the shoreline make it a perfect spot to unwind in peace.

I follow Oakley to an oversized rock and plop down next to him, drawing my knees to my chest.



The sun is starting to go down, bathing the sky in a pretty pink sunset.

Seagulls fly endlessly above us, and the crisp smell of the ocean fills my nostrils as I inhale a deep breath.

“I’m sorry for freaking out,” I whisper because I don’t want him to think I’m not grateful for what he did today.

He studies my face for what feels like an eternity before pulling a small tin can out of the pocket of his jeans. “There’s plenty of shit people should apologize for in this world...but feelings should never be one of them.”

I think about this for a moment, and realize he has a point. Everyone is entitled to their feelings...whatever they are.

Most people would try to change the subject because death—especially suicide—makes them uncomfortable, but Oakley seems perfectly content letting me disclose whatever’s on my mind.

It’s refreshing.

“Sometimes I miss him so much it physically hurts.”

*Miss them both.*

Nodding, he brings a joint to his lips and lights it. “I get that.”

Bringing my head down, I brush my lips against my knee as the scent of marijuana surrounds me like a fog. “Other times I’m so angry—so fucking *livid* with them for being quitters and abandoning me—I hate them.”

He takes a deep drag, speaking through a cloud of smoke. “I get that too.”

It’s only then I realize what I said.

*Them.*

If Oakley caught on to my blunder, he doesn’t press me about it.

For some strange reason that only makes me want to tell him even more.

But I don’t...because I can’t.

*I vowed to take her secret to my grave.*

Wordlessly, I seize the joint from him and inhale, letting the smoke infiltrate my lungs.

A cough escapes me on an exhale, but he doesn’t tease me about it.

Feeling audacious, I take another puff, my head feeling lighter and my body feeling more relaxed.

So relaxed I decide to bring up something else that’s been on my mind.

“Hayley’s been lying to you.”

I expect him to defend her...just like he always does, but to my astonishment, he doesn’t.

“I know,” he says softly, prying the joint from me.

It’s music to my ears...until I see the distraught expression on his face.

Bringing it to his lips, he takes another deep drag. “I’d say I’m surprised, but I’m not.” He laughs, but there’s no humor. “Every woman I give a shit about ends up betraying me sooner or later.”

Something sharp squeezes my chest. *Oakley isn’t wrong.*

His mother abandoned him.

Crystal used him.

And Hayley lied to him.

“I’ll never do that to you,” I tell him honestly. “You might hate me but \_\_\_”

“I don’t hate you,” he says, cutting me off. “You frustrate me. Huge difference.”

Safe to say his declaration throws me. “I frustrate you?”

Another nod. “Yup.”

It’s hard not to feel offended. “Why the hell do I frustrate you?”

He snuffs out his joint. “We should head back.”

He starts to move, but I tug on his arm. “Tell me why I frustrate you.”

He zeroes in on where my hand is locked around his bicep. “Let go.”

Like hell I will. “Not until you tell me.”

Those blue eyes pin me with a look so severe it steals my breath. “You know why.”

With that, he wrenches his arm away and stalks off.

However, I’m not finished yet.

Correction, *we’re* not finished.

“I frustrate you because you feel something for me,” I call out after him. “Something genuine and raw...and for some reason that scares the hell out of you.”

But he doesn’t have to be scared...because unlike the rest of the women in his life, I’ll never hurt him.

*I care about him too much.*

He halts in his tracks. “The other night—”

“Was incredible.”

I’ve never felt so close to someone—so unguarded and vulnerable—in my whole life.

I didn’t need to wear a shield or a mask in front of him...because Oakley has a way of seeing right through it.

He turns to face me. “It was a mistake.”

It would hurt less if he slapped me.

My eyes drift to the sand because it tangibly pains me to look at him.  
“Oh.”

I feel like a fool. *A stupid, helpless, lovesick fool.*

Taking a step forward, he presses a hand to my cheek, then tilts my chin up to look at him. “It was a mistake because *I* should have known better. I had no business messing—”

“Why?” My heart beats erratically against my chest, threatening to jump right out into his hands. “Why do you keep insisting we’re wrong when *everything* in me keeps screaming that it feels right?”

I’ve never met anyone like Oakley.

I feel like I can tell him anything in the whole wide world and he’ll never judge me.

And the safe feeling I get whenever he’s near—the one that tells me he’ll always protect me, no matter how much I may *frustrate* him—I’ve never felt that with anyone else.

Just him.

*Only ever him.*

His hold on me tightens. “I know you think you have feelings for me, but it’s only because you’re young and inexperienced. You need to find someone on your playing field, Bianca. A nice, respectable guy who—”

“I don’t want a nice, respectable guy,” I interject. “I want *you*.”

Closing his eyes, he presses his lips to my forehead. “It will pass, baby girl.”

He makes it seem like my feelings for him are nothing more than a temporary storm cloud.

But he’s wrong.

*They’re a typhoon.*

One that’s headed straight for him.



The sound of frantic pounding on my door jolts me out of my sleep.

Or rather, flashback.

Groggy, I make my way to the door, debating whether or not I should

have grabbed the can of pepper spray Jace and Cole insisted I keep in my drawer.

Wary, I open the door.

And freeze.

Because an out of breath and slightly damp Oakley is standing in front of me.

“Hi,” I breathe, silently hoping this isn’t a dream or another flashback.

He braces one arm against the frame, as if steadying himself. “Hi.”

We stand there for the better part of a minute, staring at each other like a couple of idiots, until finally, he breaks the spell.

“I’m trying to do the right thing, but you make it fucking impossible.”

He sounds utterly defeated.

I’m about to apologize, but I stop myself because I’m not sorry for wanting to be friends with him.

“Does this mean we can be friends?”

Blue eyes that seem haunted sharpen on me and he gives me a curt nod. “Yeah.”

My heart gallops and I can feel the smile stretching across my mouth.

“Good.”

Oakley, however, doesn’t return my delight. “One rule.”

“What’s that?” I ask cautiously.

“Don’t ask me to tell you what happened between us in the past.” His thick lashes lower a fraction. “Give me a fresh start, Bianca.”

My chest caves because the way he says it makes it sound like he’s simultaneously begging for forgiveness and a second chance.

“Okay,” I whisper.

I start to smile again, but then it dawns on me. “I need something from you too.”

“What?”

I shuffle my feet uncomfortably. I hate asking this, but my life is complicated enough.

Plus, I want something for myself.

Something I don’t have to explain or justify to anyone.

Something that makes me happy.

“Can we keep our friendship on the down low for a bit since my brothers hate you and I have a...you know.”

It’s clear he wants to protest, but he must want this friendship as much as

I do because he gives me another nod.

I open the door wider. "Do you want to come in?"

His eyes drop down and I'm suddenly hyper aware that I'm not wearing a bra under my white tank top.

The hand clutching the frame tightens as hunger clouds his eyes. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"Right." I take a step back. "Get home safe."

He gives me a small grin as he walks away. "Get some sleep."

For the first time since my accident, I go to sleep with a smile on my face.

# Chapter 21

## Bianca

“We barely see each other,” Stone states. “I really think you should just move in before the semester ends.”

One look at his mother, who’s sitting across the table from us, tells me she finds the idea of me moving in before the wedding about as pleasant as a root canal.

*Feeling’s mutual, lady.*

Nonetheless, Stone has a point. We’ve both been so busy this semester we hardly have time for one another.

But I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t enjoying my independence. It’s nice being able to come and go as I please and not be accountable to anyone when it comes to my whereabouts.

Especially his mother, who always finds a way to make rude comments under her breath about me.

On one hand, I understand why she harbors so much ill will. Stone and Tommy no longer talk since Stone beat him up and kicked him out last year, and to say there’s a *rift* between her sons would be putting it mildly.

However, it’s not *my* fault her firstborn is a giant douche canoe who deserves to have a venomous snake bite his testicles off.

“The semester ends in May,” I remind Stone. “I’ll be moving in before you know it.”

Pouting, he slings his arm around my shoulders. “Fine, but at least think about it, okay?”

Leaning over, I kiss his cheek. “I’ll think about it.”

I start to pull away, but he kisses my lips.

“I love you,” he whispers between soft kisses that have my heart fluttering like the wings of a hummingbird.

I’m about to tell him the same, but his mother clears her throat. *Loudly.*

A moment later, a jubilant woman carrying a large tray of various cake samples swoops in. “Gosh, I just love seeing couples in love.” She places the tray down in front of us. “Whatever you two decide on, let us know and we’ll

get it all taken care of.”

I’ve known what kind of cake I’ve wanted ever since Sawyer stopped by my dorm room with little drops of heaven in cupcake form.

The moment I took a bite of the moist, holy grail of chocolate that is red velvet—my heart was sold.

Stone’s mom, however, isn’t a fan. Therefore, she insisted we try some samples and then decide.

“This one,” she says, pointing to the cake in front of her.

It’s strange how she has her heart set already because it doesn’t even look like she’s tried any of it.

The woman smiles. “That’s our lemon and raspberry cake.”

Pushing aside the carrot cake he was devouring; Stone takes a bite of the lemon and raspberry one and gives his mom a hum of approval.

After scooping some more on his fork, he brings it to my mouth. “Try it, Bourne. It’s not bad.”

I reluctantly take a bite.

He’s right...it’s not bad.

But it’s also not what *I* want.

Needing to get rid of the weird aftertaste it left on my tongue, I stick my fork into the red velvet cake and eagerly shovel it into my mouth.

*So fucking good.*

“This one is my favorite,” I affirm, going back for more. “It’s perfect.” And because I can’t resist, I go for a third bite. “What kind of frosting is this? It’s *amazing.*”

Realizing I’m being rude, I offer Stone the rest so he can try it. “Damn. This *is* good.”

I fight the urge to tell him I told him so.

The woman laughs. “That would be our cream cheese frosting.” She starts writing something down on a notepad. “We get a lot of compliments on our red velvet cake. It’s an excellent choice.”

Stone rubs his nose against mine and then kisses the tip of it. “It’s settled then. We’ll go with the—”

“Lemon raspberry,” Stone’s mom interjects.

Oh, no she didn’t.

I fight the urge to throttle her. “I’m sorry. *What?*”

She points to the lemon raspberry cake. “We’re going with this one. It’s simple but classy.”

It's *boring*.

Not to mention, the last time I checked it wasn't her wedding and unlike *my* father, she wasn't shelling out a dime for the ceremony or reception.

Clearly uncomfortable, the cake lady looks between us. "I can come back \_\_\_"

"No need," Stone's mom assures her. "We've made our decision."

"No, we haven't," I grit through my teeth.

Stone looks like a deer caught in headlights. "Maybe we can try a few mor—"

"No," his mother insists. "This is the one." Looking at her son, she sulks. "It was your grandmother's favorite. She would have wanted you to have this cake."

Her manipulation game is hella strong, I'll give her that.

The cake lady—who looks even more uncomfortable now—taps her pen against the pad nervously. "Should I put you down for the lemon raspberry then?"

"No," I say at the same time his mother hisses, "Yes."

We both turn to Stone who looks like he's contemplating the best way to drill a hole through the floor so he can escape.

"Let's let Stone decide," his mother says.

I cross my arms. "Fine."

Stone takes a bite of the red velvet cake. "This one is delicious."

I'm about to gloat, but he takes a bite of the lemon raspberry again. "But I like this one better."

Of course, he does. *Mama's boy*.

I start to protest, but he gives my hand a gentle squeeze under the table. "Come on, Bourne." His lips find my temple. "Just let her have this."

I try to ignore the look of sheer satisfaction on his mom's face when I mutter, "Fine."



# Chapter 22

## Bianca

My steps slow when I spot Oakley sitting on the bench by the lake, inhaling a gigantic sandwich.

I probably shouldn't be so fascinated by the sight, but there's something about the savage way he tears into it with abandon.

I can't stop myself from staring.

Some people are just so unequivocally interesting...everyone else becomes boring in comparison.

"Hey."

Oakley scoots down on the bench, making room for me. "Hey."

I place my purse and the Styrofoam carton containing some cake samples down next to me.

Given we—correction, *Stone's mom*—already made the decision, I suppose there was no reason to take any home, but I figured I deserved some goodies.

"It's a nice day out," I declare, looking around the lake.

Pausing mid-bite, he gives me a pointed look. "Don't do that."

I bristle. "Do what?"

"Talk about the weather." He gulps down the rest of his sandwich. "We've never done the bullshit small talk."

Part of me wants to remind him that I don't remember everything we've done or haven't done—and he's no help because he won't tell me—but it's oddly refreshing how open and honest he is.

And how at ease I feel in his presence.

I'm suddenly struck by how I've never felt more *myself* than when I'm in his company.

Which is weird because I'm still trying to figure out who I am.

"Okay, no small talk." A nervous feeling zips up my spine when I see a few students walk by the lake. Jace and Cole could stroll by and spot us at any moment. "Do you want to go somewhere else?"

His response is gruff. "No."

*Okay then.*

It's almost comical because Stone avoided my brothers like the plague... yet Oakley isn't scared one bit.

Not that I should be comparing them. They're totally different. Like apples and oranges.

Reaching down, I pick up the container and open it.

The cake lady must have felt bad for me because I notice she slipped three red velvet samples inside.

I happily reach for one and take a bite.

Oakley's expression becomes curious as he eyes the container.

Seeing as he just devoured his lunch, I'm almost positive he's not hungry, but I offer him one anyway. "Do you want some?"

"Hell yeah, I do."

He happily picks one up and takes a hearty bite. A moment later he makes a bitter face.

"Yeah, I'm not really feeling this one."

I have to suppress a laugh because it's the lemon raspberry. "I'm not a fan either."

He places it back in the container and goes for the carrot cake next. "This is pretty good."

I'm surprised he actually had a chance to taste it because it's gone so quickly.

Bottomless pit that he is, Oakley picks up the red velvet and pops it in his mouth.

His eyes close and he utters a low moan...almost like he's savoring it.

"Fuck yeah," he groans.

Arousal snakes up my spine and I almost drop the damn container.

I'm suddenly very aware that he's seen me naked.

*And gave me the best orgasm of my life.*

When he brings his thumb to his mouth and licks it, I have to force myself not to think about what *else* his tongue can do.

"That shit's amazing."

I lick my dry lips. "Yup."

He tilts his head. "Why are you acting weird?"

I straighten my spine. "I'm not acting weird."

*I'm totally acting weird.*

His gaze is penetrating. "Yeah, you are." Those blue eyes drop to my lips,

lingering on them. “You should stop looking at me like that, baby girl.”

Both his threat and his piercing stare send a trail of goose bumps down my arms.

Feeling bold, I whisper, “What happens if I don’t?”

He leans in so close his mouth hovers just above my ear. “I’ll bend you over this bench, tear your little panties off with my teeth...” The tip of his nose skims the column of my throat. “And fuck you so hard everyone on campus will hear you scream my name.”

Instantly, my head goes light and my body tightens, my nipples becoming so hard they could slice through glass.

“I—”

In the distance someone clears their throat. *Loudly.*

When I turn my head, I see Sawyer standing there. Her brown eyes are as big as saucers...and she’s muttering the Lord’s prayer.

Shifting down the bench, I put some much-needed physical distance between Oakley and I.

“Hey, Sawyer.”

“Hi.” Her stare ping pongs between us. “Guys.”

“We were just eating lunch,” I explain, hoping she didn’t hear any part of what Oakley said.

Sawyer nods slowly. It’s evident by her expression that she doesn’t know what to make of finding us together. “Uh-huh.”

I’m starting to feel like I got caught with my hand inside the cookie jar.

You know, if the *cookie jar* was a devastating sexy guy you’re undeniably drawn to threatening to fuck you so good that everyone in a fifty-mile radius would hear you scream his name.

I grab my purse and get off the bench. “I just remembered I have a class that starts in ten minutes.”

I don’t...I just need a moment to gather my bearings.

I turn to Oakley. “See you around.”

A wolfish grin stretches his delectable mouth. “Enjoy your class.”

# Chapter 23

## Oakley

*F*riends.

A groan rips from my chest as I toss and turn in bed.

*What the fuck was I thinking?*

You can't be friends with someone you're in love with.

Especially when she's engaged to another man.

Sitting up in bed, I scrub a hand down my face.

*I should stay the hell away from her.*

But I can't.

Because she looks at me like she needs me.

*Like I can fix her.*

As if I'm the remedy for whatever turmoil is happening inside that beautiful head of hers.

And if there's even a small chance I can take the edge off the fucked-up situation I caused...I'm fucking doing it.

I'm grabbing my gym bag off the floor so I can get a quick workout in before my shift starts when I hear a knock on my door.

I open it and I'm greeted by my frazzled looking Dad who's holding a happy as can be C.J.

I'm beginning to think the terrible two's are some kind of myth because that kid is always in a good mood.

"Hey."

Dad swiftly places C.J. in my arms. "Can you watch her for an hour or so? An emergency happened at work and I have to get my ass to the office before an atomic bomb goes off."

Given he has a high-stress job, there's always an *atomic bomb* threatening to go off. However, I've rarely seen him so out of sorts so whatever's going down must be big.

"Sure." I bounce C.J. in my arms as she reaches for my cheeks. "You want to hang out with your big brother today?"

She grins. "Uh-oh."

I keep wondering if she's ever going to say my name right, but I know I'm going to seriously miss her calling me *Uh-oh* the moment she does.

"Thanks, I owe you." Dad hands me her diaper bag. "Everything is in here." Bending down, he kisses C.J.'s head. "Daddy loves you, be good for your brother."

With that, he takes off and C.J. stares up at me in wonder.

It's never been just the two of us before.

"You hungry?"

"Hungry," she repeats, as if testing the word on her tongue before shouting, "Chee-chees."

Fortunately for her, I know that means she wants her Cheerios.

Unfortunately for me, my dad forgot to pack them.

*Shit.*

As if sensing they aren't anywhere to be found, she starts screaming *Chee-chees* at the top of her little lungs.

Fucking hell.

Thinking quick, I rummage around my cabinets and fridge. However, all I have is beef jerky, soda, a few bottles of water, and some left over takeout.

The way C.J.'s face scrunches tells me she isn't happy about this one bit.

Cue the meltdown in...five, four, three, two...one.

Attempting to soothe her by walking around my apartment, I scan my brain for something she might like.

That's when it dawns on me.

"Hey, baby sis. You want some ice cream?"

There's an ice cream shop about a block away which is easily in walking distance.

Suddenly, her cries of injustice over no *Chee-chees* comes to a halt.

Crystal is super strict about never letting her have any sugar, but given C.J.'s big bro is the epitome of a rule breaker, I grab my wallet and head out the door.

# Chapter 24

## Bianca

“I’ll be at your apartment in one minute,” I tell Stone from the back seat of the Uber.

I have a two-hour break between classes today, so we made plans to spend some time together at his place and eat lunch.

I hear him sigh over the line. “Shit.”

“What’s wrong?”

Another sigh. “Ruth and I made plans to study. We have a big test coming up and we’re both nervous about it.” A weird note enters his voice. “Don’t worry, it’s not like that. Robby’s joining us when he gets out of class.”

I’m not sure how to feel about this. On one hand, I know his schedule is insane and studying for tests is important.

But on the other?

We made plans and I’m annoyed he didn’t let me know he was breaking them sooner.

I also don’t know how to feel about him insinuating I had nothing to worry about with him and Ruth because I wasn’t even concerned to begin with.

However, I know he’s super stressed, so I decide to let it go. “It’s fine. I’ll just grab a bite to eat on campus and head back to my dorm.”

I’m about to ask the Uber driver if he can pop a u-ey, but Stone says, “Actually, I was kind of hoping you could do me a favor.”

“What kind of favor?”

“Can you do my laundry? I’ve been working my ass off, burning the candle at both ends and I figured since you have so much free time seeing as you’re not working and all, you could help me out.”

I grind my molars so hard I’m surprised they don’t turn to dust.

It’s not the fact that he asked me to do his laundry.

It’s the way he managed to make it seem like me being a full-time student myself was no big deal. Granted, I’m fortunate that my dad insisted I not

work my first year of college due to all the shit that happened last year because he didn't want me to be overloaded, but still.

Forcing myself to breathe, I let it roll off my back because we've been arguing a lot lately and I'm so tired of it.

"Fine."

I'm about to hang up, but then he says, "Do you think you can vacuum too?"

"Sure thing," I grit through my teeth before I click the end call button.

A ball of dread lodges in my throat.

I'm starting to feel less like his fiancée and more like his maid.

Reluctantly, I hop out of the Uber.

I'm heading inside the building when I spot Oakley walking through the parking lot.

With a baby in his arms.

Well, not a *baby*, because she's definitely more of a toddler, but still.

My breath stalls as they come into view.

She's the most beautiful little girl I've ever seen. Blonde hair done up in pigtails, cherubic rosy cheeks, big bright blue eyes...and my favorite feature.

An adorable, albeit mischievous cheeky grin that invites you to smile right along with her.

One that's near identical to Oakley's.

*Oh, boy.* I didn't know he was a father.

Then again how could I? We only started our newfound friendship two days ago and haven't had a chance to hang out yet.

I approach them gingerly. "Hi."

Oakley who's digging around a diaper bag while holding two ice cream cones, *and* his kid, looks up. "Hey."

"Do you want some help?" I offer.

"Nah, I got this." He places the little girl down. "Besides, C.J. can stand on her own, can't you?"

She gives him a big smile and I can't help but notice the chocolate ice cream smeared all over her face as she makes little grabby hands for him.

Oakley shakes his head. "In a minute, let me clean your face first."

"She's so beautiful." I look down at the little girl who's still making those grabby hands. "I had no idea you had a daughter."

A flash of pain flickers in his eyes and I silently curse myself because it's really none of my business.

“She, uh... she’s not.” He fishes some wipes out of the bag. “C.J.’s my little sister.”

“Oh.”

A weird twist of relief goes through my chest and I have no idea why.

Oakley bends down and starts wiping her face, but she’s not a fan of that because she turns away and starts yelling, “Eye-cream.”

I can tell Oakley wants to cave, but he’s trying his best not to. “I know, but I have to get rid of the evidence before Dad comes.”

Grabbing his cheeks firmly she gives him a serious look. “Eye-cream, Uh-oh.” I can practically see the wheels turning in her head as she continues uttering her request. “*Peas*, Uh-oh.”

He melts like butter in the midday sun. “Well, shit—” He catches himself. “I mean, shoot.” He looks at me helplessly. “How the hell can I say no to that?”

Yeah, I’m no help in this situation. “I couldn’t.”

Not only because it’s ice cream which is a straight-up gift from God, but C.J.’s far too adorable for words.

“Fine.”

He holds the chocolate ice cream cone out to her, but she snatches the other one in his hand.

Oakley’s mouth drops open. “Hey, that’s *mine*.”

C.J. doesn’t agree though because she happily laps at what appears to be mint chip ice cream.

“Smart girl.” I sink to my haunches so I’m eye level with her. “Mint chip is my favorite.”

C.J. holds it out to me, and I realize she’s trying to share. “Aw, no thank you, baby.”

Oakley makes a face. “Trust me, you should take it before she shoves it in your mouth.”

“Really—”

As if on cue, she thrusts the cone forward and I get a mouthful of mint chip.

“So yummy,” I tell her because no way in hell would I ever be mad at a kid for sharing their ice cream with me. Especially when it’s my favorite. “Thank you.”

“Good job sharing,” Oakley praises, looking like he’s trying his hardest to hold back laughter. “We just need to work on you being less aggressive about



it.”

“That’s not such a bad thing,” I say with a wink. “Sometimes being persistent pays off and you end up getting exactly what you want.”

I can feel those intense blue eyes boring into me. “Is that so?”

I’m not sure if it was intended or not, but there’s a flirtatious tilt to his voice. I’m suddenly grateful for my tan complexion because I’m positive I’m blushing a thousand different shades of red right now.

“Well, being persistent is how I got you.”

Realizing my blunder, I avert my gaze. “I mean, you know…got my friendship with you.”

His expression turns stormy. “Right.”

“Uh-oh,” C.J. calls out.

We both turn our attention back to her. “Does that mean she had an accident?”

Laughing, Oakley shakes his head. “No, that’s how she says my name.”

*Jesus*. I’m pretty sure that’s the most endearing thing I’ve ever heard in my life.

After it’s clear C.J.’s had enough of her ice cream, Oakley tries to wipe her face again, but she’s not having it.

Whining, she turns her head from side to side.

“Here,” I say, grabbing the wipe from him. “Let me try.”

Making silly faces and noises to distract her, I quickly clean off her lips and cheeks.

Pretty soon her whines of protest turn into adorable fits of giggles and she starts making faces back at me.

We’re having so much fun fooling around, I almost don’t hear Oakley’s next sentence. “You’re really good with her.”

I’m about to speak, but his face is etched in so much agony my chest aches.

The sound of someone clearing their throat breaks the fog around us.

“What’s going on here?”

I look up at a short, stocky man glaring down at us with an angry scowl on his face.

“Hey, Dad,” Oakley starts. “I took C.J. for some ice cream, so we were cleaning her up.”

The man’s face softens a fraction…until his eyes wander over to me again.

He doesn't say a word, but it's clear he doesn't like me.

I wish I knew why.

Wiping my palms on my jeans, I stand up and extend my hand out to him. "Hi, I'm Bianca." I gesture to C.J. "Your daughter is beautiful."

The man glances at my outstretched hand like it's manure. "I know who you are." He looks at Oakley. "Get inside, Oak. *Now.*"

Oakley's jaw tics. "For fuck's sake relax. We were just talk—"

"Now." His eyes narrow. "You know damn well you need to stay away from her."

*Whoa.*

"Look," I begin. "I'm sorry for whatever I might have done—"

He holds up a hand. "That's enough." He takes a step closer. "If you want to talk to me or Oakley then tell your father to get a lawyer. Until then, stay the hell away from my son. Because if you don't, I'll have no choice but to get a restraining order against you. And believe me, sweetheart, you don't want that."

What. The. Actual. Fuck.

"Dad," Oakley barks. "Are you out of your goddamn mind? She didn't do anything wrong. Lay the fuck off her."

The vein in his father's forehead makes an appearance. "Goddammit, Oak. I'm trying to *protect* you."

Protecting him from what?"

"What did I do?" I question, my voice coming out wobbly. "What—"

"Nothing," Oakley reassures me. "You didn't do anything wrong, Bianca." He glares at his father. "Don't you dare put my shit on her."

His father frowns. "Oak—"

"What the hell is going on?" A slightly disheveled Stone snarls before rushing to my side. "Are they bothering you?"

"What are you doing here?" I ask, but Oakley's father cuts in.

"Bothering her? Quite the opposite, young man."

Stone's understandably confused. "What's he talking about?"

"Nothing," I say, but Stone focuses on Oakley.

"You better stay the hell away from my fiancée, asshole."

"Or *what?*" Oakley goads, taking a step forward. "You'll tell her brothers since you're too much of a pussy to deal with me yourself."

"That's enough, Oak," his father says. "We don't have to take this bullshit from them. Let's go back inside your apartment."

Oakley starts to walk away, but Stone mutters, “Listen to your pops, you lowlife junkie.”

“Jesus, Stone,” I shout. “What the hell is the matter with you?”

He turns his furious glare on me. “I don’t want this piece of shit anywhere near you.” He wraps his hand around my wrist like I’m a chew toy he’s trying to take ownership of. “Do you fucking understand me?”

“Talk to her like that again,” Oakley seethes as he walks over to us. His eyes flick down to where Stone’s hand is still secured around my wrist. “I fucking dare you.”

Stone scoffs. “Last I checked, she was *my* fiancée, not yours. Therefore, you need to butt out of our relationship and stick to the only things you’re good at like getting so drunk and high you kill innocent people.”

My stomach drops. Not only are his words brutal, they no doubt make Oakley feel even worse than he already does.

“Stop it, Stone.”

“That’s *enough*,” Oakley’s father roars. “Keep saying that crap to my son and I’ll make it my personal mission to make your life a living hell, you little shit.”

“Stay out of this, old man.”

My mouth drops open in shock because this isn’t the Stone I know at all. “Sto—”

His hand tightens around my wrist so hard I nearly wince. However, I force myself to keep it together because I don’t want to make this ordeal any worse. “Shut up, Bianca.”

Oakley takes another step forward until he’s towering over Stone and staring him down like an animal who’s just found its prey. His anger is so palpable it’s practically vibrating throughout me. “Say one more word, motherfucker.” After several long beats go by, he snickers. “That’s what I thought.”

A moment later, he heads inside the apartment complex with his dad and C.J., but not before we hear him mutter, “Little bitch.”

I pry my wrist out of his grasp. “What the hell, Stone?”

He slaps his chest. “That’s what I’m trying to figure out. Why the fuck were you talking to *him*?”

Given he’s so mad, it’s not the best time to tell him Oakley and I are friends.

Besides, our friendship is my secret.

*The one and only thing I have for me.*

And as of late, the only thing that gives me a glimmer of light in the darkness that's starting to suffocate me.

"I saw him walking up to the complex with his little sister, so I stopped to say hello. It's not a big deal."

Stone's eyes nearly pop out of his head. "Not a big deal? He tried to *kill* you."

"But—"

"But *nothing*. Christ almighty, pull your head out of your ass and stop acting so stupid."

"I'm not stupid." My next words are out of my mouth so fast, it takes us both by surprise. "And the next time you treat me like I'm trash you can take your ring back and shove it up *your* ass."

His expression softens. "I'm sorry, Bourne. I didn't mean to."

"Didn't mean to what?" I hiss. "Call me stupid or tell me to shut up?" I hold up my red wrist. "Or grab my wrist so hard you hurt me?"

He hangs his head. "All of it." His eyes close and he exhales. "I'm just trying to protect you."

If that's the case, he has a real funny way of showing it. "Protect me?" I snort. "The only thing you did was puff your chest and piss in a circle around me like some kind of animal." I cross my arms. "What you said and did was totally uncalled for. He already feels bad enough about what happened, and he doesn't need you—"

"Hold the damn phone. Are you seriously going to stand here and *defend* him to me, your fiancé?"

Shit.

"No." I inhale a breath. "I don't know." I rub my face. "Calling him a junkie and a killer was below the belt. Oakley's trying to be a better person."

He just needs someone to be there for him and believe in him so he can start believing in himself.

Stone's face hardens. "How would you know?" Anger fills his expression. "Are you talking to him behind my back?"

Oh, fuck.

It's on the tip of my tongue to tell him the truth and let the chips fall where they may, but I know it won't go over well.

He'll end up getting my brothers involved and everyone will watch me like a hawk even more.

I already feel like a bird trapped in a gilded cage, and if they tighten their reins on me and do everything they can to forbid me to see him...I'll lose what's left of my mind.

So...I lie.

Because sometimes you can want something so much, you'd do anything to keep it.

Even if it means crossing all the lines and breaking all the rules.

"No," I whisper. "I haven't."

I don't know what to make of the expression on his face. "What about him moving into my apartment complex? Did you know about that?"

Dammit.

"Not until I ran into him today."

Seemingly satisfied, he nods. "Okay. I believe you." Visibly relaxed now, he folds his arms around me. "You know how much I love you, right? That I'd literally do anything in the whole wide world for you."

"I know," I whisper against his chest. "But you scared me today. I didn't know who you were."

I loathed seeing that side of him.

He plants a kiss on the top of my head. "It won't happen again, Bourne. I just saw him near you and I freaked because all I could think about was the accident and the possibility of losing you."

Guilt floods my chest because I hate that I have to keep things from him. "You have nothing to worry about."

It's the truth. Oakley and I are friends, but I'm committed to Stone.

And hopefully in time, I'll be able to tell Stone the truth and merge the two parts of my life together and they can be friends, too.

Although after the events of today, that's doubtful.

He brings my knuckles to his lips and kisses my engagement ring. "I can't wait to marry you."

Ignoring the panic setting in, I give him a smile. "Me too."

# Chapter 25

## Bianca

Painful pressure between my legs jolts me awake.

“What—”

The sound of Stone’s winded grunts and the sensation of his dick thrusting inside me makes everything clear.

“I was sleeping,” I snap.

Wrapping his arm around my waist, he turns me so I’m lying flat on my back and squeezes one of my tits. “I know but you looked so sexy I couldn’t resist.”

A moment later, my legs are pressed to my chest and he’s pumping inside me again.

It hurts so much worse than it usually does.

Probably because I wasn’t prepared.

“You feel so good, Bourne.”

I want to tell him that can’t possibly be true because it’s the equivalent of the Sahara down there, but I’m so tired of fighting. It’s stealing every drop of mental and emotional energy I have.

Closing my eyes, I try to conjure up moments from all the decent sex we’ve had in the past.

Back when things were good between us and we felt unbreakable.

However, it doesn’t work because it only reminds me of how strained things are now.

I give him a fake moan, hoping to speed things along. Usually Stone finishes fast, but tonight him and his dick are taking their sweet time.

*Too bad I’m not in the right state of mind to enjoy it.*



\* \* \*

**Past...**

Thunder booms loud enough to shake the entire house.

A minute later, lightning follows, illuminating the windows of my bedroom.

Panic crawls up my spine. It rarely rains, let alone thunders in California, but whenever it does, it never fails to put me on edge.

When I was younger, I used to sneak into Liam's room and wait for it to end, but clearly that's no longer an option.

And given my dad is on another work trip and Jace and Cole have moved out...I'm all alone in this big-ass house.

So, I do the next best thing.

*The one that feels right.*

I rush downstairs and snatch the keys to the guesthouse.

And then I make a mad dash across the lawn.

The rain is coming down so hard my hair and the t-shirt I'm wearing are drenched in no time.

I manage to stick the key in the lock with my wet, slippery fingers. As soon as the door opens, I don't waste a second running to his bedroom.

The lights are off when I enter, but I can make out the outline of his tall form under the covers.

To my relief, he's alone.

I tiptoe to his bed, but the wooden floor creaks beneath me, rousing him awake.

He bolts up, ready to attack, but relaxes after he flicks the light on his nightstand. "Bianca? What are you doing?"

I don't speak. Hell, I don't even think...

I just launch myself at him.

"I hate storms."

The hard planes of his body are warm and I can't help but press myself against the heat of him as he wraps his arms around me.

"Jesus. You're freezing."

Nuzzling the tip of my cold nose into the crook of his neck, I breathe in his scent as he lays us down.

"You're soaking my sheets," he murmurs into my damp hair, but he makes no move to let me go.

Feeling bold, I reach for the hem of my shirt and slip it over my head.

It lands on his floor with a wet plop, before I snuggle against his bare chest again.

*Skin to skin.*

I feel his heart rate pick up. “Bianca.”

My name comes out like a warning.

One that I ignore when I feel the hard bulge of his erection between my legs.

Grazing my teeth against his shoulder, I shamelessly grind against it.

A bolt of heat zaps through me when it twitches, and he makes a rough, almost-tortured sound deep in his throat.

Our gazes collide, the air between us crackling and sizzling with tension.

Slowly, I slide my fingers down his torso, stopping when I reach the waistband of his boxers.

I tug the elastic, intending to tease him a little, but Oakley’s so hard, his cock springs out and slaps against his stomach, the silver barbell from his piercing grazing his navel.

*Holy shit.*

I knew Oakley’s dick was big...but it’s also...really attractive.

He’s thick and long with veins and ridges, and the wide mushroom tip has a shiny pink hue that has me dying to wrap my lips around it.

Feeling coy, I gently circle the small drop of fluid around his crown with my thumb, then bring it to my mouth, savoring his flavor.

His throat bobs on a swallow and when he speaks his voice is so hoarse it’s nothing but a rasp. “Bianca.”

This time my name is less of a warning and more of a plea.

Locking eyes with him, I slip down his body. “I want to taste you.”

I draw the head of his cock into my mouth before he can protest. The tip is so swollen it throbs against my tongue.

I give it a deliberate, languid suck and a low, almost desperate sound leaves him. “Fuck.” His hand tangles in my hair and his hips jerk, imploring. “Suck it harder...” Blue eyes darken with need. “Deeper.”

He’s so big there’s no way I can take all of him, but I try my best as I wrap my hand around his base and squeeze.

A feral look crosses his face. “Jesus.” His mouth parts and his brows furrow. “Yeah...just like that.”

My jaw aches as I do what he wants, sucking him so deep and hard his piercing nearly hits my tonsils.

A look of raw pleasure lights his expression as I pick up my pace. “Fucking hell.”



Face straining, he pumps between my lips...

And then he stops.

I'm about to ask what's wrong, but he crooks a finger at me and rasps, "Get up here and ride my face."

It's an offer I wouldn't dream of turning down.

I start to straddle his chest, but he grips my hips and spins me around. "No." He slaps my ass before kneading it with his big hand. "You're gonna finish what you started, baby girl." Goose bumps graze my flesh when he plucks my panties to the side. "While I lick this sweet, tiny cunt."

It's hard to focus as he peppers sloppy, hungry kisses along my slit, but I eagerly pull him back into my mouth, running my tongue over every inch of him as he proceeds to fuck my pussy with his.

Grunting, he runs his hands up my thighs, cupping the swell of my ass and spreading me wide open for him as he eats me.

I suck him harder, faster, and he moans, his body jolting with pleasure.

But it's no match for what he's doing to me. His tongue is so talented—so fucking cunning and devious—that when he attacks my clit and finds a rhythm that makes me pulsate and fall apart like only he can—I erupt like a volcano.

My orgasm is almost painful, and it hits me with a force I'm not prepared for as he pumps his finger inside me.

"Fuck yeah," he rasps against my flesh as I clench around the long digit, coming with a loud moan I can't keep inside. "That's what I want."

I fight to catch my breath while he laps at my climax, until a wave of determination hits me and I go at him full force, sucking him with everything I have as I cup his weighty balls.

"Christ." His grip on my hair tightens as I gag on his cock. With a feral grunt, he thrusts his hips. "Don't fucking stop."

I can feel him flexing tight with each frantic suck and pull and I know he's close. Shuddering, his dick throbs in my mouth, ready to unload.

When he finally does, it's with a violent groan that makes my insides clench and my head feels light as he shoots down my throat.

I quickly shift to face him so he can watch me swallow it all.

A moment later, I dip my head and run the edge of my tongue over the drops that spilled onto his balls.

"I might be a virgin, but we're very much on the same playing field."

He doesn't argue as he reaches for the blunt on his nightstand and lights

it.

Snuggling against him, I wrap my arm around his torso and rest my head on his shoulder. I expect him to protest and kick me out like the last time I snuck into his bed...but he doesn't.

He pulls me closer, tracing little circles up and down my spine with his thumb as he tokes away.

I take the blunt from him and inhale. "Will you take me driving again tomorrow?"

He pries the blunt back from me and brings it to his lips. "Yeah." A defeated sound escapes him, and he takes another long drag. "Fuck."



"Holy shit," I all but squeak as I step on the gas. "I'm driving...like down a real road. A road with freaking stop signs."

Oakley's smile is so bright I'm glad I'm wearing sunglasses. "I know. And bonus—you haven't run anyone over yet."

A rush of exultation runs through me as I continue coasting down the street. "Dude...I can't believe I'm freaking *driving*."

I feel so...normal.

I can't help but smile.

Placing a hand over his heart, he mock-gasps. "Well, fuck me sideways, Bianca Covington. Is that a *smile*?"

Narrowing my eyes, I stick out my tongue. "Asshole."

His grin grows. "You should do it more often."

"For your information, I only smile when I have a good reason to." My lips curve. "Thank you for giving me one."

"We should celebrate." He gives my knee a slight squeeze. "What's your favorite thing?"

I open my mouth to say him and the huge thing nestled between his legs, but I don't want to be corny, so I settle for my second favorite.

"Ice cream."

His eyebrows shoot up. "Seriously?"

I make a face. "Don't tell me you hate ice cream."

The fact that Liam hated it drove me crazy.

"Nah, ice cream is the shit. I just see you eating healthy crap all the time

so I'm surprised." He points to the left. "There's a shortcut to the pier if you turn here."

I eagerly make the turn because the pier has the best ice cream stand.

My stomach dips when it occurs to me. "We might have a small problem."

"What?"

"I still don't know how to park."

Oakley chokes out a laugh. "I got you."

*I know he does.*



The look of sheer disgust Oakley shoots me is almost comical.

"Mint chip?" he questions as I happily lap away at my cone. "I thought you wanted ice cream...not toothpaste."

So much for Oakley not judging.

We start walking down the boardwalk. "What's wrong with mint chip?"

"Everything," he says while gesturing to his chocolate cone. "Chocolate on its own. Awesome. Mint—cool." He shakes his head profusely. "But chocolate and mint together? Motherfucking *blasphemy*." His face scrunches. "It's a mortal sin against taste buds."

He's wrong. *So fucking wrong.*

However, everyone has their flaws.

I walk over to a bench near a quiet area where there aren't many people. "Maybe you just got a bad batch when you tried it."

"Nope. Trust me, no matter how many times I've tried it, it always tastes terrible—"

Rising on my tiptoes, I press my lips to his.

I'm expecting him to push me away since we're in public, but he doesn't.

I faintly register the sound of something dropping before one of his hands grips the back of my neck, and the other curls around my hip possessively as he thrusts his tongue into my mouth.

Once again, I'm held captive by him...because no matter how much I give, he always demands more.

*Like he'll never get enough of me.*

Moaning, I sag against him, but the sound is swallowed by Oakley's

ravenous kiss.

When he finally lets me go, I'm utterly breathless.

The tip of his tongue sweeps across his bottom lip as a lewd grin curves his mouth. "On second thought. It's not so bad."

Laughing, I give him a playful shove because we both know that kiss was a lot better than *not so bad*. "Dick." I peer down at his cone that's now a melting chocolate puddle. "You dropped your ice cream."

Now *that's* a mortal sin.

There's a flirtatious glint in his eye. "Guess you'll have to share more of yours with me."

I go to kiss him again, but stop myself because I can't make this nagging feeling go away.

I don't want a marriage proposal or anything—because *yikes*—but I'd like to know what he's thinking when it comes to us.

I swallow hard. "Oakley?"

"What's up?"

"What are we doing?"

He cocks an eyebrow. "Having ice cream."

I give him a look. "I meant this...us."

Face screwing up, he takes a small step back. "I guess we're having that talk, huh?"

I blow out a breath. "Look, I'm not gonna stand here and do that thing where I act like one of those hipster girls who are all, '*I'm not like other girls, baby, I'm way better,*' and then pretend to be cool with something I'm really not just to keep a guy I'm into." I pin him with a look. "I want what I want, and I refuse to apologize for it."

Amusement dances in his eyes. "And what exactly is it that you want from me?"

"I want you...this...whatever this is."

Uneasiness enters his expression. "You know I don't do relationships, baby girl."

I tell him the truth. "I don't do relationships either."

Hell, I wouldn't know the first thing about having a relationship. And if I'm being honest with myself, they kind of petrify me.

However, I'm not okay with him screwing other girls.

"But I do have one rule."

Despite looking like he wants to flee the scene, he stays. "What's that?"

“Don’t sleep with anyone else.” I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. “Or at least if you’re going to, have the decency to give me a heads-up and tell me we’re over before you do.”

Coming closer, he tips my chin. “Deal. But only if you follow *my* rule.”

Oakley wanting rules is surprising, but he’s entitled to have one too.

“What?”

“I’m not taking your virginity, Bianca.”

I search his face for signs that he’s joking...but there aren’t any.

“Why not?”

He laughs, but it’s humorless. “There are a million reasons why I shouldn’t...but for starters? I don’t fucking deserve it.” He strokes my cheek with his thumb. “You obviously kept it this long for a reason and I don’t want you throwing something important away on a fling—”

“Hey,” Jace says behind me.

*Shit.*

Eyes going wide, Oakley blows a gust of air into my face. “Got it.” He looks at Jace and Dylan. “Bianca had an eyelash in her eye.”

“Thanks,” I say, playing along. “Hurt like a bitch.”

Dylan scrunches her nose. “I hate when that happens.”

I promptly ignore her and focus on my brother. “What are you doing here?”

Jace gestures to the hand that’s entwined with his girlfriend’s. “It was a nice day out and we’re both off, so Dylan suggested we come to the pier.”

Of course she did, because somehow the bitch always finds a way to ruin my life.

His curious stare bounces between me and Oakley. “What are you guys doing here?”

“Ice cream,” I blurt out at the same time Oakley says, “I’ve been teaching her how to drive and we came here to celebrate.”

“Wait...what?” Jace says, his expression a mixture of shock and miffed. “You’re *driving*?”

“Yeah.” I can’t help but smile again. “It’s only parking lots and side streets so far, but I’m learning.”

“She’s killing it,” Oakley adds and it’s all I can do not to beam.

“That’s good.” Expression pinched, Jace grips the back of his neck. “I just...I guess I always thought I would be the one to teach you how to drive if —when—you were ever ready.”

Well, shit.

“Oh.” I wince. “I mean, I would have asked you, but...” He’s the *last* person I’d ever want to teach me. “You know how you are, Jace.”

Evidently, he doesn’t though because his expression twists in confusion. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

*Oh, boy.*

“No offense, but you’re not exactly the epitome of calm and chill.”

He’s visibly offended. “What are you talking about? I’m *always* calm and chill.”

Dylan and Oakley exchange a bemused glance before they start laughing.

“I love you, baby,” Dylan says, “But Bianca has a point. I’d never want you to teach me how to drive because you’d be biting my damn head off every two seconds.”

“Fuck yeah he would,” Oakley chimes in. “Just the other day you bitched because I was going ninety on the freeway.”

Jace turns his irritation on his friend. “What part of speed *limit* don’t you understand, fucker?”

My guess would be the limit part, because well...Oakley doesn’t like limits.

Exasperated, Jace throws up his arms when Oakley laughs. “Fuck me for not wanting my best friend to crash his car and end up roadkill.” His expression becomes serious. “Fine...whatever. You can teach Bianca how to drive.” He wags a threatening finger in his face. “But don’t you dare teach her your shitty habits behind the wheel.”

Oakley holds up his hands. “I promise I’ll keep Baby Covington safe.”

I have to order my heart not to swoon.

Jace relaxes. “Good.” He looks around our little circle. “Since we’re all here, why don’t we head over to Sushi Sushi and grab some lunch?”

“Hell, yeah,” Oakley says.

Linking her arm through Oakley’s now, Dylan smiles. “I feel like it’s been forever since we caught up. What have you been up to lately?”

Fortunately, neither Jace nor Dylan see the side-eye Oakley shoots me.

“Not much,” he says, focusing his attention back on his cousin. “Just chillin’.”

It quickly becomes clear there’s an unspoken third rule between us.

*Don’t tell a soul.*

# Chapter 26

## Oakley

I'm standing in an empty classroom sweeping shit into the dustpan when I hear footsteps approaching behind me.

For a moment I wonder if it's Jace coming to finish the fight we started a couple weeks ago, but then I hear it.

"Do you have a death wish?"

*Cole.* The other Covington brother.

And my former best friend.

I spin around. "What the fuck do you want, Covington?"

Eyes swirling with rage, Cole crosses his arms. "Stone tells me you keep bothering Bianca."

At that, I laugh because the little shit is not only a sissy, he's also a tattletale.

Cole takes a step forward. "What the fuck is so funny, asshole?"

I give him the truth. "That Bianca's fiancé is such a little bitch he came running to you to snitch on me."

For a moment I swear I see his lips twitch before his expression turns stoic. "He's worried about her." He shakes his head. "But that's not the point. The point is how many motherfucking times do we have to tell you to stay the hell away from her before you get it through that thick skull of yours?"

I'm about to argue that Bianca's a big girl and if she wants me in her life, I'm not gonna stop her, but then he says, "Was it not enough that you almost killed Sawyer because you sold her drugs? You had to try and take out my baby sister too?"

And there it is.

The massive cinderblock of guilt lodged in my chest rears its ugly head.

I could stand here and make excuses. Tell him that Sawyer approached me about getting her Adderall so she could study and when I realized she had a problem, I tried to get her to stop...but it was too late.

But it doesn't fucking matter.

I never should have sold her that shit to begin with.

She was my friend. Someone I cared about.  
And I treated her like a run of the mill customer.  
A quick buck to make ends meet.  
And Bianca?

There's no excuse for what I did to her.  
It's something I'll have to live with for the rest of my life.  
I look him in the eyes. "I'm sorry."

It's the God's honest truth. Fuck knows I never meant to hurt either of them.

I can tell he's fighting the urge to take a few swings at me, however, whatever he sees in my expression has his anger dissipating and being replaced with sadness.

He rubs the back of his neck. "Yeah, well, sorry doesn't fucking cut it, Oak. Not this time."

I have no retort for that because he's right.

He exhales sharply. "Real talk? If you ever actually cared about her, you'd stay the hell away. She's happy now, man. Really fucking happy." His eyes meet mine. "Let her go."

A nagging, troubling feeling turns my gut to lead as he walks away.

"Cole," I call out before he exits the classroom.

He stops. "What?"

"I don't think that's true."

Confusion spreads across his face. "You don't think what's true?"

"That she's happy." Gripping the broom handle, I add, "Call me crazy, but something isn't right there. He's not good for her."

I fucking feel it in my goddamn bones.

He snorts. "Nah, I'm not gonna call you crazy, but I will call you jealous." His jaw locks. "She's happy with Stone. Trust me, if she wasn't, we would fucking know. And unlike *you*, he's a good guy who wants the best for her."

"I want the best for her too."

Which is exactly why I'm fucking telling him this shit ain't right.

"Then stay the hell away," he growls before walking out.

I can't.

Not only because my heart doesn't like that idea.

But because of the fucked-up feeling churning in my gut.

The one telling me not to walk away.



*Because she needs me.*

# Chapter 27

## Bianca

I find Oakley mopping an empty classroom in the psychology building.

I approach him cautiously, hoping like hell he didn't change his mind about being friends. "Hey."

He pauses. "Hey yourself."

"Look," I start, taking a step toward him. "I know things were a little crazy the other day, but I was hoping we could still hang out."

Part of me is expecting him to decline, but to my surprise, he doesn't.

"I work twelve to eight during the week, but after that I'm free."

"Well, most of my classes end before five, but I have a class that gets out at seven on Tuesdays." Remembering Stone will be at work tonight, I add, "Do you want to hang out after you get off? You can come up to my dorm and I can order us some dinner."

His eyes travel over my face and his lips curl into a soft smile. "I'll be there."

I can't help but smile myself. "Good." Giving him a small wave, I spin around, however due to the wet floor, I end up slipping.

I'm about to hit the floor face-first, but Oakley wraps his arm around my waist, catching me.

His breath tickles my earlobe. "You okay?"

No. I'm most definitely *not* okay.

I'm trying to ignore the way his hard body is pressing against my back and the big hand that's splayed across my belly, but it's like telling a blind person to look at the stars.

"I think so," I manage to squeak out. And then because I'm a frazzled mess, I blurt, "Do you have a craving for anything in particular?"

My heart beats double time when the hand on my belly tightens as his nose finds the spot just under my ear and he inhales me.

"You know, food-wise," I whisper, hoping it breaks the spell he's got me under.

His voice is a low rumble. "Whatever you order is fine."

A moment later he backs away and resumes his mopping.  
I'm about to leave, but then I remember. "Thanks for teaching me how to drive."

It's clear I've taken him by surprise because he bristles. "How do—" "I had another flashback." Giving him a cheeky grin, I run my fingers along the doorframe. "And I'd get us mint chip ice cream for dinner, but you don't actually like it."

His lips curve into a smirk. "I do now."



**Past...**

"Goddamn, I love your tits," Oakley groans as he slides his dick between them.

For a moment I wish I wasn't tied to his bedpost so I could touch him.

Then again, I would have missed out on all the fun—and orgasms—I've had while being at his mercy tonight.

"Oh, yeah?" I sweep my tongue along my lower lip suggestively. "Why don't you show me how much."

Shooting me a wolfish grin, he squeezes them in his big palms and thrusts harder. "Well, I was planning on coming in your mouth...but..." His face strains with pleasure. "I definitely don't mind coming all over these."

It shouldn't be so hot watching him blow his load all over my boobs, but holy shit...it is.

The deep, gruff noises he makes while his lips part and his eyes close as he comes undone...

It's utterly mesmerizing.

He's like a potent narcotic—dulling all the pain—but slowly turning me into an addict.

"Christ," he rasps, his lips ghosting over mine. "You're fucking gorgeous."

I mock gasp. "For a non-blonde, right?"

There's a playful glint in his eye when he tugs on my hair. "Asshole."

I try to close the distance between us and kiss him, but he edges away.

"We aren't finished yet." Smirking, he drags his thumb between my

cleavage, scoping up some of the white fluid on my tits before bringing it to my mouth. “You have to clean up your mess.”

Meeting his gaze, I suck his thumb, lapping up the salty liquid.

His eyes turn smoky. “Fucking hell, baby girl.”

My heart beats like a drum as he trails open-mouthed kisses down my body, stopping right above my scar.

I inwardly flinch because I hate whenever someone draws attention to the imperfection.

*The one that reminds me of the day my world was torn apart.*

The pad of his finger gingerly grazes it. “What happened?”

My first instinct is to lie, but I don’t want to. Not with him.

“Car accident.”

I expect him to press me about losing my kidney, but he doesn’t.

He simply sweeps his lips over the scar and murmurs, “You’re still here, though. Which means you’re stronger than what tried to break you.”

Emotion clogs my throat and my mind reels as I process his simple, yet profound statement.

My mother’s illness might have tried to kill me, but I was stronger.

*Because I survived.*

Somehow, Oakley always manages to say something that not only steals my breath but makes me think of something in a whole new light.

Then again, he’s got a way with words.

“Oakley?” I whisper, hoping what I’m about to say won’t ruin the moment between us.

He looks up. “What’s up?”

“Remember when I set your weed on fire a few weeks ago?”

His jaw tics. “Yeah.”

*Here goes nothing.*

“Well, I sort of...kind of...looked inside your notebook and—”

“What?” he barks, shifting in bed.

“I know it was wrong, but your poems are—”

“Emo bullshit.” The tendons in his neck stand out as he thumps his chest. “But no matter how stupid they are, they’re personal and they’re *mine*. You had no fucking right—”

“I’m sorry,” I tell him, even though I know it won’t ease his anger or take back what I did. “I just...I couldn’t help myself.” I hold his gaze because what I have to tell him is more important than my pride. “And your poems

aren't emo bullshit...not to me. They're amazing and—"

"Get the fuck out." His jaw tics. "Now."

My stomach bottoms out when I see the look of utter betrayal across his face. "I'm sorry."

"Get *out*," he repeats, harsher this time.

"I can't." I eye the restraints tied around my wrists. "I'm still tied up."

The fact that he won't even acknowledge me as he unties me, hurts like hell.

I mentally curse myself as I scan the floor for my clothes because me and my stupid big mouth just ruined everything between us.

And that's when it occurs to me *why* he's so mad.

It's more than me reading his poems.

It's because I stumbled upon something so personal to him.

Something that—for reasons I'll never understand—humiliates him and makes him feel vulnerable.

And while there's one secret that can't ever leave my lips...

There's also another, more sinister secret I'm keeping.

Something I never, *ever* want anyone to know because not only would they never understand...

They'd label me as sick and twisted.

And they'd be right, because what I did was wrong.

*Even though my intentions were good.*

My palms begin to sweat and my stomach churns with nerves.

Telling him will change everything between us, because there's no way he won't judge me.

But for some reason, I feel the need to give him this so he can see I'm willing to be vulnerable for him, too.

Even though I'm positive he'll think I'm a disgusting mental case and want nothing to do with me afterward.

"Oakley," I whisper.

My head is spinning so much I feel like I could pass out at any moment from the anxiety coursing through me.

He must hear the emotion in my voice because he stops tugging on his sweatpants and looks at me. "What?"

"My first kiss was with Liam."

I regret the words the second they leave my mouth and I instinctively slap my hand over my lips, wanting nothing more than to suck them back in.

Oakley's expression gives nothing away, and for some reason that only makes me want to elaborate, as if I can somehow fix what I said...even though it's impossible to undo it.

"He was really upset while talking about our mom and the bullies at school and..." I draw my knees to my chest, attempting to shield myself. "He started saying stuff like how he'll never get married, or have a girlfriend, or get kissed and I...I don't know." My voice cracks as tears blur my vision. "I wasn't thinking. I just wanted him to know how much I loved him and try to fix it...but he got so angry with me. So fucking angry." Bringing my hands up, I try to hide my face, my shame, my grief. "Three days later he killed himself."

Because I crossed a line I never should have and made things weird between us.

*And left him with no one to turn to.*

My chest heaves as big, ugly tears roll down my cheeks.

I feel like I just ripped the scab off the deepest of scars and poured salt in the wound.

Making a fist, I punch my head, as if the action alone can quell the revulsion burning through my system. "I'm so disgusting. So. Fucking. Disg \_\_\_"

Oakley's hand wraps around my wrist.

And then he's hauling me into his arms, hugging me so tight it steals all the air from my lungs.

"No, you're not. Far from it."

"Then you must not have heard what I said."

"I heard every fucking word." He locks my jaw in his hand. "You were just trying to ease his pain." He frames my face in his hands. "That doesn't make you disgusting. It makes you a good sister. A good sister who would do *anything* for someone she loves because underneath that tough, stubborn exterior...she has a huge heart."

His words only make me cry harder.

Despite my fears about spilling my secrets, Oakley didn't judge me.

Like always, he accepts my demons.

He runs his fingers up and down my naked back. "What happened between you two that day...it's not why Liam killed himself."

He doesn't get it. "Yes, it is. He didn't have anyone to talk to."

*Nowhere to turn.*

“It’s not why,” Oakley argues. “Liam knew he had people who loved and cared about him. People he could go to.”

He’s *wrong*. Besides, Oakley didn’t become friends with Jace and Cole until after Liam passed—therefore, he has no right to make any kind of assessment about my brother because he didn’t fucking know him.

Irritation catches the back of my throat and I find myself glaring. “What the fuck makes you think you know anything about why *my* brother took his life?”

The look he shoots me is like a visceral punch. “My last memory of my mom was her riding some drug dealer for a bag of heroin before she drained my dad’s bank account and took off.” His expression falls. “I used to spend hours every day sitting by the door, wondering what I did wrong and why I wasn’t good enough to make her stay, yet still hoping like hell she’d come back to me...but she never did.” Sorrow floods his face. “She never will.”

And just like that, my heart stops cold.

“It’s her loss, Oakley. You know that, right?”

The selfish woman who walked out on her little boy missed watching him grow up to become an incredible man.

“Maybe.” The intensity of his gaze sears my soul. “Point is, I’ve been where Liam was, desperately searching for something to make it hurt a little less—and even though I know I can always turn to my dad, along with Jace, Cole, and Dylan...I don’t. Because someone else’s love will never be enough to get rid of your pain when you can’t manage to love yourself.” The tip of his thumb brushes the edge of my lip. “Liam didn’t die because of anything you did, baby girl. He’s gone because he couldn’t see past all the torment he held inside.”

He presses a kiss to my forehead. “But he wouldn’t want the people he loved—especially his baby sister—spending the rest of her life blaming herself for something that wasn’t her fault.”

With that, he gets off the bed.

As much clarity as Oakley’s given me just now, it also fills me with a deep sense of sadness.

Because, he too, is one of the broken people.

Just like Liam...

*Just like me.*

“So how do you cope?” I ask as I watch him put on his clothes. “If you won’t turn to your dad or your friends, how do you—”

“Drugs.” My heart caves in as he grabs his keys and ambles toward the door. “Addicts are people who are trying to numb the pain, too. Only difference is, they aren’t dead...yet.”



# Chapter 28

## Bianca

“Can I ask you a really messed up question?” I whisper into the darkness.

Oakley and I are currently lying side by side on the small rug in my dorm because I felt like inviting him to lay on my bed when I have a fiancé would be wrong.

We’ve been talking so long I don’t even know what time it is.

Not that I care.

Time feels like it stands still whenever I’m with him.

He shifts on the carpet so we’re face to face. “Sure.”

I chew my bottom lip nervously. “Promise you won’t get mad?”

“I won’t get mad,” he assures me.

“Your mom ran off with a drug dealer, right?”

I immediately regret bringing it up when I see pain slash across his face.

“Yeah,” he says softly. “Yeah, she did.”

“I guess I’m just wondering why...” My voice trails off because I don’t have the courage to finish that sentence.

“I became one?” Oakley finishes for me.

I nod.

He rolls over so he’s on his back and stares up at the ceiling. “I don’t know.” His throat bobs on a swallow. “I didn’t really think about her when I started working for Loki, but maybe subconsciously I was hoping she’d find me or some shit.” He snorts. “Christ. I’m a fucking idiot.”

“No.” Absentmindedly, I run my fingernails up and down his forearm. “You’re a lot of things, Oakley, but an idiot isn’t one of them.”

He angles his head so he’s looking at me. “My shitty life choices beg to differ, baby girl.”

“Then it’s a good thing it’s not too late for you to make some better life choices, huh?”

He sighs. “Trust me, I’m trying. It just seems like no matter which way I turn I keep hitting walls.”

Before I can stop myself, I reach for his hand. “Then we’ll break them

down together.”

A frown pulls at his lips. “I don’t get it.”

“Get what?”

“Why you’d want someone like me in your life. You know what I did, what I’m responsible for. I almost *killed* you and yet you keep treating me like I’m—”

“Worthy of forgiveness?” I interject. “That’s because you are.”

And even though it’s the truth, I know it’s more than that.

*So much more.*

Not only did I trust him enough to divulge some of my darkest secrets, Oakley has a way of making me feel...free.

Like I can be myself around him—whatever that is—and he won’t ever judge me.

“Or maybe it’s because I feel something with you that I don’t feel with anyone else. Something good and raw and pure...and every time I have another flashback it just confirms you’re not the heartless asshole everyone seems to think you are.”

And whether anyone likes it or not, I know he belongs in my life.

*I feel it in my marrow.*

He shakes his head. “I don’t even know what the fuck to say to that.”

“Don’t say anything.” Ignoring the strange hurt in my chest, I squeeze his hand. “Just don’t leave me.”

Because if he does? Something inside me will snap and I’ll never be able to fix it.

His face is a mask of hurt and purpose as he holds his pinky up before swiping it through mine. “I won’t. Not this time.”

My chest caves in because pinky promises were me and Liam’s thing. Yet, I can’t bring myself to feel one ounce of resentment about it.

On the contrary actually. It’s almost comforting.

We lay there staring at each other for what feels like eternity before he breaks the silence.

“We need to talk about your shithead fiancé.”

*Oh, boy.* Here we go.

“He’s not a shithead. Although what he said to you was fucked-up and wrong, so I get why you would think that.”

Stone wasn’t right for what he did, but I’d be lying if I said I couldn’t understand why he went postal when he saw us together. In his mind, Oakley

is responsible for almost killing me because he was intoxicated and that's something Stone won't ever forgive.

A flash of rage flickers in Oakley's eyes. "I don't give a fuck what he said to me. I don't like the way he was talking to *you*."

"I know it looked, bad, but he was angry and—"

"Goddammit," he snaps. "Don't be that girl. You're smarter than that. The Bianca I know would never take that shit from him or anyone else."

It would hurt less if he slapped me.

"Well, I'm sorry but you're stuck with *this* Bianca now."

His blue eyes soften. "That's not what I meant."

"Yes, it was." Sitting up, I draw my knees to my chest. "Everyone in my life expects me to be a certain way since the accident, but I thought you were different. I thought..." I shake my head because it no longer matters. "I'm trying to put myself back together, okay? But it's hard when I don't have all the pieces, and the few pieces I do have...aren't so great."

*Except the pieces I have with him.*

Goose bumps break free when he runs his fingers down my back. "I don't expect you to be anyone else but you, baby girl."

I press the heels of my palms to my eyes, so I don't do something dumb like cry. "I don't even know what that means because I don't know who I am."

And the worst part is? *I'm not sure I ever did.*

"I get that." Worry etches his features. "For what it's worth, I wasn't trying to upset you. I just wanted to make it clear that if he *ever* fucking hurts you..." His nostrils flare on an indrawn breath. "Well, let's just say I've gone to jail once, and I'd gladly go back for you."

There's so much conviction behind his words he leaves me no choice but to believe him.

However, he has no reason to worry. "Stone's not like that. Sure, he gets upset every now and then, but he'd never hurt me."

Not physically anyway.

That's when I remember some of my flashbacks. "And you're one to talk. You haven't always been *Mr. Nice Guy* to me."

Granted I deserved his wrath back then, but still. *Pot meet kettle.*

His brows furrow. "You're right, I haven't. But even when I was a dick, I still knew where to draw the line." Concern fills his face. "I'm not sure he does."

It takes everything in me not to laugh. “You’re worrying for no reason. Stone’s never put his hands on me. Not once.”

My words do little to squash the anger simmering beneath the surface of his gaze. “I hope for his sake he never fucking does.”

# Chapter 29

## Oakley

A sharp knock on my front door jolts me out of a dead sleep.

Muttering a curse, I stagger out of bed ready to give whoever's on the other side of it a mouthful for waking me up on my day off.

"What the fuck do you—"

My sentence falls by the wayside when I open the door and see Dylan and Sawyer standing there.

Ah, hell.

"I was sleeping," I inform them, hoping they'll leave because I'm not in the mood to be read the riot act about staying away from Bianca.

Dylan raises one dark blonde eyebrow. "It's one in the afternoon."

I shrug. "So?"

Sawyer waves a paper bag in front of my face. "I brought some chicken from Cluck You."

As if on cue, my mouth waters.

*Dammit.* They came armed with the good shit.

Begrudgingly, I move to the side and let them in.

After converting my futon to a couch, they plop down and Sawyer starts emptying the contents of the paper bag onto my coffee table.

I stare at them. "Do Jace and Cole know you two have gone rogue?"

They exchange a glance.

"They don't control us," Dylan says.

"We're big girls," Sawyer adds. "We don't need their permission to see you."

Yeah, that's a *no*.

I'm about to protest, but Dylan huffs, "I love Jace, but I love you too, Oak. And nothing will ever change that."

Sawyer nods. "Ditto."

And just like that, guilt floods my chest.

Dylan has every right to walk away from me and my bullshit, yet here she

is...still in my corner.

And Sawyer harbors no malice toward me even though she should, because I caused her to have a goddamn heart attack.

Sawyer hands me a plate. "Eat some chicken. It will put you in a better mood."

After grabbing a pillow, I take a seat on my floor and dive in.

I can feel their eyes studying me intently the entire time.

"What?" I snap when I've had enough.

"Nothing." Dylan's eyes wander around the room. "I was just wondering if maybe you had something you wanted to get off your chest."

Sawyer stops eating. "Because you know you can tell us anything."

Dylan nods. "And we mean *anything*."

"Like what's going on with you and Bianca."

Dylan nudges Sawyer in the ribs. "Sawyer."

Sawyer holds up her hands. "What? There's no point beating around the bush."

Subtle. Real fucking subtle.

Keeping a straight face, I look them in the eyes. "Nah."

Then I go back to eating my chicken, ignoring the way their mouths drop open.

"Come on, Oak," Sawyer whines. "You have to tell us *something*."

Dylan winces. "On second thought. The less I know, the better."

Sawyer waves her hands, shooing her away. "Then go somewhere else because I want to know everything. It sucks being left in the dark."

She may have a point, but Bianca considers Sawyer a friend and vice versa. Ergo, I can't trust Sawyer not to tell Bianca what happened.

And if she's going to find out the truth about our past...it needs to be from me.

Glaring, I place my plate down. "Look, gossip girls. This isn't one of your little soap operas. What's going on between Bianca and me is just that... between us."

Dylan eyes me suspiciously. "So there *is* something going on between you two?" She holds up a finger. "Wait, don't answer that."

Sawyer nudges her in the ribs this time. "Hush, you." Fluttering her lashes, she gives me an innocent smile. "You were saying?"

Oh, for fuck's sake.

"Even if there was, I'm not saying shit because you two will just run back

and tell Jace and Cole which is something Bianca doesn't want to happen."

"I won't," Sawyer assures me. "You're my friend and so is Bianca. I love Colton, but he's gonna have to realize that my friends are going to tell me secrets and part of being a good friend means being trustworthy and keeping certain things to myself."

Dylan shakes her head profusely. "Nope. This shit is bound to backfire. If you two want to talk I won't stop you, but I won't listen to it."

Before anyone can say a word, she covers her ears with her hands and starts humming a *Jimmy Eat World* song.

Something I wouldn't even know if it wasn't for my cousin's obsession with them and alternative rock music.

Sawyer gives me her undivided attention. "Spill the tea, sis."

"There's no tea to spill," I grunt. "And don't ever refer to me as *sis* again."

"Fine." She takes a bite of her chicken. "But you two are talking?"

"Maybe."

She rolls her eyes. "Come on, Oak."

"Fine," I admit, because it's easier than sitting here arguing with her. "We're kind of...down-low friends."

She blinks. "I see."

I wag a finger. "And there it is...*judgment*."

I should have known better.

She places her chicken back on her plate. "No judgment. It makes sense why you guys would have to be friends in secret. Not only because of Jace and Cole, but you know...Stone."

The tiny hairs on the back of my neck stand on end at the mention of the prick's name. "Right."

Appearing uneasy now, she chews her bottom lip. "It must be hard for you."

That's the understatement of the century.

"It's not exactly a goddamn picnic," I mutter.

Sympathy fills her eyes. "Then maybe you shouldn't be friends." She holds up her hand. "Bianca is great, and she wouldn't intentionally hurt anyone." She thinks about this for a second. "Well, not *anymore*. Point is, if you still have feelings for her, it might not be the best thing in the world to subject yourself to the pain that comes along with seeing her." Picking up her water bottle, she takes a sip. "Dylan said you've been doing really well and

going to AA meetings every day. I don't want you to put yourself in a situation that might cause you to relapse."

"Sawyer's right," Dylan chimes in.

"Hey, I thought you didn't want to hear any of this?" Sawyer points out.

Sulking, Dylan bites into her chicken. "I didn't, but I also don't want Oak to feel like he can't talk to me." She looks at me. "Therefore, your secrets are safe with me, too." She points her drumstick at me. "However, I think you need to listen to Sawyer. Seeing Bianca is obviously hurting you, and—"

"Do you have any idea what it's like to know you almost killed the person you love most in this world?" I growl before I can stop myself. "Only, instead of killing her, you destroyed her life and everything she ever knew, and then left her to pick up the broken pieces without you, and there's not a goddamn thing you can ever do or say that will fix it."

Their mouths fall open and they softly shake their heads.

"That's right, you fucking don't." I stand up. "This shit isn't about me or my feelings, it's about hers. And whatever she wants...whatever she fucking needs from me...I'll do it."

Because her happiness is the only thing that matters.

"Holy cow," Sawyer sighs wistfully. "Bless it. They're like the modern-day Romeo and Juliet."

Wincing, Dylan nods in agreement.

"They both died in the end, remember?" I point out as I walk into my kitchen to grab a soda from the fridge. "Anyway, can we change the fucking subject because I'm done talking about this shit?"

They don't answer, but I definitely hear them whispering shit to each other.

When I walk back into the room, I find Dylan looking all kinds of confused. "Poems?"

My eyes drop down to the notebook she's holding.

Fucking hell.

These two shit stirrers just don't know when to leave shit the fuck alone.

"You write poems?"

Thinking quick, I swipe my notebook from her hands. "No."

Dylan looks at Sawyer. "But you just said—"

"Not a damn word, short stack," I growl in warning.

Dragging her gaze around the room, Sawyer shuffles her feet.

Dylan's visibly offended. "How come you told Sawyer but not me?"



“I didn’t tell Sawyer,” I inform her, recalling the time she peeped over my shoulder during a study break back in high school. “Sawyer’s a little snoop.”

“Hey,” Sawyer shoots back. “That’s not fair. Your poems are amazing and deserve to be shared with the world.”

Eyes wide, Dylan makes grabby hands. “Gimme.”

I hold it behind my back. “Not a chance.”

She pouts. “Come on, Oak. I want to see them.”

She tries snatching it from me, but I place one hand on her forehead, keeping her at bay. “And I’d like to be able to suck my own dick, but some things in life aren’t meant to happen.”

Next thing I know she’s launching herself at my back like some kind of spider monkey. “Jesus fucking Christ.”

I’m so busy trying to wrangle her to the ground, the notebook slips out of my hand.

Quick on her feet, Dylan grabs it and jumps up triumphantly.

Then she runs and locks herself in my bathroom.

“Not cool,” I roar, banging my fist on the door.

“Hush,” she yells on the other side. “I’m reading.”

“Just great,” I mutter.

“They’re really good,” Sawyer assures me. “I don’t know why you hide them.”

I turn to look at her. “Because they’re—”

“Amazing,” Dylan whispers as she comes out of the bathroom.

Sawyer’s face lights up. “Right?”

Dylan clutches my notebook to her chest. “It’s like emo crack for the soul.”

Fuck my life. She might as well chop off my nuts.

“Gee thanks.”

“No,” Dylan says emphatically. “I mean that in the best way.”

She suddenly stops talking and I can practically smell the wood burning from her thinking so hard.

“Have you ever thought about writing songs?”

That chicken must have been laced with some good shit because she’s talking crazy.

“I don’t sing.”

She laughs. “I know. But lots of musicians hire songwriters or buy songs from writers.” Her blue eyes become saucers. “Holy shit.” Her gaze flicks to

Sawyer. “Landon.”

Sawyer practically squeals. “Oh, my God, Landon.”

Bewildered as fuck, my gaze bounces between them. “Who the hell is Landon?”

“Landon Parker,” they both shout like a couple of schoolgirls.

I blink. “That really clears things up.”

Dylan lets out a groan of frustration. “Landon Parker is this incredibly talented musician. He mostly sings alternative rock, but his voice, along with his piano and guitar skills are so mind-blowing he could sing anything and people would go crazy.” She grins. “Anyway, he’s total indie and not into any of the skeevy shit that comes with stardom because he doesn’t want to be a sellout or have some pop record label turn him into something he isn’t.”

“Can you get to the point?” I urge because she’s starting to bore me.

She slaps my arm. “I am.” She blows out a breath. “Anyhow, I reached out to him about becoming his manager and eventually when I open up my indie label, having him come on board. We met a few times, and we’re this —” She moves her thumb and pointer finger centimeters apart. “Close to making it official.”

“That’s awesome,” I tell her.

Even though I don’t know shit about rock music, I know she’s always wanted to manage artists and open her own record label. It’s cool as shit watching her dreams come true.

“I’m really proud of you.”

She beams. “Thanks, but that’s still not the point.”

And she’s lost me again.

“Anyway, he’s working on finishing his upcoming album, but he’s stuck on the last two songs and has some writer’s block.”

I gesture for her to cut to the chase. “Okay, and?”

She points to my notebook. “You can help him. Hell, you guys could sit down and create *epic* music together.”

The look I shoot her conveys exactly what I think about that.

“Yeah...no.”

Her jaw drops. “What do you mean *no*?”

I flash her some teeth. “No, thank you?”

She grabs me by the shoulders. “Oakley, do you understand that this opportunity might change your life?” Desperation flickers in her eyes. “I know you don’t believe in yourself, but I do.”

“Me too,” Sawyer adds.

It’s not that I’m ungrateful for their support, it’s just...I don’t fucking know.

This shit is foreign as hell to me. Plus, songwriting sounds like it requires a lot of concentration and focus. Not to mention *skill*.

Three things I’ve always lacked.

Hell, I flunked out of my first senior year of high school, and if it wasn’t for Sawyer tutoring me, I would have flunked my second attempt too.

“Look, I appreciate the offer, really, I do. But I don’t know the first thing about writing songs.”

It’s best I stick to the only shit I’m good at.

Sweeping and mopping floors.

Dylan’s disappointment is palpable. “Okay, but if you ever change your mind—”

“I won’t.”

I can tell she wants to argue, but fortunately she drops it.

I swivel my gaze around my apartment. “This visit was nice and all, but I want to get to the gym before it closes.”

Sawyer and Dylan exchange a glance.

“I think that’s his way of giving us the boot,” Sawyer states.

Dylan wraps her arms around me. “I love you, Oak.”

I return her hug. “Love you, too.”

I start to back away, but she grabs my cheeks. “I didn’t say it before, but I’m really proud of you. And if you ever need anything, please call me. I don’t care what time it is. I don’t ever want you to feel like you don’t have me, okay? I’ll always be there for you.”

Well, shit.

The muscles in my chest draw tight. Dylan and C.J. were the only good things to come out of my father’s marriage with Crystal.

“I know.”

After smacking a kiss on my cheek, Dylan ambles to the door.

Next thing I know, Sawyer is wrapping her arms around me.

Now I’m *convinced* they put something in that chicken because these girls are way too goddamn sappy.

“You have to stop looking at me like that,” Sawyer whispers against my chest.

“Like what?”

“Like you broke me.” Her eyes are glassy when she looks up at me. “I chose to take the Adderall, remember?”

*And I chose to give them to you.*

It’s something I’ll never absolve myself for.

I want to rub away the knot of blame forming in my chest, but Sawyer won’t let me go.

“No one in the world is perfect, Oak. We all make mistakes. The important thing is that you learn from them.”

“I know.”

Holy hell do I fucking know. I’m reminded of all my mistakes every single fucking day.

“Love you,” she utters before unhinging herself from me.

“Love you too, short stack.”

Shortly after they leave, I realize my notebook is missing.

# Chapter 30

## Bianca

A silky feather-light touch gliding down my body has my eyes fluttering open against the sunlight.

“Morning,” Stone whispers next to me in his bed.

When I look down, I notice my t-shirt is pushed up past my breasts and he’s sliding a single red rose down my torso. “Good morning.” I gesture to the rose. “What’s the special occasion?”

He smiles from ear to ear. “You go wedding dress shopping today, silly.”  
Oh...right.

He plants a soft kiss on the inside of my thigh. “I got you some breakfast.” He gestures to the nightstand. “It’s your favorite.”

When I glance over, I notice a glass of orange juice along with a blueberry muffin.

I don’t inform him that banana nut muffins are actually my favorite because the gesture was incredibly sweet.

“Thank yo—” I start to say but he moves my panties to the side, exposing me. “What are you doing?”

He licks two of his fingers. “I want you to enjoy your breakfast.” My nipples pucker when he slips his now wet fingers inside me. “While I enjoy mine.”

For the first time in a long time, genuine arousal for him courses through me.

“Screw the breakfast,” I breathe when he starts moving his fingers. “Don’t stop.”

“I can’t wait to marry you,” he murmurs as he picks up his pace. “I can’t wait to fuck this tight pussy every night for the rest of my life.”

*Holy shit.* Stone never talks dirty.

I always wished he would, but I lost hope when it became clear he was never going to utter anything more than, ‘*you feel so good*’ during sex.

But now?

It’s like I woke up in an alternate universe because everything feels right

between us again.

“Tell me more,” I urge as I clutch the bedsheets. “Tell me every dirty thing on your mind.”

“You feel so good,” he rasps. “Like a dream.”

*Ugh.*

“What else?”

He circles my clit and I swear I see stars. My orgasm is a mere heartbeat away. “Your pussy—”

A loud knock on his bedroom door startles us both.

“Stone,” his mother calls out. “I need you to take out the garbage.”

“In a minute, Ma,” he grunts, thoroughly annoyed.

*That makes two of us.*

I swear the woman knows exactly what we were up to.

It’s no secret she’s not my biggest fan—especially after Stone punched his brother and forbid him from being in our wedding party—which makes the fact that we’re all going to be living together soon...awkward as hell.

I sigh in defeat. It’s safe to say my impending orgasm is *long* gone.

“I need you to do it now,” his mother demands. “If you can’t, then ask Bianca.” A moment later her footsteps fade down the hall, but not before I hear her mutter, “It’s not like she does anything *else* around here...besides my son.”

Removing his fingers, Stone exhales heavily. “She’s just upset because you didn’t invite her to go dress shopping with you.” He kisses my stomach. “She’ll get over it eventually.”

More like next *century*.

“I didn’t invite my dad’s wife Nadia to come either,” I point out. “It’s me who’s picking out the wedding dress, therefore it should be me who decides who comes along.”

And the only people I want there are my maid-of-honor Sawyer, and my bridesmaid Dylan.

It’s so much less pressure that way.

“Plus,” I continue. “I told your mom that after I find the right dress, she’s welcome to come to the shop and see it.”

Heck, she’s free to come to every fitting I have if she wants to.

I just want to make sure I have the final say in my dress since it’s the only thing about this damn wedding I seem to have any control over.

“I know,” Stone says, sitting up in bed. “But she’s still insulted.”

Annoyed, I start ticking things off with my fingers. “The woman already picked out our wedding cake, our flowers, the priest, and fought me tooth and nail about the venue she wanted us to choose.”

All of which *my* father is footing the bill for.

“I get it, Bourne. I really do.” He shrugs. “What can I say? She’s just being a mom.”

His words send a pang of hurt through my chest.

I wish she was here.

She *should* be here for this.

Standing, he drops a quick kiss on my forehead. “Don’t let it ruin your day, though okay?” He tips my chin. “I’ll talk to her.”

“Fine,” I whisper because it’s better than arguing with him on what’s supposed to be a special day.

He treks to the door. “Enjoy your breakfast.”

I stare at the blueberry muffin and grunt in contempt.



“There are so many choices here,” Sawyer assures me. “Don’t give up just yet. We’ll find your dream dress.”

I hope she’s right because if I have to try on another ugly taffeta concoction they have the nerve to call a dress, I swear to God I will rip the shit to shreds.

“You want a sweetheart neckline, right?” Dylan questions.

“At this point I’d take a decent looking paper sack as long as it’s white,” I mutter.

Dylan laughs. “Amen to that. I hate shopping, too.”

That’s the thing. I love shopping. I just can’t seem to find the right dress that’s beckoning me.

Sawyer and Cole’s wedding isn’t for another year and a half, but when we went dress shopping for her, it was lucky number three that ended up being the one. The moment she looked in the mirror you couldn’t wipe the smile off her face.

Heck, birds chirped, bells rang, and the heavens opened up as we all squealed like a couple of maniacs because she looked so beautiful.

*So happy.*

It was a great moment.

Unfortunately, I don't seem to have her luck because I've already tried on fifteen dresses today and they all suck balls.

I'm starting to regret not taking my father up on his offer to get my own designer, but he's already spent so much on this wedding I felt bad and decided to go with an off the rack dress.

I stalk over to one of the plushy chairs and plop down. "I'm so over this."

"Calm down," Sawyer says. "We're not leaving until we find the one that makes you feel like a princess." She tracks down a salesgirl and points to something on her phone. "Do you have this dress in stock?"

The woman nods. "As a matter of fact we do, but it's limited edition and the designer only sent one to the store." Wincing, her eyes sweep over Sawyer. "It's a size four though so I'm afraid it won't fit you."

Instantly Dylan and I are ready to scratch the bitch's eyes out, but we don't have to.

Giving her a big smile, Sawyer simply states, "That's okay, I already have my wedding dress that I look hot as hell in." She looks at me. "Fortunately, my friend is a size four and I think this one will be perfect for her."

The woman nods. "I'll go bring it out."

She starts to walk away, but Sawyer clears her throat and says, "Actually, can you have someone else do it?"

The woman blinks. "Why?"

"You work on commission, right?"

The woman raises a brow. "Yes."

Sawyer flashes her some teeth. "That's why."

"You little badass," Dylan says with a smile.

Sawyer pretends to wipe some dirt off her shoulder. "Damn skippy."

I start to laugh, but then another woman walks over to us. She's carrying a huge bouquet of stunning flowers.

"Bianca Covington?"

I exchange a curious glance with Sawyer and Dylan. "Yes?"

She sets the bouquet on the small table next to me. "These are for you."

"Ooh, la, la," Sawyer sings. "Someone's a lucky girl."

She's not wrong.

"Tell me about it." I flip open the card. "This morning it was a red rose



and now it's an entire b—”

I stop talking as I read the card.

*She's with you.*

Love, your big brothers.

Tears clog my vision because my brothers are the sweetest assholes in the world.

Dylan and Sawyer's eyes go wide and they rush to my side.

“What happened?”

“Are you okay?”

“No.” I reach for a tissue. “Blame your stupid men.”

That only confuses them.

Sawyer blanches. “What do you mean blame our stupid men?”

I show them the note.

And then I quickly hand Sawyer a tissue because she turns into a blubbering mess.

Dylan waves a hand in front of her face and looks up at the ceiling. “I can't believe he actually listened to me.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well,” Dylan starts. “I mentioned that today might be hard for you because...” Her voice trails off.

Because we're both members of the club that no one wants to be in.

*The dead mother's club.*

Emotion rises in my throat all over again. “Thank you.”

I make a mental note to do the same for her when Jace finally gets his shit together and pops the question.

She gives my hand a small squeeze. “It wasn't me. They came up with the flowers and the note all on their own.”

Sawyer blows her nose. *Loudly.* “That was so sweet.”

We're such a sight that when a saleslady approaches us with the dress we requested, she pales and says, “Is this a bad time? I can come back.”

“No,” Sawyer says. “It's a perfect time.”

She's right. This has to be a sign.

I haul myself out of the chair. “Fine, but if this isn't it, I'm getting married in a paper bag.”

Sawyer and Dylan usher me into the fitting room.

“No giving up,” Sawyer chides. “And no getting married in a paper bag because I’m telling you, I saw this dress and it screamed *Bianca*.”

“If you say so.” After I strip down to my undies, I squeeze my eyes shut and raise my arms. “Just put the damn thing over my head and zip me up.”

After what feels like an eternity filled with random tugs and pulls of fabric, they finally spin me around.

And their mouths drop open.

“Holy shit,” Sawyer breathes. “I knew it would look beautiful on her, but...damn.”

“I know,” Dylan says. “It’s...”

“The one,” they say at the same time.

The suspense is killing me, especially since there are no mirrors in these tiny dressing rooms which means you have to walk out to the main room set up with random mini-stages.

“Move out of my way so I can see.”

They start to, but pause abruptly.

“Wait,” Sawyer says. “How do you want to wear your hair?”

I shrug because I haven’t given it much thought. I was too worried about finding the right dress.

“I don’t know. Up, maybe?”

Dylan winces. “You have *such* pretty hair though.”

“Fine. Half up and half down.”

“Perfect,” Sawyer exclaims. “Do you have a clip?”

I shake my head.

“Don’t worry.” Dylan takes the jaw clip out of her hair. “I got you.”

Sawyer starts sifting her fingers through my hair and Dylan snorts. “Never thought I’d see the day where you’d be doing Bianca’s hair.”

Sawyer starts laughing. “You and me both.”

Unfortunately, I don’t understand why it’s such a big deal.

They must notice my confusion because Dylan says, “Hair and makeup were always your thing, and there was a time when you made Sawyer your personal project and gave her a makeover.”

Needless to say, I don’t remember any of that. “Oh.” I look at Sawyer. “Did I do a good job?”

Sawyer and Dylan exchange a forlorn glance before Sawyer ruffles my hair. However, there’s no mistaking the sadness in her eyes. “Yeah.”

A moment later, they make me close my eyes, haul me out of the dressing

room, and position me on one of the stages.

“Okay,” Sawyer declares after what feels like forever. “Open your eyes.”

When I do, I’m...speechless.

They weren’t kidding when they said the dress was perfect.

I take in the white, strapless tulle ballgown with a sweetheart neckline, full skirt, and long dramatic train. I turn a little and the sequins catch the light, making me sparkle like a ballerina in a music box.

I feel *exactly* like a princess.

And then I realize...

My mom’s wedding dress was a fancy sequin ball gown too.

My dad said she looked so beautiful his heart physically stopped when he saw her.

“This is the one,” I choke out.

“It fits you like a glove, you’ll hardly need any alterations,” the salesgirl says.

Dylan smiles. “It’s like it was made for you.”

“You look gorgeous,” Sawyer exhales. “Stone is going to pass out when he sees you.”

A smile spreads across my lips as visions of me wearing this dress while walking down the aisle to meet Stone flash through my mind.

Suddenly, the room starts spinning and white-hot panic punches through my chest because it becomes impossible to get enough air into my lungs.

“Get it off me,” I scream, my hands flying to my throat as beads of sweat dot my forehead and spots form in front of my eyes.

When they don’t move fast enough, I start clawing at the dress, desperate to rip the fabric off because I can’t breathe.

*I’m dying.*

“Get it off,” I scream as loud as I can before gasping for air. “I need it off *now.*”

Sawyer wraps her arms around me as Dylan starts undoing the corset.

“It’s okay,” Sawyer whispers. “It’s gonna be okay.”

*No, it won’t.*

Sawyer tightens her hold as my body breaks out in a fit of uncontrollable shakes.

“What’s happening?” The salesgirl squawks. “Does she need something to eat? Does she have a medical condition?”

“No,” Dylan snaps. “Just give us a few minutes alone.”

After they both help me out of the dress, Dylan runs back to the fitting room to fetch my clothes.

I don't even realize I'm crying until Sawyer starts wiping my tears away with a tissue before forcing me to drink some water.

"I'm sorry," I croak, feeling so embarrassed I wish the ground would open up and swallow me whole.

She gives her head a shake. "You have nothing to be sorry for." She places her palm on my forehead. "You still feel clammy, though. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I assure her. "It's just cold feet. Happens to every bride, right?"

She cups my cheeks and the look she gives me is so full of concern my heart twists. "That didn't look like cold feet or nerves. That was...I don't know, it was almost like you were fighting for your life." Her voice drops to a whisper. "Bianca, do you want to marry Stone?"

I place a hand to my aching chest as another tear streams down my cheek. "I care about him, Sawyer. So much."

She hugs me so tight it almost hurts. "I know you do, honey. But if you're having reservations about this, and it's clear you are...you need to listen to your heart and do what's best for you."

She has a point.

"But my dad already paid for everything."

"I get that," Sawyer says. "But you and I both know your dad would never want you to spend the rest of your life with someone if you were having serious doubts about it."

Again...she has a point.

"It just happened so fast, you know? One moment we were graduating high school, and the next he was getting down on one knee and—"

"You never had time to think if it was what *you* really wanted," Dylan interjects.

"Exactly."

She hands me my jeans and t-shirt. "Look, I'm not gonna tell you what to do, but I really think you owe it to yourself to take some time to think about it."

As much as I hate to admit it because it's a bitter pill to swallow ...

*They're right.*

# Chapter 31

## Bianca

“You seem off today?” Oakley notes.

Probably because I still haven’t ended my engagement with Stone.

One—because he’s so busy there hasn’t been any time.

And two—how do you look someone you care about in the eyes and tell them you want to downgrade them from your fiancé to your boyfriend?

Ugh, my life is one giant clusterfuck.

“I’m fine,” I grit through my teeth.

He eyes me with amusement. “If you say so.”

Agitated, I get off my bed and start pacing around my dorm room. “But even if I wasn’t, it’s not like I could talk to you about it.”

It’s clear I’ve insulted him because he crosses his arms over his chest. I instantly avert my gaze because the ropey muscles and thick veins running along his forearms are distracting as hell.

“You can tell me anything.”

*Not this.*

I quicken my pacing. “No, I can’t.” I pause. “You *know* why.”

I’m really hoping he fills in the blanks, so I don’t have to say it aloud.

Unfortunately, he doesn’t. “No, I don’t. Because you won’t fucking tell me.”

“That’s because I can’t,” I argue.

“Why?”

“Because I shouldn’t be talking about any of this with you since we used to be...you know, friends with benefits.” I wave a hand. “Fuck buddies who didn’t actually fuck...whatever you want to call it.”

Therefore, hearing me talk about my relationship problems with another man might make things...awkward.

Suddenly, he stands.

Before I can blink, he stalks toward me and doesn’t stop until my back is pressed against the wall and he’s bracing his arms on either side of my head.

“Let’s get one thing straight, baby girl. You were *never* my fuck buddy.”

I can't tell if he's trying to insult me...or compliment me. "I don't know what that's supposed to mea—"

Words die in my throat when his thumb ghosts over my cheekbone. "You were more than that."

His statement—along with the intense look he's aiming my way—punches the breath out of me. "I wish I could remember."

With a solemn expression, his hand cups the back of my neck. "Me too."

I tilt my face up. Our lips are so close we're exchanging the same air. "I need to know what hap—"

A loud knock on the door makes me jump.

"Campus police," someone who definitely sounds like my brother Cole barks.

"Ass," Jace mutters through laughter. "Open up. We brought you some dinner."

Shit on a thousand sticks.

Sheer panic surges through me and I start ushering Oakley toward my closet.

'Get in there,' I mouth.

He gives me a look that says, 'You've got to be fucking kidding me.'

But I'm not.

My closet is so tiny and he's so tall I feel bad cramming him in there, but it's the only option I have. He can't hide under my bed because they might see him, and he can't crawl out of my window because I'm on the sixth floor.

"I'm sorry," I whisper.

I'm about to close the door, but he halts me. "Hold up."

"What's wrong?"

He gives me an impish grin. "Save me some food."

*Good Lord.* This guy and his obsession with food is unmatched.

I can't help but laugh as I close the closet door and walk across my dorm room so I can let my brothers in.

"What took you so long?" Jace questions the moment I see him.

"I aged fifty years," Cole gripes.

They try to walk in, but I start coughing up a lung. "Sorry. I'm actually really sick."

Concern washes over their faces.

"What's wrong? Do you need us to take you to a doctor?"

“No.” I wave a hand. “It’s just a cold. I haven’t been sleeping much lately.”

They exchange a serious glance before Cole says, “Maybe we should let you get some sleep then.”

Jace gives me a wary look. “Are you sure you’re gonna be okay?”

“Positive,” I assure them. “I’m just gonna take some cold medicine and turn in for the night. I’ll be better tomorrow.”

“Okay,” Jace concedes, but it’s clear he’s still worried. “Is there anything we can get you?”

“Nope. I’m good.”

“I’ll call you later,” Jace says before they start walking away.

“Wait,” I call out.

When they stop, I quickly snatch the bag out of Cole’s hand “Have a good night. Thanks for the food.”

I ignore the perplexed expressions on their faces as I sprint back inside.

### **Past...**

Every nerve in my body fires with white-hot pleasure as Oakley continues doing sinful things to me with his talented tongue.

Somehow, he’s managed to not only discover all my hot spots...but find new ones I wasn’t even aware of.

And today is no exception.

After I sucked him off like a good girl, he made it his mission to tease me relentlessly by bringing me to the brink...but always stopping just short of me orgasming.

“Please,” I beg as he flicks my clit.

I’m so close I can taste it.

He groans low and deep, lapping at my slickness with more fervor—like he’s eating my pussy for *his* pleasure instead of mine.

And fuck if that doesn’t drive me even crazier.

“Oh, God.”

My core tightens and my thighs clench around his head with my impending release...however, right before it happens, he grips my hips and flips me over.

Slowly, he drags his thumb down my spine, stopping when he reaches the crack of my ass.

“Ever had anyone play with you here before?”

I instinctively arch my back, hoping my answer won't be a game changer. “No.”

Palms cupping my cheeks, he spreads me wide. “Fuck.”

My heart kicks up and if I was the kind of girl who blushed, I'd be ten different shades of red because I've never been so *exposed* before.

“What else haven't you done?” he murmurs, his stubble scraping the curve of my ass.

I'm not sure what he means.

“Like...in general? Lots of stuff. I've never been to India. Never went skydiving. Never been on a date—”

A gruff laugh cuts me off. “I meant sexually, baby girl.”

*Right.*

Feeling like an idiot, I utter, “Well, seeing as I've never had sex since *someone* still refuses to fuck me, not mu—”

Words die in my throat when he plunges two fingers inside my pussy and drags his tongue against my puckered hole.

*Holy shit.*

The action is so naughty...so filthy...so *forbidden*. My breath hitches and my body hums.

He sinks his teeth into my ass as he curls his fingers inside me. “Such a tight little pussy.” He circles the illicit hole with his tongue again, meticulously siphoning every ounce of my pleasure. “And a sweet little ass.”

My orgasm slams into me so unexpectedly my head spins and the room tilts as I gasp for breath.

“That's it,” he rasps against my flesh as he pumps his fingers. “Let go.”

I shake and spasm, clutching the bedsheets for dear life as I ride out the rest of my climax.

Wagging his eyebrows, he reaches for the blunt on the nightstand. “That was fun.”

“It was,” I agree, still catching my breath. “Speaking of fun, your birthday's next week. Do you have any plans yet?”

I'm kind of hoping he says no, so I can spend the day in bed pleasuring *him*, but he brings the blunt to his lips and nods.

“Boys' night out with your brothers.” Giving his head a shake, he laughs. “And apparently a *girls'* night out a few days later because Dylan and Sawyer don't think it's fair that Jace and Cole are hijacking me for my birthday.”



I don't think it's fair either. "Oh."

I must fail to hide my disappointment because Oakley frowns. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

He pins me with a look. "Don't lie to me."

"Fine," I relent. "I was kind of hoping we could spend time together for your birthday, too."

He shrugs. "You should come out with us for girls' night."

I pretend to think about this for a moment. "Sure...as long as I get to run Dylan over with my car a few times before we leave."

Reaching over, he tugs my hair. "Stop being a brat." A cloud forms over his features. "Dylan's important to me."

I know she is.

However, it still doesn't make me hate her any less.

I open my mouth to tell him so, but a knock on his front door cuts me off.

"Are you expecting company?"

"No." He cups his hand over his mouth. "Who is it?"

"It's Britney, bitch," Cole calls out.

"We brought munchies," Jace adds with a chuckle. "Open up."

Oakley's eyes go big. "Shit."

Shit is right.

The one time I brought up possibly telling my brothers about us so we didn't have to sneak around all the time—Oakley straight-up lost his shit.

I thought it was because he feared a very probable ass-kicking, but that wasn't the case.

Oakley considers Jace and Cole his family and the thought of losing them...

Well, let's just say I care about Oakley so much I understand why we need to stay a secret.

There's no way my brothers will accept the thought of us having a summer *fling*, and given Oakley's mother already walked out on him and he purposely distances himself from his dad because he can't bear to bring himself to tell him he slept with his wife...

I don't want him to lose another person he loves.

Jumping off the bed, Oakley shuffles into his sweatpants. "One second." He swiftly chucks my t-shirt and shorts at me. "Put your clothes on."

“Anytime today, man,” Jace’s impatient ass booms.

The chatter on the other side of the door picks up as I get dressed.

“I bet Casanova’s in there giving one of his many skanks the D,” Cole declares.

Jace laughs dryly. “Probably.”

A surge of anger rushes through me and I charge for the door, determined to give my two asshole brothers a piece of my mind.

Oakley’s toned arm wraps around my waist, tugging me back. “Are you crazy?”

“Maybe,” I hiss. “But you know what I’m not? A *skank*—”

He slams his hand over my mouth and points to the window on the opposite side of the room. “I’ll deal with them. You crawl out there.”

I do a double take because I must not have heard him correctly. He can’t possibly expect *me* to crawl out a damn window. “Seriously?”

He pops the screen off. “It’s gonna look suspect as fuck when they come inside and realize *you’re* here.” His face falls and he looks so freaking cute right now my belly does a little flip. “If they find out about us—”

“They won’t,” I whisper, swiping my pinky through his. “Pinky promise.”

My heart stops when I realize what I did.

*Liam.*

I’m not sure what to make of his expression when he looks down at our adjoined pinkies. “Thanks for having my back.”

Pushing down my emotions, I gesture for him to give me a boost so I can climb outside.

I’m about to heave myself out the window, but he halts me. “Wait.”

“What’s wrong?”

A jolt runs through me when he brushes his nose against the curve of my ear. “Be ready at eight tomorrow night.”

I raise a brow. “Ready for what?”

A smug grin creeps along his mouth. “I’m taking you out on a date.”



The smell of fresh baked zeppole hits my nostrils as I blink up at the

flashing lights and various game stands surrounding us. “You brought me to a carnival.”

After stuffing me full of mint chip ice cream at my favorite spot, I figured he’d take me out to dinner, or maybe the movies...

Anywhere other than this place.

It’s obvious Oakley doesn’t know me like I thought he did, because I don’t do carnivals.

The rides—wild death traps they are—remind me of the car accident that killed my mom.

However, I don’t want him to think I’m a coward, so I simply gesture to my outfit and say, “I’m not dressed for this.”

It’s not exactly a lie. I chose a cute, short black summer dress and my favorite deep purple crop jacket to pair with it.

Oakley doesn’t look at all put off. Quite the contrary actually...it’s almost like he was expecting me to reject being here.

Leaning down, he skims the shell of my ear with his lips. The action sends warm tingles over my breasts and along my thighs.

“Baby girl.”

Closing my eyes, I soak up his addictive scent. “Yeah?”

The deep rasp of his voice rolls through me. “Stop being a pussy.”

When I look up there’s a knowing smirk on his face.

*Dammit.* I hate when he calls me on my shit.

I start to protest, but he grabs my hand and leads me to a zeppole stand where he promptly orders a small bag of them. “You have to have one.”

Despite them smelling like little drops of heaven, I decline. “Do you have any idea how much fat is in that? It’s like a heart attack waiting to happen.”

He takes a huge bite out of one and it takes everything in me not to lick the remaining powdered sugar off his lips. “They’re so fucking good.”

Going back for another bite, he moans around the dough and—holy hell—I have to remind myself we’re in public because I seriously want to jump his bones.

I sweep my eyes up and down his glorious body in wonder. “How do you have a body like that when you eat like crap?”

Laughing, he slaps his flat stomach. “I have a fast metabolism. I also do a hundred push-ups a night.”

That makes sense. God knows I have to work hard at maintaining my figure by not only eating healthy, but staying active.

“Come on,” he urges, holding his zeppole to my mouth. “One bite.”

The eager, almost childlike, look in his eyes makes me fold like a cheap lawn chair.

“Fine.”

*Jesus.* I can see why Oakley moaned before. The little ball is so warm and crisp yet super tender with the perfect amount of sweetness.

*Calories be damned.*

“Holy shit.”

His lips twitch. “Told you.”

I hastily finish it and much to Oakley’s delight devour another one.

I can feel him studying me as I lick the remaining sugar off my fingers.

“What?”

“Nothing. It’s just nice to see you have fun for a change.”

I’m about to remind him I have plenty of fun when we’re in his bed, but he tugs on my hand again. “Come on.”

“Where are we going?”

“Ferris wheel.”

Record. Fucking. Skip.

I swiftly plant my feet into the ground. “I don’t do rides...ever.”

Turning to face me, he frowns. “I had a feeling you’d say that.” He takes a step closer. “How about we make a deal?”

“No.” I shake my head. “I’m not trying to be a bitch and ruin our night, but...” I close my eyes. “I can’t do it.”

Rides scare me. Hell, almost *everything* scares me.

His brows crash together. “Why?”

“Because I don’t want to die.”

He runs the edge of his thumb along my cheekbone. “We’re all gonna die someday, baby girl. But it’s still no reason to miss out on all the fun life has to offer.”

He has a point—a valid one—but it still doesn’t ease my anxiety.

“I’m scared,” I admit, loathing the way my voice shakes.

“I get that.” He tips my chin. “But know that whatever happens...I got you.”

*I know he does.*

And that’s the scariest part of all.

I trust Oakley with everything I have in me.

Somehow, he’s broken all my locks and climbed all my walls.

I vaguely recall what he said before. “You mentioned something about making a deal earlier?”

He fishes a small piece of paper out of his pocket. “I wrote something.” I go to snatch it, but he holds it out of my reach. “But you can’t read it until after the ride is over.”

That’s not fair.

He knows how much I’m dying to read whatever he wrote.

“Fine,” I begrudgingly concede. “Let’s go.”

He interlaces his fingers with mine and I let him lead me to the Ferris wheel of doom.

My knees buckle as we wait in line, and by the time it’s our turn I almost chicken out again, but Oakley squeezes my hand.

And he doesn’t let go.

The moment the ride starts moving I close my eyes, latching on to the safety bar for dear life with one hand and his with my other.

My stomach churns with every stop and I say a silent prayer the ride ends quickly.

His rough voice touches my ear. “Open your eyes.”

I give my head a stubborn shake.

His bottom lip trails along my cheekbone. “For me.”

*Dammit.* He’s not playing fair.

Hesitantly, I do.

I instantly regret it the moment I realize we’re stuck at the top.

My belly does a weird, panicked lurch.

Oakley juts his chin. “You see that?”

*Nope.* I refuse to look at anything other than him.

“See what? That we could plunge to our deaths at any moment?”

I expect him to laugh at my dramatic antics, but his expression grows serious.

“No.” His gaze locks on mine. “That’s the world, baby girl.” The look he gives me steals my breath. “And you’re in it for a reason.”

A sharp twist goes through my chest as I take in the bright lights and the gorgeous view of the town below us.

I’ve been so scared of dying...I haven’t been living.

*Because I’ve been too busy missing them.*

It’s like my life stopped the day my mother’s did.

And then when Liam died, it broke whatever was left of me.

I honestly can't remember the last time I took a breath without the weight of my grief pulling me under. Or the last time I looked at something beautiful and didn't immediately wish they were here to witness it with me.

But maybe—just maybe—it's okay to smile and enjoy life once in a while.

I couldn't save them—and it's something I'll always feel guilty about.

But I can still save me.

Reaching into the pocket of my jacket, I pull out the paper Oakley gave me.

*A soul as black as the night sky.*

*Lips as red as the blood she's out for.*

*The girl who leaves them running scared.*

*She's a beautiful nightmare.*

“You were supposed to read that after the ride,” Oakley reminds me, but I ignore him because I'm too fixated on the words he wrote.

*Words he wrote for me.*

It's so hauntingly gorgeous it cuts straight into my heart.

“Kiss me,” I whisper, because I want Oakley's lips on mine more than my next breath.

I want us...whatever this is.

Gripping the back of my neck, he kisses me long and deep...

*As if he needs this as much as I do.*

# Chapter 32

## Oakley

### Past...

Her gorgeous smile is so bright it rivals all the lights around us as we get off the Ferris wheel. “Thank you for making me do that.”

I’m about to tell her she doesn’t have to thank me for giving her a new experience, but my phone rings.

I press the ignore button when I see Loki’s name flash across the screen. I’ll hit him back later.

Right now, I have more important things on my mind.

Like the girl next to me.

*The one burrowing under my skin.*

Rain starts coming down—not enough to soak us—but enough to send some people ducking for cover.

But not Bianca.

She tugs on my hand, gesturing to the live band that’s playing a stripped-down version of some *Nickelback* song.

“I love this song,” she declares as she walks over to the small stage where they’re performing.

It takes everything in me not to laugh, because almost everyone I know hates the band...but not her.

As usual, the girl is full of surprises.

She ebbs when everyone else flows.

The muscles in my chest draw tight as she sways to the music and fireflies begin flickering around her.

As if they too are utterly captivated by her presence.

The rain picks up, but it still doesn’t stop her.

Hand clutching her heart, she tilts her face up to the night sky, the hem of her now damp dress rising up her thighs as she moves.

I want to remember this moment forever.

Because if life has taught me anything...it’s that beautiful things never

last.

*No matter how much you might want them to.*

I suck in a breath when she smiles again.

She's like the smell of smoke in the distance...warning you to stay away.

*But I can't.*

There's something about her. Something raw and authentic.

The side of her I might not have known if I had kept listening to Hayley's lies...or the feeling in my gut.

The one cautioning me she was trouble and not worth the bullshit.

My chest coils as I continue observing her, the alarm bells growing louder in my head.

Watching my dad fall apart after my mom left showed me what a woman can do to a man—the way they can annihilate you and leave you with nothing once they're through with you—and then I let Crystal do it to me.

I'm not looking to repeat the mistake.

Her dark eyes lock on mine, luring me in. "Dance with me."

I shake my head, taking a step back.

Bianca Covington is the type of woman who could steal a man's soul and then destroy his existence when she's done.

If I had any sense, I'd stay far away.

She stops moving, that gorgeous smile falling off her lips as thunder booms above us. "Please."

Like a moth to a flame, I find myself moving closer, drawn to this frustrating—yet fascinating paradox of a girl I have no business fooling around with.

I grip her waist. "I don't dance."

*But I do...for her.*



# Chapter 33

## Oakley

“I know you care about her, Oak,” my dad states. “But you need to move on. You might not realize it yet, but there’s only one way this story ends.”

I place some Cheerios in a bowl for C.J. Given she had a meltdown last time, I decided to keep them in stock at my apartment.

“And how’s that?”

His expression is solemn. “With your heart getting smashed.”

C.J. gives me a cheesy grin when I hand her the bowl.

“She’s marrying another guy,” my dad points out like I’m not all too aware of that fact. “Not to mention, you know how the Covingtons are.”

I don’t follow. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Jason Covington knows how to be a shark when he wants to be. It’s why he’s so successful. I wouldn’t put it past him to file a lawsuit and sue for damages for his daughter.” He shrugs. “Will he win? Of course not, because he’d be going against me and I’d nail his goddamn balls to the judge’s bench. But it doesn’t mean it won’t be tedious and a pain in the ass to deal with.”

My dad is one of the smartest men I know, but personal injury attorney he is not. “If the Covingtons were gonna go after me, they would have done it by now.”

When he starts to protest, I say, “We live in California, Dad. You only have six-months to sue for damages after a car accident.” Inhaling a breath, I add, “Or one year from the date the injury was first discovered.”

Both of which have passed.

I’d be lying if I said a small part of me wasn’t hoping they’d sue my sorry ass...but they never did.

He looks impressed. “Okay, fair enough...but still.”

Annoyance flares in my gut. “But still *what?*”

“She’s getting married to a guy who isn’t you. Therefore, she has no business coming around you and screwing with your head.”

Christ almighty. Here we fucking go.

“She’s not.”

He pins me with a look that makes it clear he doesn't believe that for one second.

"She's lost." Annoyed, I grip the back of my neck. "Confused. She doesn't know which end is up and her family has her stuck in a box because they think it's the best way to protect her." I cut my gaze to his. "But you can't stick a girl like Bianca in a box for too long because sooner or later she'll crawl her way out and make the world her bitch again."

Because that's what my girl does.

She fights just as hard as she loves.

And that side of her is still in there...she just has to tap into it.

He scrubs a hand down his face and exhales. "I know you care about her. And yes, she's very beautiful, I'll give her that. But that's exactly what makes her the kind of woman who will leave you with nothing once she's decided she's bored with you and kicks your ass to the curb."

I know he's speaking from personal experience, but he's got it all wrong.

Even at her worst, Bianca still gave a fuck about the people she loved. She wouldn't intentionally hurt them, let alone throw them away like garbage.

She's not a potential trophy wife with her eye on her future husband's bank account like my dad's making her seem.

"She's not Crystal."

"I didn't say that."

"She's not Mom either," I hiss.

He grimaces. "What makes you so sure about that?"

"Because I fucking know her," I roar. "And I'm getting real fucking tired of you acting like I'm some goddamn little boy instead of a grown man who can handle his shit."

He pinches the bridge of his nose. "I just don't want you walking down the same path I did."

I know he's scared and wants to spare me from that potential pain because he loves me.

But this is my life. Therefore, seeing her is my fucking decision.

Not his.

"Uh-oh," C.J. calls out.

The moment I look her way she takes the bowl of Cheerios and dumps it over her head.

Then she grins.

I can't help but laugh. "Guess you didn't want any more of those, huh?"

My dad scoops her up and puts her in his lap. "We have to get going anyway." He covers her ears. "Crystal will lose her shit if I'm late dropping her off."

I wince. "How's the custody battle going?"

"Let's just say if there was a town called petty-ville Crystal would be the mayor of it." He groans. "She's requesting twenty grand a month in alimony and child support...along with sole custody."

Jesus fucking Christ. The money is one thing, but not letting him have any rights to his own kid?

"That's fuck—" Catching myself, I mutter, "Fudged up."

"Tell me about it." He uncovers C.J.'s ears and rubs his nose against hers. "Mommy doesn't realize who's she's messing with and that nothing's gonna keep me from my favorite little munchkin."

C.J. starts giggling right before she blows raspberries on his forehead. "Dada."

Taking a wipe out of her diaper bag, he cleans his face. "You still going to meetings every day?"

Haven't missed one yet and I don't plan to.

"Yup. I catch one before work."

He stands. "Good." He looks at C.J. "Say bye to your brother."

"Bye-bye." She makes grabby hands for me so I lean down. "Love, Uh-oh."

*Jesus.* This freaking kid. "Love you, too."

Before I can stop her, she finds an abandoned Cheerio in her dress and sticks it in my mouth.

I try not to laugh but fail. I wouldn't put it past her to start a restaurant when she grows up. This way she can feed people whenever she wants.

"Thanks for the snack, C.J.," I mumble as I walk them out.

My dad stops short when we reach the front door. "Oak?"

"Dad?"

His gaze snaps to mine. "I know I'm giving you a lot of shit about talking to her, but I just want the best for you...and I really don't think she's it."

With that, he walks out.

A tight knot forms in my chest. *He's wrong.*

Reaching inside my t-shirt, I pull out the St. Christopher pendant and feather that belong to her.

Bianca Covington was the best thing that ever happened to me...  
*And I fucked it all up.*

# Chapter 34

## Bianca

Stone lied to me.

He told me he wrote that poem, but he didn't.

Oakley did.

God, I'm so angry I could scream.

I glance at the clock. Stone will be here any minute to pick me up for the party we're supposed to go to for Ruth's birthday and I can't wait to see him so I can give him a piece of my goddamn mind.

I continue digging through some old purses in my closet, searching for the poem so I can confront him with the evidence before he can attempt to skirt around it.

*He lied.*

And yes, I'm lying to him about my secret friendship with Oakley and two wrongs don't make a right, but...

I hiss when my finger slices across a piece of paper.

"Dammit."

I'm about to get a Band-Aid for my papercut, when a note scrawled in my handwriting catches my eye.

*I'm not good with words like you are, but I figured I'd try anyway.*

*I know you hate your birthday because it reminds you of your mom, but despite how much she disgusts me...I'm also grateful to her.*

*Because she brought you into the world.*

*This beautifully broken yet incredible person who's fundamentally changed me for the better.*

*Because you're the only one who's ever been able to break through my walls and truly see me.*

*Happy birthday, Oakley.*

*Thank you for being born.*

*Thank you for saving me...even when it's from myself.*

*Always yours,  
Bianca*



**Past...**

My hands turn clammy as I fold the letter and place it on Oakley's kitchen table.

*Get a grip.*

I'm not the kind of girl who gets clammy hands and butterflies in her stomach.

I'm also not the kind of girl who writes love letters...but here we fucking are.

I've been searching my brain for weeks, trying to come up with the perfect present to get Oakley for his birthday—well, aside from my mouth on that gigantic dick of his—but I couldn't come up with anything.

Until this morning.

Given he writes poems, I figured he might enjoy something written by me.

Or maybe not, because I'm not nearly as good as he is with his words.

I did, however, write him something straight from the heart.

Something genuine.

I glance at the clock above the oven.

Oakley told me he'd be back around two a.m., but it's now well past three.

Not that I should be worried, because he's out with my brothers having his boys' night so I know he's safe.

I'm about to slip into his bed and wait for him there, but the latch on his front door clicks open.

A moment later a very drunk Oakley stumbles inside...but he's not alone.

He—along with my equally drunk brothers—are standing on either side of him, slurring the words to some rap song.

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I mutter a curse.

I glare at Jace who up until now has always been the responsible one. “I thought you were the designated driver.”

He glances at his friend. “Oak told me I was being a buzzkill and fired me.”

Oakley and Cole snort.

I open my mouth to start screaming about the dangers of driving drunk, but Jace reaches over and pats my head. “Relax. We took an Uber home.” His face twists in confusion. “Why are you here?”

*Dammit.* Even plastered, Jace is too perceptive for his own good.

Ignoring him, I start herding the drunk trio over to the couch, however it’s the equivalent of wrangling puppies because Cole starts raiding the cabinets looking for food, Jace trips over the coffee table, and Oakley announces he has to take a leak before venturing to the bathroom.

“Does he ever go food shopping?” Cole whines as he joins a nearly passed out Jace on the couch. “I’m hungry.” He looks up at me. “Make me food.”

Hands on my hips, I turn my furious glare on him. “I’m your sister, dipshit, not your servant.”

He pouts. “Come on.”

“Fine.” Walking over to the kitchen table, I pick up my cell. “I’ll order you a pizza.”

At that, Jace perks up. “Make sure you ask for pineapple.”

“Dude, *no*,” Cole argues as I bring the phone to my ear. “Pineapple doesn’t belong on pizza, you fucking freak of nature.”

“Fuck you, pretty boy,” Jace snaps before shoving him. “We’re getting pineapple.”

Cole shoves him back. “No, we’re not.”

Jace stands—or rather, he tries to—but he’s so drunk he wobbles. “Pine-fucking-apple.”

Cole staggers to his feet. “Meat-fucking-ball.”

Oh, for fuck’s sake.

“Hello,” a groggy sounding Sawyer answers after the third ring. “Bianca, are you okay?”

“Oh, *I’m* fine.” I clear my throat. “However, I need you to come to Oakley’s and get your boyfriend who is so drunk he’s seconds away from fist fighting his brother—who is also drunk, by the way—over pineapple pizza.”

“Shit.” I can practically hear her jumping out of bed. “I’ll be right there.”  
I promptly end the call.

Mouth agape, Cole places his hand over his heart. “Traitor.” He looks at Jace. “Can you believe she called Sawyer and tattled on me?”

Shrugging, Jace plops down on the couch. “Not my problem.” Folding his arms behind his head, he places his feet on the coffee table and peers up at me. “Pineapple. *Now.*”

Flashing him some teeth, I bring the phone to my ear again. “Sure thing.”

Dylan picks up after the second ring. “Hi—”

“I need you to come to Oakley’s and pick up your drunk boyfriend.  
*Now.*”

With that, I hang up.

Cole snorts. “Well played, little sis.”

Reaching over, Jace smacks the back of his head. “Shut up.”

They start arguing again, but it dawns on me that Oakley’s been in the bathroom for a while now.

Leaving them to their bickering, I walk inside the bedroom and head for the adjoining bathroom.

The door swings open right before I reach it.

Oakley’s expression is almost painful. “You.”

“Me.”

Next thing I know he’s shoving me up against the wall in a kiss so sizzling my skin breaks out in goose bumps.

“Do you have any idea what you fucking do to me?” His hot mouth skates down my jaw. “How much you fuck me up?”

I’m about to remind him that my brothers are in the next room and they can walk in on us at any moment, but I lose all sense of logic when his mouth dips to my neck and he starts untying the drawstring to my pants.

“I was supposed to have fun tonight,” he rasps against my flesh as his hand disappears inside my panties. “But all I could think about was coming home to you.” I’m trying to process his words, but he grinds the heel of his hand against my clit. “How much I crave this tight pussy.”

A hiss escapes me when he slips a finger inside my slickness.

He groans low and deep. “I love how you’re always so goddamn wet for me.”

It takes every ounce of willpower not to moan when he picks up his pace, teasing me into oblivion.



“Fuck. I could take you right here, baby girl.” My entire body trembles when his teeth sink into my neck, hard enough to leave a mark as he adds another finger. “Bury my dick inside you and make you mine forever.” Something obscure passes in his gaze. “That way you’d never forget me.”

I open my mouth to tell him to do it, but he freezes...right before he starts shaking and falls to the floor.

*Shit.*

“Oakley’s having a seizure,” I shout.

My heart’s in my throat as I rush to grab a pillow off the bed and place it under his head.

A moment later Jace and Cole are at my side.

“Is he okay?” Cole asks.

“How long has he been seizing?” Jace questions.

“About twenty seconds...so far.”

My mind is spinning trying to figure out how one moment we were fooling around and the next...he’s having a seizure.

Oakley has epilepsy, so seizures aren’t exactly foreign—but I also know his seizures are almost always triggered by severe emotional distress...or drugs.

My stomach drops. “Were you guys with him the whole time tonight?”

Jace and Cole exchange a confused glance.

“Yeah,” Cole answers. “Why?”

“Go,” I tell them. “You two are drunk. I’ve got this.”

They start to protest, but the look I shoot them tells them I mean business. “I mean it, assholes. Get out.”

I wait for Oakley’s seizure to end before I shove my hand inside his pocket.

A ball of dread lodges in my throat when I pull out a tiny plastic bag. It’s empty, but I notice a faint white powdery residue.

Oakley blinks up at me when he comes to. He looks so disoriented I almost forget how livid I am with him.

“You had a seizure,” I whisper, running my hand along his forehead.

I have every intention of confronting him about what I found, but right now I know he needs to rest.

“Is he okay?” Dylan asks rushing into the room.

Sawyer quickly follows suit. “Is there anything—”

“He’ll be fine,” I tell them. “But if you two really want to help, take Jace

and Cole home because the calmer it is around here, the better.”

Sawyer nods. “No problem.” Looking down, she blows Oakley a kiss. “Feel better, Oak.”

Standing, I head over to his dresser and pull out a pair of sweatpants for him.

Dylan tries to pry them away from me. “You don’t have to do that, Bianca. I can—”

“No,” I snap, tightening my hold. “I’ve got this.”

I narrow my eyes, daring her to challenge me.

I can’t decipher the expression on her face, but fortunately for her sake, she’s smart enough to back down.

“Fine. If you need anything, let me know.”

“I won’t.”

I can practically taste the retort on her lips, but she bends down and smacks a kiss on Oakley’s cheek. “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

He gives her a groggy half-smile before closing his eyes.



“You made me grilled cheese and soup,” Oakley whispers as he rolls over in bed.

Snuggling closer to him, I push his dark blond hair out of his eyes. “I did.”

The silence stretches between us until the only sound in the room is our breathing.

“Oakley.”

I wait for him to look at me before I utter, “I found the cocaine in your pocket.”

I wait for him to say something—*anything*—but he doesn’t.

He averts his gaze, almost like it hurts to look at me.

“Thanks for the food.”

The dismissive tone of his voice makes it clear this conversation is over and he wants me gone.

*Tough shit.*

“You could have died,” I inform him, even though I know he’s already well aware of that.

Oakley is many things, but stupid isn't one of them.

Sighing, he reaches for the blunt on his nightstand and lights it. "Spare me the pep talk. It's not like I do drugs every day." Inhaling, he smirks. "Except weed."

That may be true, but it doesn't make it right.

Because even when he's not doing cocaine, ecstasy—and God only knows what else—he's still drinking nearly every day.

Nerves bunch in my stomach as I struggle to find the right words.

Then again sometimes the *right words* are the exact ones staring you in the face.

The ones that hurt too much to acknowledge.

"You have a problem, Oakley."

His jaw tics, the tendons along his neck bunching as he brings the blunt to his lips and inhales. "I have lots of fucking problems."

I refuse to let him skirt around this. "You know what I mean."

He takes a deep drag, filling the room with the smoke from his marijuana. "Like I said, it's not like I do hard drugs every day."

I'm more concerned about *why* he feels the need to do them at all.

Pushing the covers off, I get out of bed because our bodies touching is too much of a distraction from how important this conversation is. "Why did you do drugs last night?" I hold his gaze. "And don't you *dare* lie to me because we don't do that with each other."

His voice is a rough, painful scrape as he rakes a hand through his hair. "I wanted to escape."

"From what?"

The look he shoots me sucks all the oxygen out of the room. "You."

My throat grows tight as I try to process his words. "Is that your fucked-up way of saying this thing between us is..."

I let my sentence trail off before I can utter the word *real*.

Because once I say it—there's no taking it back and the magic between us might go away.

Oakley's not the kind of guy who does relationships, he's made that perfectly clear from the beginning.

Expression pensive, he speaks through a thick cloud of smoke. Like what he's about to say next will change everything between us.

"You do things to me."

Everything in me goes still. "What kinds of things?"

His voice is so low it's nothing but a faint rasp, but I hear it.

"You make me feel."

The air between us becomes heavy as I take a step toward him.

On one hand—Oakley acknowledging he has feelings for me is...well, everything I've ever wanted.

*But it's not worth the risk of him using drugs.*

"I need you to stop doing drugs."

The crack in my voice takes us both by surprise.

His eyes soften. "Baby—"

"I can't watch another person I care about kill themselves," I scream, fighting the strangled sob trying to rip its way out of my throat.

*The lie I've been trapped in.*

It's too late, though. The dam inside me has cracked with the force of a missile.

Hot tears spill down my face as I turn to run away.

However, I don't get the chance because Oakley wraps his arms around me from behind and tugs me against him. "Talk to me."

"No."

I kick and squirm, trying my hardest to get away, but that only makes him tighten his hold on me.

The secret I'm keeping is the equivalent of cinderblocks tied to my ankles and I so desperately want to be free.

But I can't...because freedom comes at a price.

"Baby girl."

His voice is laden with so much concern, it slashes the last bit of control I was desperately trying to hold on to.

"She killed herself," I cry out, the tears falling faster.

He freezes. "Who?"

Oh God, it hurts. It hurts so fucking much.

Like a sledgehammer straight to the heart.

"My mom."

"What?" His breath hitches. "I thought she—"

"I lied," I scream so loud the windows rattle. "And then I made Liam lie too because we needed to protect her."

I shudder in his embrace as he carries me back to bed and proceeds to cradle me in his arms.

"I was so scared, Oakley. I didn't know what happened...it was like she

just snapped. She kept talking about going somewhere without pain, and when I asked her where that was.” Another tremble rolls through me. “She said heaven.” I curl up in his arms. “I tried to stop her...but I couldn’t.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” he rasps. “None of this was your fault.” Anger crosses his features. “Christ. I can’t believe she almost k—”

“She was sick,” I utter, quickly coming to her defense before he can spew the words. “Liam and I...we *had* to protect her.”

Because she was our mom and we loved her so much.

He looks like he wants to argue, but he holds me tighter, strumming his fingers up and down my spine as I continue to cry my heart out.

“Promise me you’ll stop doing drugs,” I choke out between sobs.

Because if I lose him too...

*I won’t survive it.*

His throat bobs on a swallow. “I’ll never make you a promise I can’t keep. You know that.”

His admission only makes me cry harder. “Then make me a promise you can.”

“I’ll try,” he whispers against my ear. “I’ll try for you.”

I hold out my pinky finger. “Promise?”

Giving me a small nod, he hooks his pinky through mine.

And then he hauls me against him, wrapping his arms around me so tight it steals all the air from my lungs.

I bury my damp face against his chest. “Oakley?”

“Yeah?”

“You make me feel things, too.”

*Things my mother warned me not to feel.*

My stomach clenches as I watch him lick a drop of ketchup off his thumb before he goes back to eating his burger.

Today I successfully managed the art of parallel parking. To celebrate my small victory, we grabbed some loaded bacon cheeseburgers for dinner on the way home.

Well, Oakley did.

I’m currently pushing my veggie burger around my plate wondering why everything he does turns me on so damn much.

As if sensing my internal struggle, his lips curve in a slow smirk. “You look like you want some.”

“I don’t eat meat,” I tease, playing coy.

That only makes his smirk deepen as he waggles his eyebrows. “I guess you only suck it then, huh?”

I should roll my eyes at his crude remark, but I find myself laughing.

I love that we share the same perverted sense of humor.

Trying to keep a straight face, he holds his burger out to me. “Well, if you change your mind, offer still stands.” He winks. “You can have my meat anytime you want.”

I’m about to tell him I want it right here on this table, but the appetizing scent of his burger fills my nostrils. I can’t deny that it smells delicious. Way more delicious than the poor excuse between two buns I’m attempting to eat does.

My stomach grumbles, betraying me. “I can’t.”

His brows furrow. “Why?”

Guilt prickles through me and my shoulders slump. “Liam.”

Clearly perplexed, he shakes his head. “Wh—”

“I swore off eating meat with him so he didn’t have to do it alone.” My stomach grumbles again. Louder this time. “But your burger smells really good and I’m gonna need you to finish it soon so it stops tempting me.”

His expression turns serious. “I’m not trying to be a dick, but don’t you think it’s time for you to start living life on your terms?”

If only it were that simple. “But—”

“But nothing, baby girl.” He holds my gaze. “Liam’s dead...and as much as that sucks, not eating meat won’t bring him back.” A groove in his forehead deepens. “Take a bite, Bianca. You might like it, or you might hate it, but either way, it will be *your* fucking choice.”

Oakley has a point, I realize as I proceed to take a small bite.

Liam didn’t force me to become a vegetarian, but I’m not the same person I was back then.

It’s time to start making my own decisions.

A delectable taste fills my mouth. “It’s good.”

Smiling, Oakley pushes his plate toward me. “Finish it.”

I shake my head. “Later.” I chew my bottom lip wryly. “There’s something else I really want right now.”

His lids lower. “That so?”

I’m about to answer, but his palm starts traveling up my thigh.

My heartbeat grows erratic as his hand slides up my shorts.

“Do you want to go to your bedroom?”

His throat works as his fingers make their way inside my panties. “No.” He teases my clit with the pad of his thumb. “I want to make you come for me right here in this chair.”

*Oh, God.* I’m so turned on I can’t even see straight.

Mouth parting, I watch the tendons in his arm flex as he pumps those long fingers inside me.

My head lolls back as shivers race up my spine. “Jesus—”

A knock on the door cuts me off.

Undeterred, Oakley continues to work me. “Whoever it is will go away.”

“Open up, Oak. It’s us,” Dylan calls out.

“We brought you birthday treats,” Sawyer adds.

“Shit,” Oakley mutters as he removes his hand. “I forgot that was tonight.”

I mentally curse Dylan and Sawyer for ruining my impending orgasm as I fix my shorts. “Forgot what was tonight?”

“Girls’ n—” Oakley starts to say, but another loud knock cuts him off. “Relax, I’m coming.”

*Too bad I’m not.*

The moment he opens the door, Dylan and Sawyer bounce inside, carrying a shit-ton of stuff in their hands.

“I know you said you didn’t want to go to the bar,” Dylan begins. “But we still wanted to celebrate with you.”

Smiling from ear to ear, Sawyer adds, “So instead of having a girls’ night out...we’re having a girls’ night in.” Her smile widens when she sees me. “Hey, Bianca. I didn’t know you were here, but it’s perfect timing.”

I raise a brow. “Perfect timing for what?”

Sawyer and Dylan quickly proceed to empty their bags.

From the looks of things, it’s safe to say they raided every beauty product aisle at the local dollar store.

I have to stifle a laugh when I catch the horrified look on Oakley’s face.

Visibly distressed, he holds up what appears to be a face mask. “What the fuck is this shit?”

“It helps clear your pores,” Sawyer answers cheerfully. “We also brought stuff to do your nails.”

He backs away like a wild animal caught in a trap. “Nuh-uh. Not fucking happening.” He slaps his chest. “In case you two are blind, I’m a *dude*. Get this girly shit out of my house.”

“Relax,” Dylan says with a roll of her eyes. “One spa night with us won’t revoke your man card.” She grins. “Plus, we also made a big jug of margaritas, so you’ll be nice and relaxed soon.”

My chest coils.

It’s been almost a week since Oakley promised me he’d *try* and he’s been doing really well.

Sure, he still works for Loki and at *No Name*, but I haven’t seen him so much as pick up a beer lately.

The first few days of his newfound sobriety he was downright miserable and stayed in bed, but he was strong enough to get through it.

However, I’m worried he’s going to give in to temptation soon—especially now that he and his closest friends are twenty-one so having a few drinks while hanging out is pretty much second nature now.

I can tell he’s fighting an internal war with himself as he mulls this over.

*Come on, Oakley.* Stay strong.

Blowing out a breath, he squeezes the back of his neck. “Fine. Nix the margaritas and I’m in.”

And just like that, the tension in my chest dissipates and swells with pride.

Dylan shrugs. “Okay. We can make daiquiris instead if you—”

“Jesus Christ, Dylan,” I snap, trying my hardest not to throttle her. “Quit forcing him to drink.”

Dylan’s eyes widen in surprise. “I’m not. I just...” Visibly uncomfortable now, she shuffles her feet. “I didn’t mean—”

“I know you didn’t,” Oakley interjects. “But I...uh. I’ve been trying to cut down.”

Her face perks up. “Really?” She wraps her arms around him. “That’s awesome.” Expression serious, she peers up at him. “I’m proud of you, Oak.”

Sawyer picks up a jug and pours the liquid down the sink. “Me too.”

“For fuck’s sake,” Oakley grunts. “Don’t you two go all after school special on me.” He pats his stomach. “I’m just trying to work on my abs.”

Dylan and Sawyer roll their eyes before all three of them share a laugh.

I hate that he felt the need to turn something serious—something he should be giving himself credit for—into a joke, but it doesn’t surprise me.

Sawyer holds up two packages. “What kind of face mask does everyone want? I have charcoal and cucumber aloe.”



“And that’s my cue to leave,” I say, heading for the door.

Oakley frowns. “You’re leaving?”

“Come on, Bianca,” Sawyer whines. “Stay.”

Dylan goes silent.

*Feeling’s mutual, bitch.*

Which is exactly why I need to leave. I refuse to spend another second with her.

Smiling tersely, I point to my face. “Sorry, I’m not undoing all the work my professional esthetician Stella does with your cheap little face masks.”

With that, I start to leave, but Oakley’s intense gaze holds mine.

‘See you later,’ he mouths as Sawyer and Dylan venture into the living room.

Pretending to think about it, I give him a small shrug.

Blue orbs darkening, he leisurely brings his finger to his mouth.

*The same finger that was inside me moments ago.*

My cheeks heat and I want to smack the shit-eating grin I catch on his face as I close the door behind me.

He knows damn well I’ll be back.



I’m walking up the staircase when I hear it.

“Hey.”

I turn around at the sound of Jace’s voice. “Hey. I didn’t know you were here.”

“I dropped Dylan and Sawyer off for their girls’ night with Oak.” He shrugs. “I figured since my trip to New York is coming up soon we could hang out and catch up.”

Am I mad that Jace, Dylan, Sawyer, and Cole are all going on some kind of couples vacation to New York in two weeks? No.

Am I hurt that no one asked me if I wanted to tag along to the big apple? A little.

However, I’m not one to be a bitter Betty. Well, not *anymore*.

Especially since my dad has another work trip scheduled around that time, which means I’ll have tons of alone time with Oakley and we won’t have to sneak around.

“Yeah, sure. I think there’s a new zombie horror movie out if you want to go.”

I loathe horror films—particularly ones featuring zombies because they make me jumpy—but Jace happens to love them.

And truth be told, I miss hanging out with my brother. We grew even closer after Liam’s death, but lately it feels like we’re light-years apart.

I’m not sure what to make of the look on his face, but whatever it is... it’s not good.

“Bianca.”

“Yes?”

I really wish I knew why he was acting so weird. Almost like he’s mad at me.

A small wrinkle forms between his brows. “We need to talk.”

Sensing what he’s probably angry about, I quickly utter, “Look, if this is about Dylan—”

“It’s not about Dylan.” He’s quiet for a beat. “It’s about Oakley.”

“Oakley?” I all but screech as nerves bunch in my stomach. “What’s up with Oakley?”

“You tell me,” he snaps. “You’re the one who’s been off gallivanting with him all summer.”

“Gallivanting?” I repeat with a sardonic laugh. “What are you, eighty?”

Jace’s cheeks hollow in frustration. “You know what I mean.”

“No,” I deadpan. “I don’t.”

If this is his way of trying to ask if Oakley and I are a thing, he needs to put his big boy pants on and come right out with it instead of giving me the third degree.

He digs inside his pocket and pulls out a folded piece of paper. “Then explain this.”

I snatch the paper from him. Both my heart and stomach flip in succession when I realize it’s the letter I wrote Oakley for his birthday.

“Where did you get this?”

He crosses his arms. “I found it on Oakley’s kitchen table the other night.”

I was wondering why Oakley never said anything about it.

I was starting to think what I wrote was horrible, but as it turns out, he never got a chance to read it.

Because Jace stole it.

And now he thinks there's something going on between us.

My stomach knots. *I have to fix this.*

I know how much Oakley cares about his friendship with Jace and Cole. Hell, he considers them his actual brothers.

I quickly straighten my spine, armed with a glare. "Okay, first of all—you had no right to read this letter, because it's not yours." My lips purse. "Secondly—this isn't what you think. Oakley and I are friends."

He snorts. "Bullshit. Oak is my best friend and I've never said some shit like that to him."

I shrug my shoulders. "Yeah, well, maybe you should."

He narrows his eyes. "Tell me what the hell is going on between you two. Right fucking now."

"Nothing is going on between us." Realizing I have to give him something more than that, I add, "Yes, we've grown close this summer, but it's not like that. He's been...a really great friend. Not only did he teach me how to drive, but he listens to me talk about my problems. And best of all? Unlike *you*, he never judges me."

His face falls. "I don't judge—"

I sharpen my gaze.

"Okay, fine," he relents. "You have a point." He blows out a heavy breath. "I just wasn't sure what to think between him teaching you how to drive, and you always hanging out at his house all the time lately, and then finding this letter...it doesn't look right."

"We're just friends," I reiterate.

Friends who like to tear off each other's clothes and can't seem to get enough of one another.

He frowns. "If you say so."

Meeting his stare, I put the final nail in the coffin. The one that will make him believe me. "You know I'd never lie to you, Jace."

It's the truth. Apart from our mother, I've never, ever lied to him.

*Until now.*

Raking a hand through his hair, he heaves a sigh. "I know. Which is exactly why I came to you instead of him. He's my best friend and I'd do anything for him, but the dude's lied to me more times than I can count so I can't exactly trust him to keep it real with me." He chokes out a laugh. "And now I feel stupid for laying into you, because of course you guys aren't together. The two of you don't make any sense. Not only are you complete

opposites, you couldn't be farther from his type.”

I swallow the lump rising in my throat. “Right.”

He gives me a smile. “Now that *that* shit's settled, let's go see the zombie movie.”

Watching a zombie movie after dismantling this bomb is the last thing I want to do, but I force myself to go along with it anyway. “Sure.”

It's safe to say my brother isn't the only one questioning how trustworthy Oakley is now.

# Chapter 35

## Bianca

Holy shit.

Emotions tangle in my chest as I place the note down and try to process everything.

*I told Oakley about my mom.*

I knew we had a bond and we were close, but didn't know I trusted him so much that I'd tell him the one thing I've never told anyone.

Tears prickle my eyes as I get off the floor.

Oakley was right. We were way more than fuck buddies who didn't fuck.

What we had between us was...*real*.

I'm so lost in my thoughts I don't even hear the latch on my door click open.

"Are you ready?" Stone questions, striding inside my dorm room.

I seriously regret making him a spare key now because just the sight of him fills me with anger.

I can't help but feel like he took something precious from me by lying about that poem.

I glare at him. "No, I'm not."

To say he's taken aback would be an understatement. "Wh—"

"You didn't write that poem."

"What poem?"

He looks so confused and it only makes me more irate.

It's all I can do not to tear my hair out as I stalk toward him. "The one that said I was a beautiful nightmare."

He thinks about this for a moment before making a face like he tastes something rancid. "That thing?" His eyes roll. "Okay, fine, I didn't write it. I don't know why it's such a big deal—"

"Because you *lied* about it," I scream so loud the windows vibrate. "I loved that poem. It made me feel special and important and I thought you wrote it from your heart, but you didn't."

Oakley did.

Hands on his hips, he blows out a breath. “You’re right, I lied.”

I’m about to start screaming again, but he closes the distance between us and locks his arms around me. “But I only did it because I wanted to impress you.” He looks sheepish. “And because I got scared that maybe some other guy was trying to woo you by writing poems. I didn’t want him to steal you away from me.”

His remorseful expression makes it clear he regrets it, but still.

“You shouldn’t have lied.”

“I know. I’m sorry, Bourne.” He glances at his watch. “Not to be a jerk, but can we shelf this for a bit? We’re supposed to be at Ruth’s parents’ house by nine.”

I should tell him to go fuck himself and go there alone.

But that’s the thing about guilt...

Sometimes it makes you do things you shouldn’t.

*Like avoid conversations you need to have.*



The party’s in full swing by the time we arrive at Ruth’s house.

Stone whistles as we look around the giant atrium filled with fancy people wearing even fancier clothes. “I knew her parents were loaded, but not *this* loaded.”

He’s right. This isn’t a typical college party by any means.

Sure, there are some college students buzzing around, but instead of beer pong, flip cup, and rap music...there are waiters passing around champagne and caviar on silver trays.

I’m starting to feel underdressed in my short silky black dress and red heels.

I can tell Stone’s uncomfortable too, because he *always* is when it comes to wealthy people.

“Breathe, Stone,” I whisper. “They’re just people.”

“Easy for you to say,” he hisses as he adjusts his tie. “You grew up with a silver spoon in your mouth.”

I have to stifle the urge to tell him that *he* grew up with a stick lodged in his asshole, but you don’t see me constantly ridiculing him about it.

“You’re here,” someone shouts behind us.

A moment later a very bubbly Ruth runs over to us.

Her fiancé Eugene follows behind her like a lost puppy.

After exchanging quick hugs, she focuses on Stone. “I was just telling my dad all about you.” She smiles. “He’s *dying* to meet you. Stay here while I go get him.”

Before anyone can say a word, she runs off.

Stone looks like he’s going to puke. “Her dad is the head of the neurology department at Stonybrook Hospital.” His voice shakes a little. “He has a lot of connections so don’t say anything that will embarrass me, okay?”

Yeah...I’m going to pretend like he didn’t just say that.

Stuffing down my irritation, I grab a champagne glass from one of the passing waiters.

I’m not a drinker, but holy hell I could use one right about now.

Ruth comes back with a tall, older gentleman in tow who I can only assume must be her dad.

Appearing green now, Stone straightens his spine and holds out his hand. “Hello, Dr. Kelp, it’s so nice to finally meet you.”

The older man smiles as he shakes it. “I can say the same.” He places his arm around Ruth’s shoulders. “My Ruthie here has told me nothing but great things about you.” He winks and does that stupid mock gun thing. “Great job killing it on your last exam. Ruthie said you received the highest score in class.”

Yes, he did. Because it’s all he could talk about last week.

I down my glass of champagne and grab another.

Stone tries to act modest, but he doesn’t do a very good job. “Well, what can I say? Your daughter makes a terrific study partner.”

*Does she now?*

Ruth beams like he handed her all the stars in the sky. “Only because you’re so smart.”

My eyes drift to poor Eugene who looks like a fish out of water.

Mr. Kelp slaps him on the back. “Eugene, why don’t you do us a favor and fetch us some of those spring rolls.”

My mouth practically drops open because *rude*.

“Actually,” I interject. “I’ll do it.” I give Mr. Kelp a sugary sweet smile. “I’m Bianca by the way.”

I shoot Stone a menacing glare as I trek off.

After tracking down a tray of spring rolls, and another glass of

champagne for myself, I head back over.

“It’s been two years since the accident,” I overhear Ruth say as I approach their little circle.

I halt in my tracks, hoping like hell I’m hallucinating their conversation.

“Such a shame,” Mr. Kelp hums. “In my experience, if memories don’t return to the patient before then, they never will. Poor girl sounds like a lost cause.”

White-hot rage surges through me and I clear my throat. *Loudly.*

“Here’s the thing,” I start. “I don’t appreciate being talked about behind my back.” And because I’m enraged, I don’t stop there. “I know they don’t teach this in medical school, but patients are human beings. They don’t deserve to be talked about like goddamn lab rats or reduced to a lost cause.” I shove my tray of eggrolls into Mr. Kelp’s hands. “Here.” Mocking him, I add, “In my experience, if you eat them too fast, you’ll choke on them.”

With that, I stalk off.

Unfortunately, Stone’s right on my heels.

“What the hell are you doing?” Grabbing me by my elbow, he steers me into an empty room. “Do you have any idea how much you’ve just embarrassed me?”

Wow. The fact that he cares about what Mr. Kelp thinks more than me is just...

Straight-up nauseating.

I down my glass of champagne and set the empty glass on a nearby table. “You know what? Fuck this shit.” I pat his shoulder. “Enjoy the rest of your evening with Mr. Kelp and your—” I make air quotes. “‘Terrific study buddy.’” Waving both my middle fingers in the air, I saunter toward the door. “I’m leaving.”

He seizes my arm. “What the hell is going on with you, Bianca? You’re not acting like yourself right now. It’s like I don’t even know you.”

I laugh, but there’s not a single ounce of humor. “Funny. I can say the same about you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Gee, where should I start?” I begin ticking things off with my fingers. “How about the fact that you’ve recently become fond of having sex with me while I’m sleeping. Or, that you let your friends talk about me like I’m some kind of science experiment whether I’m there or not. Or, that you tell me to shut up—”



“Because you were defending *him*,” he roars. “The guy who almost killed you.” He snorts. “And yeah, maybe I do try to turn you on when you’re sleeping in hopes you spare me some attention and affection, but it’s only because you turned into a frigid snob who’s not interested in screwing her fiancé anymore.”

*Holy hell.* Fuck him.

“Well, don’t worry, champ. It seems like *Ruthie* is very interested in screwing you.”

Taking a step back, he laughs. “Oh, Jesus. Is that what you think? That I’m interested in her? For Christ’s sake have you seen her? There are dogs that are better looking.”

Revulsion rolls through me like a boulder going downhill and picking up speed.

Placing his hand on his chest, he says, “I’m not saying I’m perfect, Bourne. But I’m trying to make our relationship a priority. Which is a hell of a lot more than I can say about you these days.”

I am trying to make our relationship a priority. I’m trying so hard I’m practically turning myself inside out doing it.

Irritated, I cross my arms. “What in the actual fuck are you talking about?”

“I asked you how dress shopping went the other day and you didn’t even answer me. It’s like our wedding is the farthest thing from your mind—”

“Because I don’t want to get married!” I shout before I can stop myself.

*Oh, God.* There it is.

Out in the universe.

I should feel bad, but all I can feel is a strange sense of...freedom.

Stone looks like I just sucked all the oxygen out of the room and left him to suffocate.

“What? What do you mean you don’t want to get married?” Slowly, he shakes his head, like he’s trying to process the atomic bomb I’ve just placed on his lap. “You don’t...you don’t love me?”

“No,” I quickly say because it’s not that. “I still care about you, but...” I close my eyes. “Everything happened so fast between us. We got engaged so quickly that I barely had a chance to wrap my head around the accident, graduating, and leaving for college before we were planning a wedding and —”

“Leave,” he croaks.

When I look up, I notice his eyes are glassy.

“I’m sorry, Stone. This isn’t how I wanted to tell you—”

“Leave,” he repeats, harsher this time. “It hurts too much to look at you right now.”

I’m at a loss for what to do because I don’t want to abandon him while he’s so upset...

But I know I’m the one who caused it.

So, I do what I should have done a long time ago.

I walk away so we can have some space.

# Chapter 36

## Bianca

I probably shouldn't have drunk all that champagne.

By the time Oakley arrives at Ruth's house to pick me up, I'm so buzzed I start giggling when I see him pull up on his motorcycle.

"What did the pirate say on his eightieth birthday?"

A curious expression lights his face as he gets off his bike. "What?"

I punch the air. "Aye 'maighty."

His eyebrows shoot up to the sky. "Are you drunk?"

A weary sigh escapes me. "Not nearly enough for the shit night I've had."

He joins me on the curb. "Yeah, you sounded pretty upset on the phone when you called." I can feel him studying me, worry etching his features. "What happened?"

I shake my head. "I don't really want to talk about it."

Because if I do? I'm afraid I'll crack wide open and he'll see everything I've been keeping inside.

Like the fact that I've spent so much time hating and resenting my former self instead of trying to figure out why I became that way in the first place.

Most people would push, but Oakley doesn't. He cocks his head to the side, looking around. "Nice neighborhood."

"Yeah." I touch his arm to get his attention. "Can we get out of here? Stone's still in the house and I don't want him to come out here and..."

"See me?" he finishes for me.

"Yeah." I look down, wondering how the hell I can even begin to untangle the mess I'm trapped in. "We got into a big fight and I kind of, sort of...ended the engagement."

*Welp.* The cat's out of the bag now.

I'm not sure what to make of his expression, but Oakley's definitely not upset about the news. "Oh."

"I'm not ready to get married yet," I explain, even though he didn't ask for one. "I don't know what that means or where that leaves things between

Stone and I, but I feel like a gigantic weight's been lifted off my chest."

*Like I'm no longer drowning.*

He gives my hand a small squeeze. The contact causes a shiver to run down my spine. "Then you know you did the right thing."

That may be true, but right now it just hurts.

Like an open wound that won't heal.

Oakley stands and reaches for my hand to help me up. "Let's get you home." He pauses. "Shit."

"Shit? What's shit? Nothing's shit."

*Well, other than my life at the moment.*

His jaw hardens. "I have my bike."

I shrug, not understanding. "So?"

I've never been on a motorcycle before, but it seems like a lot of fun.

Heat rushes over my face when his eyes peruse my body from head to toe.

"That dress might be an issue." A frown pulls at his mouth and his entire demeanor changes. "I don't want you on my bike."

Color me confused. "Why?"

Those blue orbs harden. "Because the last time I drove with you I almost —"

"But you didn't," I argue before he can finish that sentence. "Sure, I have a few scars, but someone once told me that scars meant I was stronger than what tried to kill me." Rising on my tiptoes, I fold my arms around his neck and look deep into his eyes. "I forgive you, Oakley."

His nostrils flare as pain illuminates his face. "Don't."

Not the reaction I was hoping for. "Don't what?"

"Don't say shit like that when you don't even know what it is you're forgiving me for."

"Then tell me." A groan of frustration leaves me. "Tell me everything that happened between us."

I'm so tired of not knowing.

He unlocks my arms from his neck and walks over to his bike.

I open my mouth to argue some more, but he chucks his helmet at me. "Put this on."

I hold up the shiny black helmet. "Do you have one for you?"

"Let's go," he grunts as he straddles the bike, ignoring my concern.

After securing the helmet on my head, I hop on and wrap my arms around

his waist.

I'm not prepared for how it feels to have our bodies so close or the way it makes my heart race.

Looking over his shoulder, he grinds out, "Hold on tight."

Pressing my cheek against his back, I constrict my grip...

Holding on to him with everything I have.



"We're gonna get arrested," Oakley warns.

I launch another egg at the car then duck behind the bushes. "Not if no one sees us."

He gestures to the carton of eggs on the ground. "Why are we doing this again?"

I pick up another egg. "Because Stone's mom is a bitch, but it would be wrong to punch her. Plus, this is way more fun." I wind my arm back. "This is for forcing me to go with lilies instead of roses like I wanted."

I squeal in delight when the egg goes splat against her windshield.

*Take that, bitch.*

I pick up another one. "This is for saying it would be weird and attention-seeking to have both my brothers and my dad walk me down the aisle."

Oakley picks up the next egg. "This is for driving a Ford when everyone knows they suck."

When I give him a look, he shrugs. "What? It's all I got."

I laugh when he throws it and it lands on the Ford emblem.

"Nice shot."

He flexes. "Thanks, I've been practicing." He points to her car. "She has giant dice hanging from her mirror."

"Basic bitch move," I note.

We throw our eggs at the same time.

Only they don't hit her car...

They hit the car pulling up beside it.

Which happens to belong to her son.

Well, shit.

Oakley yanks me behind the bush just as Stone exits his vehicle.

When I see Oakley's lips twitch, I place a finger over mine, reminding

him to be quiet.

A moment later we hear, “What the fuck?” Followed by, “Goddamn kids.”

And that’s all it takes.

I start laughing so hard it hurts.

“Who’s there?” Stone barks.

Next thing I know, I’m on my back and Oakley’s hovering above me. “You’re gonna get us caught, chuckles.”

I’m honest to God trying to stop, but I can’t. I haven’t had this much fun in forever.

“I can hear you laughing, you little shit,” Stone yells.

A snort escapes me.

Shooting me a warning look, Oakley places his hand over my mouth, but I can tell he’s close to giving in himself.

“Next time you punks pull this crap, I’m calling your parents,” Stone gripes.

The moment his footsteps fade away, the laughter we were both trying to suppress breaks free.

“It’s not funny,” I say through laughter.

“It’s not funny,” Oakley agrees as his head dips to the crook of my neck and he starts laughing so hard he shakes. “It’s fucking hysterical.”

Another round hits us and I start wheezing...

And then I feel it.

His cock growing hard and heavy against my thigh.

A tremble runs through my body when he shifts so he’s nestled between my legs, brushing right against my core. When I take a breath to gather my bearings, our lips almost touch.

Blood rushes in my ears and my heart thuds in my ribcage like a warning drum.

“Oakley.”

It comes out like a plea, but I don’t know if it’s to beg him to stop or to keep going.

His voice is pure gravel. “Tell me what you need.”

*If only it were that simple.*

My mind reels and my breath grows shorter.

It would be so easy to give in and lose myself in him.

*Use him to escape from everything I’m scared of.*

But I can't.

My throat feels like sandpaper as I give him my response. "I need to go home."

# Chapter 37

## Bianca

Incessant knocking on my door has me bolting up in bed.

I glance over at my alarm clock and curse.

Anyone who knows me, knows how much I value sleep, therefore waking me up at the asscrack of dawn is a sure-fire way to get under my skin.

Grumbling, I stomp to the door and swing it open. “What the fuck do—”

The rest of my sentence falls by the wayside when I see Stone standing there...looking like someone killed his puppy.

“Hi.”

He shoves his hands in the pockets of his jeans. “Can we talk?”

I’d honestly rather have a root canal, but I know we have to do this.

Stepping aside, I gesture for him to come in. “Do you want some water \_\_\_”

His kiss takes me by surprise and for a moment my brain temporarily fritzes out.

I gently push him away. “Stone—”

“No,” he says. “Just let me get this out before I lose my nerve.” He runs a hand through his hair. “I love you, Bianca. And I hate how things have been between us lately.” He gets down on one knee. “But I’ll do anything, and I mean *anything* to fix this...fix us.”

Oh, boy.

I appreciate that he’s finally acknowledging there’s been something off with our relationship, but I’m not ready to walk down the aisle.

“I’m not ready to get married,” I confess. “I should have told you earlier, but I didn’t want to hurt you.”

Or admit that I made a mistake by saying yes in the first place.

Especially after I fought my family tooth and nail to be with him.

“Let’s postpone the wedding then,” he says. “We can wait until you’re ready and work on our relationship in the meantime. Get things back on track.”

There’s a weird twinge in my chest.



He might be offering to put me in a bigger cage now that the wedding is off the table...

*But it's still a cage.*

I give him complete honesty because it's what he deserves. "Stone, I can't even remember parts of my life. Everything is so confusing and—"

"I know it is." He thumps his chest. "Because I was there, remember? I was the one who was there when you were trying to put yourself back together. I was the one helping you pick up the pieces of your life." His eyes narrow. "Not him."

I can't deny that.

Not only was Stone there for me every step of the way, he took me under his wing and made me feel safe and protected...something I needed after the accident.

But I'm not so sure he's what I need now.

I also have to make one thing abundantly clear to him.

"This has nothing to do with Oakley." Heart full of lead, I take off my engagement ring. "I'm sorry—"

"No," he chokes out. "Don't give up on us." Burying his head against my stomach, he peers up at me with teary eyes. "Give me another chance. We don't have to get married right now, but don't end this, Bourne. I need you."

My own tears threaten to break free as he continues.

"I'd fucking die for you, Bianca. Rip my beating heart out of my chest and hand it to you on a silver platter if that's what you wanted." He pushes my ring back on my finger. "Don't give up on me. Please. Not yet. Not until I prove why it should be us...why it's *always* been us."

Oh, God.

His words. The sheer desperation in his eyes.

The fact that I still care about him deeply...despite all our issues.

The nagging feeling in my gut telling me not to end things between us without at least trying to work it out first.

"Okay," I whisper.



I find Oakley cleaning an empty classroom after my psych class lets out.

"Hey."

His lips curve into a smirk when he sees me. Almost like he was expecting me to come find him.

“Hey, you.”

“So,” I begin, walking over to him. “I was thinking we could catch a movie tonight. You know, venture outside of my dorm room for once.”

“Tired of keeping me your dirty little secret, huh?” he teases.

He’s not exactly wrong, but he knows I have my reasons for it. “Very funny.”

His blue eyes roam over me like lava. “We can catch a movie.” White teeth sink into his bottom lip, almost like he’s thinking. “As long as it’s not a chick flick.”

Rolling my eyes, I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. “Fine. No chick flicks. We can see the new action—”

Words die in my throat when his blue eyes narrow on something and his expression shuts down.

I blink. “What’s wrong?”

His jaw hardens and he goes back to sweeping. “You’re still wearing his ring.”

I suddenly feel exposed, like I’m standing stark naked in a room full of people.

It’s a struggle to find my voice. “Yeah, I...Stone came by my dorm this morning and we kind of worked things out. I mean, the wedding is postponed, but...”

I let my sentence trail off because I’m babbling like an idiot.

Oakley clutches the handle of the broom so tight his knuckles turn white. “Good for you.”

It’s clear he doesn’t actually mean the sentiment.

Suddenly, he walks past me like I’m nothing more than a piece of furniture.

His anger is so palpable...so *intense*...I can taste it.

“Oakley.”

He pauses. “On second thought, tonight doesn’t work for me.”

With that, he stalks off.

Taking pieces of my heart with him.

# Chapter 38

## Oakley

I shouldn't be mad at her.

I knew what I was getting myself into when I agreed to be friends.

But goddamn it, I'm fucking furious.

Even if she doesn't find her way back to me, no way in fuck should she be with him.

The douchebag is all wrong for her.

Anyone who's paying close attention can tell she's not nearly as happy as she's pretending to be with him.

"You can take your lunch break now if you want," my boss informs me as I place the mop and bucket back into the closet. "You look like you need one."

I don't say a word as I slam the closet door and start trekking across campus.

Resentment mixed with pain simmers in my gut as I head toward the lake.

My head tells me to walk away from the bullshit...

But my heart tells me to fight for her.

Because she's worth it.

Because I love her.

*Because she went down fighting for us.*

"You better stay the hell away from her," someone snarls.

When I look up, I realize I'm face to face with the biggest scumbag on the planet.

Unfortunately, he picked the wrong day to confront me.

"I suggest you walk the fuck away before I rip your puny arm off and bitch slap your ugly face with it."

I want to wipe the arrogant smile off his lips when he leans in. "Last time I checked you were technically a faculty member, so I suggest you stay in your lane unless you want to lose this piece of shit job over assaulting a student."

Jesus Christ. What a fucking pussy.

He's too scared to approach me without a safety net because he knows I'll beat the living shit out of him and make him regret the day he was born.

Edging away, he pops the collar of his shirt. "Like I was saying, stay away from my fiancée, chump."

"Ex-fiancée," I remind him. "Or did you not get the memo?"

He bristles before he recovers. "You mean the memo that she's still wearing *my* ring."

He's got me there.

However, I'd rather die than let him know how much that guts me.

"Not for long," I muse.

Taking a step back, Stone cackles like it's the funniest thing he's ever heard. "Bianca's a smart girl. Do you really think she'd give up everything we have to be with some murdering junkie whose biggest accomplishment in life is becoming a janitor?"

Pure wrath races through my veins and my hands are wrapped around his throat before I can stop myself.

He starts coughing and choking, but that only makes me tighten my grip. I want nothing more than to squeeze every drop of life out of him and get rid of this *problem* forever.

Closing the distance, I bring my lips to his ear because I want him to hear what I'm about to say loud and fucking clear.

"I might be a murdering junkie, but you're nothing but a scared little boy whose balls still haven't dropped." I can tell I'm scaring the shit out of him because his eyes widen with fear. "And you have every right to be scared... because she doesn't look at you the way she looks at me."

*She never will.*

This weasel is just a pathetic, piss-poor understudy.

I'm the man she loved first.

"Oakley, stop," someone who sounds a lot like Dylan shouts.

Next thing I know, she's trying to wedge herself between us and pry us apart.

"Oakley, please," she begs.

"I'm gonna have you arrested," Stone wheezes when I release my grip. "Say goodbye to your freedom, asshole, because you just signed your ticket back to jail."

Goddammit.

I flip him the bird. “Suck my dick, you pussy motherfucker.”

“Not so fast,” Dylan says when Stone brings his phone to his ear. “You’re not calling the police.”

“The fuck I’m not,” Stone argues.

I step toward him. “Do it, bitch. I don’t give a fuck. I’ll finish whooping that ass before the cops show up.”

It will suck to go back to jail, but I’m sure as shit not gonna let him think he’s got my balls in a vise.

I can see the panic in Dylan’s eyes as she places her hand on my chest. “He’s my family, Stone.”

Stone starts pressing buttons on his cell. “I don’t care.”

I seriously regret not popping his head off like the goddamn weed he is.

Dylan snatches his phone away. “If you do this, I’ll be upset...and you really don’t want to upset me. Because if you do? You’ll upset Jace. And we *all* know what happens when Jace gets upset.”

Yeah...he puts people in the hospital.

Like Stone’s piece of shit brother Tommy.

He seizes his phone from her hand. “Whatever.”

With that, he runs off like the little bitch boy he is.

Dylan turns her furious glare on me. “What the hell is wrong with you, Oak? Are you trying to go back to jail?”

“He started it.”

She cocks an eyebrow. “Seriously? What are you, five?”

“It’s the truth,” I growl. “I was minding my own business and he started with me.”

She rubs her forehead. “And somehow your hand ended up wrapped around his throat because...”

“He’s a motherfucking piece of shit pussy bitch baby.”

Exasperated, she throws up her hands. “Gee, that really clears things up.”

“I’m serious, Dylan. The douchebag can’t deal with the fact that Bianca doesn’t want to get married and called off the wedding, and he thinks starting with me will fix it.”

Dylan opens and closes her mouth like a fish. “Bianca called off the wedding?”

“Yeah. Last I heard anyway.”

She blows out a breath. “Wow. I mean, I definitely don’t think it’s a bad thing.” She wags a finger in my face. “But what *is* a bad thing is you

fighting.”

“The fucker deserved it.”

“That may be true, but you have a rap sheet now and the last thing you need is to be on the cops’ radar again because they will haul you back to jail.” She puts her arm around my waist. “Come on, I’ll buy you lunch and we can talk.”

We start walking...until I recall what she said the other week. “Dylan?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you really think I have what it takes to be a songwriter?”

She smiles. “I really do, Oak.”

I mull this over for a hot minute.

Stone’s comment about me only amounting to a janitor shouldn’t bother me.

But it does.

All my life I’ve always done the bare minimum. Never branching out.

Never believing in myself.

Because I’ve been too afraid of screwing shit up to even try in the first place.

“Do you think you can give that Landon dude a call?”

# Chapter 39

## Bianca

My heels clack as I make my way up the staircase leading to his apartment.

Oakley's obviously upset with me, but instead of talking to me about it... he's avoiding me.

And I've had about enough of it.

Making a fist, I bang on his door so loud my hand hurts.

I don't give a fuck that it's early in the morning or that it's his day off, I need him to talk to me now, dammit.

The door swings open after my seventh knock.

I have to remind myself to breathe when he answers it wearing nothing more than a pair of gray sweatpants.

He brings the spoon from the bowl of cereal he's munching on to his mouth. "Hey—"

"You promised," I yell. "You pinky promised you wouldn't leave me, yet the first time I do something you don't like, you get upset and abandon ship." I stab the air with my finger. "Not fucking cool, Oakley Zelenka. I know me being with Stone is hard for you to swallow, but you don't get to stand there and get butthurt over the decisions I make when you won't even tell me what happened between us."

He takes another bite of his cereal, studying me carefully as he chews. "You done yet?" I watch the muscles in his throat work as he swallows. "For your information, I was gonna ask if you wanted to chill today."

I clench my hands. "Then why didn't you?"

His lips curve into a smirk as he glances at his watch. "Because it's nine o'clock on a Saturday, and you're not a morning person."

He's got me there.

"Oh."

My stomach tightens when he takes a step closer. The look in his eyes is downright feral. "And just so we're clear, baby girl. I don't give a fuck about your little boyfriend."

And just like that, he reduced Stone to nothing more than a crumb on a

counter.

I'm about to suggest that maybe it's best we don't talk about him, but he says, "Let me get dressed and I'll take you out to breakfast before we go on our adventure."

Not that he didn't already, but it's safe to say he has my undivided attention. "Adventure? What kind of adventure?"

Back to munching on his cereal again, he simply winks. "You'll see."



I stare at the building in confusion.

When Oakley said we were going on an adventure today, I had no idea he meant doing something so...*permanent*.

I shuffle my feet nervously because the idea of needles and ink going into my skin doesn't sit well with me. "Do I have to get one, too?"

He shakes his head. "Nope. You're just here for moral support."

"Aw," I tease. "You need me to hold your hand?"

His eyes are so haunted it hurts my heart. "Always."

With that, he opens the door and we amble inside.

I watch as Oakley gives some big burly dude behind the counter a fist bump. "What up, man?"

"I'm good to go whenever you're ready," the guy tells him.

My curiosity grows as we all walk to a room in the back of the shop.

"What are you getting?"

That mysterious glint in his eye is back again. "You'll see."

Oakley takes a seat on a big black chair and I plop down on the one across from it.

The man starts setting up shop, and a moment later I hear the buzzing from the tattoo machine.

I blink in confusion when I realize the guy is tattooing Oakley's fingers.

"You're getting your fingers tattooed?"

I'm not trying to judge, but that's one hell of a place to be inked.

He merely nods like it's no big deal.

However, it *is* a big deal. This is something that will be on his skin for the rest of his life.

"Why are you doing this?"



“Because I want to,” he deadpans.

Feeling protective, I give the man doing his tattoo a warning glance. “You better not fuck up.”

The guy’s eyes widen. “I’m sorry. Who are you?”

Oakley laughs. “She’s my—”

“Bianca,” I interject. “I’m his Bianca, and *your* worst nightmare because if you fuck his tattoo up, I will shove my heel into your asshole.”

Oakley and the guy exchange a bemused glance before he goes back to tattooing him.

Walking around, I study the various pictures on the wall. There are so many different styles. Some bright and colorful, others dark and shaded.

As much as needles scare me, I’d be lying if I said the idea of getting a tattoo didn’t equally intrigue me.

It occurs to me that if I want one so bad...maybe I should go ahead and do it.

Take life by the balls and live a little.

“I want one.”

Oakley doesn’t look at all surprised by my declaration.

The man tattooing him laughs and says, “Jane up at the front desk has been doing some killer ink lately. If you really want one, I think she has an opening this morning.”

Before I can talk myself out of it, I go to the front desk to find Jane.



“It doesn’t hurt as much as I thought it would,” I say over my shoulder. “Is that weird?”

“Nope,” Jane assures me. “It’s just the fear of the unknown that trips up most people.” She pauses. “We’ll be done in about another minute. Came out awesome.”

My stare connects with Oakley’s from across the room.

His tattoo artist finished up a few minutes ago, but I haven’t been able to see it yet because I’ve been getting tattooed myself.

“All done,” she sings.

I’m starting to regret getting it on my shoulder blade now because I can’t see it.

Jane laughs when she sees my struggle. “Hold on. I’ll get you a mirror.”

A moment later she holds up a mirror behind me while I hold another one up in front of me.

Holy shit.

Tears prickle my eyes because it’s exactly what I wanted.

Jace, Cole, and Dylan all got butterfly tattoos for Liam a few years ago, and I wanted to get one myself.

Problem is, Liam’s life ended before he got a chance to transform into a butterfly.

Just like I am now...he was a caterpillar trapped inside a perpetual cocoon.

So that’s exactly what I got.

A purple and green caterpillar trapped inside a cocoon.

With the hope that maybe one day I’ll be free and turn into a butterfly.

I don’t even realize I’m crying until Oakley’s walking over and scooping me into his arms.

He doesn’t tell me it will be okay or offer me empty words about how he’s in a better place.

“We’ll never be butterflies,” I choke out as he rocks me.

“Caterpillars are cool, too,” he whispers against my hair. “You get to hang upside down and you have over a thousand muscles but no bones. That’s some badass shit.”

I can’t help but stare at him because how the hell does he even know that?

“I read Wikipedia when I get bored,” he states before I can ask.

A laugh flies out of me. “I don’t know how you do it.”

His expression turns serious. “Do what?”

I loop my arms around his neck and hug him tight. “Manage to make me feel better when no one else in the world can.”

He draws tiny circles up and down my back with his fingers. “I can say the same about you, baby girl.”

That’s when it occurs to me. “Show me your hands.”

Adjusting myself on his lap, I look down.

Oh, no.

This is bad. *Real* bad.

Seven of his fingers have huge block letters inked on them that spell out the phrase, ‘*back in a*’...followed by what looks like a pot plant on his pinky.

The heel of my hand finds my forehead and I audibly groan. “Oakley, that doesn’t even make any sense.”

“Sure it does,” he argues, pointing to each of his tattooed fingers. “Back in a…” He sticks up his pot plant pinky and waggles his eyebrows. “Haze.”

For a moment, I think about placating him and saying it’s awesome…but that would be a boldfaced lie.

“That’s dumb.” I get off his lap. “Let’s haul that guy back in here so he can fix this mess.”

“It’s perfect.” He stands. “I got the thing I love most in this world.”

A weary sigh escapes me, because *of course* he did. “Weed.”

His expression falters and he holds my gaze. “Just because I can’t have it anymore doesn’t mean I love it any less.”

# Chapter 40

## Bianca

### Past...

We're a tangled mess of sweaty limbs and wrinkled bedsheets as we lie in his bed. The hum of the air-conditioning kicks up a notch, trying its best to keep up with the end of the summer heat as we fight to catch our breaths.

Oakley's phone rings for what must be the tenth time in thirty minutes, but he ignores it.

Nuzzling against him, I run my fingernails down his pecs. "Your favorite color is orange."

Amusement gleams in his eyes. "Is that a deal breaker for you or something?"

"No," I answer. "I'm just wondering why is all."

Most guys like blue, red, or black...but as usual, Oakley's the exception.

He thinks about this for a moment as he brings a joint to his lips and inhales. "It's bright in all the right places."

I can't help but smile because I love the way his mind works. "I've never met anyone like you, Oakley Zelenka."

Something tells me I could travel the whole wide world and that will never change.

A smirk touches his lips as he peers down at me. "Is that a good thing or bad thing?"

My smile widens. "It's the best thing."

Snuffing out his joint, he shifts so he's on top of me, caging me in with his forearms. "What about you?"

"What about me?"

Dipping his head, he nuzzles the hollow of my throat. "Why is purple your favorite color?"

"Because pink is way too fucking bright."

I wish I could tell him something deep and profound, but that's all I've got.

He chuckles against my neck before drawing the tender skin into his mouth...leaving his mark. My nipples pucker and I instinctively part my thighs, sucking in a breath when I feel him harden between them.

*So close, yet so far.*

My eyes flutter closed, and I moan when his teeth scrape my flesh as his mouth works down my body. I love how he's always branding me...giving me little reminders of what naughty things we've done and how addicting he is.

"I like pink." Settling his head between my thighs, he spreads my pussy with his fingers and gives it a little kiss. "Especially *this* pink." Blue eyes trained on me, his tongue darts out and he flicks my clit. "So fucking pretty."

*Oh, hell.* I'm so revved up a strong breeze could send me spiraling straight to orgasmville.

"Oakle—"

The sound of his phone ringing again cuts me off. "Who the hell keeps calling you?"

Annoyed, he reaches for his cell on the nightstand. "I don't know." His face falls when he looks at it. "Shit."

"What's wrong?"

He sits up in bed. "It's Hayley." Before I can say a word, he presses the green button and brings the phone to his ear. "What's up?"

Needless to say, I'm pissed.

I had no idea he was still talking to her.

Anger rolls through me as he continues his conversation.

"I'm busy right now, but I'll hit you up later." He frowns. "I know you are, boo, but everything will be okay. I won't let him touch you."

It takes everything in me not to rip the phone out of his hand and break it.

I'm downright seething by the time he ends the call. "You're still talking to Hayley?"

"I haven't been, but she's going through some shit right now." He blows out a breath. "She got into a fight with the guy she's been seeing and he just threatened to beat the shit out of her."

*Right.* And I'm the long-lost Queen of fucking Sheba.

Covering myself with the sheet, I glare at him. "And you *believe* her? In case you forgot, Hayley's the same girl who told you all those lies about me."

And there's no doubt in my mind Hayley would say and do whatever it

takes to sink her hooks back into him.

*Christ.* It's really no surprise she'd pull this. Everyone knows Oakley's a sucker for a damsel in distress.

He just can't help himself.

He grips the back of his neck. "I know. And I fucking hate that, but if I don't help her and something bad happens..." He shrugs a shoulder. "What she did was wrong, and she's not the person I thought she was, but I'll never be okay with some motherfucker putting his hands on a woman."

Annoyed, I rub my temples.

I love his big heart and how he always has people's backs...even when they don't deserve it.

However, I hate her.

"I get that, but it doesn't mean you need to be the one to play captain save a ho. Tell her to call the police."

"The police won't take it seriously since he hasn't actually done anything to her yet."

It's on the tip of my tongue to tell him that maybe he shouldn't take it *seriously* either since the bitch is a certified liar, but his phone rings again.

Frustration forms a knot in my gut. "I swear to God if that's her—"

"It's Loki," he grunts before answering his phone. "What's up?" His jaw sets. "I'm chilling with my girl, why?"

I force myself not to swoon. *His girl.*

"What kind of favor?" I watch in confusion as he walks over to his dresser and pulls a t-shirt out of his drawer. "Santa Creek? Damn, man. That's a two-hour drive." Frowning, he grabs a pair of jeans and boxers. "Fine. Let me jump in the shower real quick and then I'll head out." Irritation mixed with longing passes in his gaze when he looks at me. "Damn right you fucking owe me."

With a grunt, he hangs up.

"I gotta take a drive out to Santa Creek. I'll be back later."

I've quickly come to realize that *take a drive* is code word for make a drug deal.

"I can come with, if you want." I sit up. "Maybe I can drive?"

"Hell no." He locks my chin in his hand. "I don't want you anywhere near this shit." Closing the distance between us, he kisses my lips. "I'll bring back dinner for us though."

I palm his cheek when he starts to pull away. "I hate that you're still

working for Loki.”

Not only could he get in trouble one day, but being around drugs all the time has got to be torture for him.

He’s been doing so good and I don’t want him to slip up.

“I don’t have a choice,” he says as he types out a text on his phone. “I need the money.”

“Well, I have plenty of money at my disposal.” Wagging my eyebrows, I lower the bedsheet, baring my breasts. “And as long as you promise to keep doing that thing I love with your tongue, I have no problem sharing some with you.”

He watches beneath lowered lids. “Thanks for the offer, but the thing I do with my tongue is on the house.” Reaching down, he gathers me in his arms and swats my behind. “However, the thing I can do with my dick?” Shivers run down my spine when he locks his arm around my waist and drags his teeth along the nape of my neck. “That’s gonna cost you, baby girl.”

“Name your price,” I breathe, because I’ll pay just about anything to experience it.

Groaning, he unfastens his arm and I fall back on the mattress. “Don’t fucking tempt me, Bianca.” The look he gives me could melt a glacier. “If I stay in bed with you any longer, your virginity will be gone faster than the coke I’m dealing these rich boys partying on their daddy’s yacht.”

I’m about to ask him why losing my virginity to him would be such a bad thing, but he heads for the bathroom.

Disappointment flickers in my chest when I hear the shower turn on a moment later.

Swear, sometimes holding on to him is like trying to hold on to a cloud.

I debate getting dressed and heading home until he comes back, but I notice Oakley’s cell on the bed.

I manage to swipe it before it times out and the screen locks.

Thinking quick, I pull up Hayley’s name and type out a text.

**Oakley:** Meet me at the park at nine so we can talk.

It takes Hayley all of one second to respond.

**Hayley:** I’ll be there.

Another one quickly follows.

**Hayley:** As usual you're the only one I can count on. You're like my knight in shining armor.

I grit my teeth as yet another text comes through. *Clingy bitch.*

**Hayley:** I really don't know what I'd do without you.

Rolling my eyes, I swiftly delete the exchange.  
And then, I join *my* man in the shower.



The look on Hayley's face when I step out of my car is priceless.

"I'm sorry, were you expecting someone else?" I taunt as I walk over to the bench she's sitting on.

Her eyes narrow into tiny slits. "What are you doing here?"

I place my hands on my hips. "Look, I'm gonna make this real simple. Oakley and I are together now, so if you know what's good for you, you'll leave him the fuck alone and stop blowing up his phone with your desperate little lies."

Crossing her arms, she stands. "And if I don't?"

Given the bitch is well aware that her father is responsible for my mother's death, there's no point beating around the bush.

"I'll not only tell everyone that your father took advantage of one of his patients and do everything in my power to have his license revoked...I'll inform your mom he's an adulterating piece of shit." I flash her some teeth. "Oh, and I'll release the videos I have of you doing the kinds of things disgusting old men would love to jerk their pathetic little cocks to for years to come."

Hayley doesn't look the least bit worried by my threat. "No, you won't. Because then you'd have to admit to everyone that *your* mother was nothing but a psycho whore...just like her daughter."

My hand is wrapped around her throat so quick it takes us both by surprise. "Say that again," I urge, tightening my grip. "I fucking dare you."



“Do it,” she croaks. “Put me out of my misery.”

For a moment, I debate granting her wish, but quickly come to the realization that burying her body somewhere they’ll never find it is going to take some strategic planning on my part and she’s honestly not worth the effort or the potential jail time.

Begrudgingly, I release my hold on her. “How the hell can you stand there and defend someone like him?”

I’m not being rhetorical either. I’m genuinely curious how someone can still manage to love someone like that.

“I’m not defending him.” Her face is filled with sadness as she rubs the red spot on her neck. “I’m just good at keeping his secrets.”

I’m not sure what that means. However, the crestfallen look in her eyes makes something in my chest twist.

“I have no idea what that me—”

“Of course, you don’t,” she spits. “Consider yourself lucky.”

My mother used to tell me I was too intuitive for my own good.

And right now, my Spidey senses can’t stop a horrible thought from pummeling me.

An unspeakable, *revolting* thought that makes my stomach bottom out.

“Hayley.” It’s a struggle to say the words. “Did he—”

“Why do you care?” She snorts. “Oh, that’s right. You don’t. You just want the sick gratification of being able to tell everyone that my daddy used to crawl into my room every night.”

A sick, ugly feeling spreads throughout my chest. I always knew her dad was terrible for what he did to my mom, and his wife...but he’s even worse than I could fathom.

“I won’t tell anyone,” I whisper, my mind breaking off in a thousand different directions “But I really think you should. I’ll even go with you if you want.”

I’m not her biggest fan, but I’m willing to put that aside if she needs someone for support.

Hell, I’d do just about anything to help her get through this.

“No.”

“Why not?”

I can’t comprehend why she’d want to keep something like this silent.

Then again, I’ve never been molested.

I used to think my life was as fucked-up as it gets, but as it turns out...

things could have been worse.

*Way worse.*

Blowing out a shaky breath, she wipes her glistening eyes with the back of her sleeve. “Not that I expect you to understand, but he’s still my dad.” She averts her gaze, like she’s ashamed of her next words. “And deep down there’s a part of me that still loves him. Despite the bad things he’s done and all the pain he’s caused me.”

I understand that more than she thinks.

“I get it,” I whisper.

We stew in the heavy silence for what feels like hours before she speaks again.

“Please don’t tell anyone about what he did to me, Bianca. I’ve never told anyone and—”

“Your secret is safe with me.” My insides tighten uncomfortably. “But I *really* think you should tell someone.”

She gives her head a small shake. “I’m graduating next year. And once I land a good job and I’m able to support myself, I won’t need him for anything anymore.” Closing her eyes, she inhales. “I’ll be free.”

Despite all the animosity I was harboring, I want that for her.

I fetch my keys out of my purse. “For what it’s worth, I really hope everything works out for you.”

With those parting words, I start to leave.

“Bianca?” she calls out.

I pause. “Yeah?”

“I’m never gonna stop trying to get Oakley back.”

Instantly, my body jolts with animosity.

Turning to face her, I give her a wicked smile.

“Then may the best girl win.”

# Chapter 41

## Bianca

I feel so sick it takes everything in me not to puke as I continue pacing the floor of my dorm room.

I was hoping it was all just a terrible nightmare...but it wasn't.

It was reality. *Her reality.*

Hayley had to go through horrors that were unimaginable.

Horrors no one should ever have to go through.

*Because of him.*

And the worst part is, she never got to have her freedom.

*Because she's dead.*

I clutch my stomach as another wave of nausea surges through me.

I'm about to run to the bathroom, but a knock on my door halts me in my tracks.

I quickly usher Sawyer and Dylan inside.

I can't tell my brothers what happened because it would mean telling them about our mom's affair, and I can't tell Oakley because he was close to Hayley and I know he's shouldering enough guilt already.

I also can't tell Stone because he's super busy with work and school.

If Hayley was still here I could be strong and keep her secret for as long as she needed...but she's not.

And I know this knowledge will slowly eat me alive over time if I don't do something about it.

Therefore, that leaves me with Sawyer and Dylan to confide in.

I'm hoping the three of us can sit down and come up with some kind of plan to get justice for Hayley since she never got the chance to do it herself.

However, that requires me telling Dylan and Sawyer something that no one else knows.

Unless you count that piece of shit Mark Young.

"What's going on?" Sawyer questions.

"You sounded really freaked out on the phone," Dylan notes.

I motion to the bed. "Have a seat."

When they do, I utter, “I need your absolute word that what I’m about to tell you won’t ever leave this room. I don’t care if my brothers beg, plead, or threaten to end things with you. I need you guys to swear you won’t ever fucking tell them.”

Their eyes widen.

“Okay you’re *really* starting to scare me,” Sawyer says.

Dylan nods. “Me too.”

What they feel right now is nothing compared to what they’re going to feel once they know the truth.

“Swear you won’t tell a soul.”

After exchanging a nervous glance, they both nod.

Since I can’t bring myself to say the words aloud, I typed up a letter with everything they need to know.

I pluck it off my dresser and hand it to them. “Read this.”

With shaky fingers, Sawyer unfolds the note and they both start reading.

The first gasp comes a few seconds later.

Sawyer looks up at me with glassy eyes. “Your mom...the accident. She —”

“Keep reading,” I press.

*Because it gets so much worse.*

Dylan’s mouth drops open. “Your mom was having an affair?” She shakes her head. “But Jace said your dad was the one having an affair.”

“Keep reading,” I repeat, my heart in my throat.

Sawyer slaps her hand over her mouth. “Oh, my God.”

Dylan clutches her stomach. “Holy shit, I feel sick.”

After they’re done, I snatch the letter back, walk to my bathroom, and light it on fire in the sink.

I come back to see Sawyer praying and Dylan with her head in her hands.

“I don’t even know what to say,” Dylan whispers.

Sawyer tries to speak, but she only ends up crying.

And me? I’m trying to find a way to go numb, but it’s not working.

“I tortured a girl who was being tortured by her father in secret for years.” A shudder runs through me. “I’m so disgusted with myself I want to wash my soul out with bleach and then light myself on fire.”

Hell, it’s what I deserve.

A full minute passes before Sawyer speaks. “You didn’t know.”

I open my mouth to argue, but then she says, “You only found out what he was doing to her after the fact.”

I scoff. “Still doesn’t make it right.”

Neither of them put up an argument.

Sitting on the floor, I draw my knees to my chest. “I need to make him pay.” Revulsion pushes through my veins. “For her.”

Dylan chews on her thumbnail. “Not to be negative, but I don’t think there’s much we can do.”

Sawyer nods. “Yeah. I mean if Hayley was still here, we could support her and urge her to go to the police to report him, but...she’s not.”

I know.

A nauseating thought occurs to me. “He sees kids in his office sometimes.”

Who’s to say he might not do the same thing to them?

*He’d do it to anyone he suspects might make an easy target.*

Because that’s what repulsive assholes like him do.

First, they charm you, then they manipulate you, until eventually...they break you.

“Jesus,” Dylan exclaims. “That’s...fucking sickening.”

Sawyer’s bottom lip quivers. “So that means there has to be another victim for him to get caught?”

I jump to my feet because I can’t take it anymore. “I have to do something.” I start pacing the floors again. “Something that will make him pay without giving up Hayley’s secret to the rest of the world.”

Sawyer and Dylan exchange a strange glance.

“No,” Sawyer hisses. “We’re not doing it.”

Dylan concedes. “You’re right. We can’t.”

It’s safe to say they’ve piqued my interest. “Care to share with the class?”

Dylan starts fidgeting. “You don’t know this, but back in high school Sawyer and I came up with a plan for me to seduce Tommy in order to get him to confess to what he did to Liam. I ended up recording it so Jace could hear it, but it turns out he didn’t even listen to it.”

They might be on to something.

“That could work.”

They both look at me like I’ve sprouted another head.

“What could?”

“Well,” I begin as a plan starts formulating in my brain. “I highly doubt he’d confess what he did to his daughter so I could get it on tape, but there might be a way I can seduce him and then...you know, report him to the police.”

Dylan blinks. “Report him for what exactly?”

“Rape, sexual assault...does it really fucking matter? The bastard deserves to have the book thrown at him.”

Dylan stands. “Okay, first of all, that’s incredibly dangerous—”

“You did it with Tommy,” I point out.

“Tommy was confined to a hospital bed with a broken leg.” She looks at Sawyer. “He couldn’t do anything to me even if he wanted to. Plus, Sawyer was waiting right outside the room just in case it went south.”

“So, you two can wait outside his office. If things get out of hand, you guys can swoop in.”

Sawyer rubs her forehead. “I don’t like this at all.”

“Fine.” I throw up my hands. “I don’t need you guys. I can do it myself.”

“You’re not doing this by yourself,” Dylan argues.

Sawyer sulks. “You shouldn’t do it at *all*.”

“Well, it’s happening. Whether you like it or not.”

It’s the best course of action.

Will he fall for it? Probably not. But I know if I don’t at least try, I’ll never forgive myself.

And yes, it’s wrong to claim to be a victim when you’re not, but his real victim doesn’t have a voice anymore.

Therefore, I’ll be hers.

Given every fucked-up thing I’ve done in the past, it’s the very least I can do now.

Sawyer gets off the bed. “Okay, let’s say you go through with this and you report him. What then?”

I chew my bottom lip as I think about this. “I don’t know. He gets in trouble.”

“Yeah, best case scenario. But before it even comes to that, it’s going to involve a lot of extensive questioning by the police. Maybe even a long, drawn-out trial down the line that will undoubtedly be mentally exhausting for you.”

She makes a great point, but it doesn’t matter. I’m willing to pay the price to get justice.

“I’ll deal with that when the time comes.”

Dylan rubs her temples. “Are you *sure* about this, Bianca? Because once you do it...there’s no going back.”

I look them in the eyes. “I’m positive.”

*I’m doing this for Hayley.*

# Chapter 42

## Bianca

“I ’ve just been so lost and confused.” I look the piece of shit in the eyes. “So vulnerable...you know? I have no one in my life to turn to.” The next words burn. “Despite what happened, I know my mom trusted you...so I figured you’d be the best person I could vent to.”

Mark rubs his chin, assessing me. “I can’t imagine how difficult this has all been for you.”

A sick lurch goes through my stomach. “One can say the same about you.”

He tries to fake genuine sadness, but he fails.

Because he’s a motherfucking sociopath.

“Yes, well...” His sentence trails off. “I’m just trying to take it one day at a time.”

It’s taking everything in *me* not to snatch the pen from his hand and stab him right in the jugular.

I uncross my legs and watch as his eyes track the movement. “Thank you for taking the time to meet with me. I’ve had no one to turn to. I’ve been so alone.” I give him a forlorn look. “I really appreciate it.”

Looking down, I stand and make my way to the door, stopping right before I exit.

Chewing my bottom lip, I pretend to think about my next move. “Dr. Young?”

“Yes?”

“Would it be....do you think I can have a hug?” My mouth curves into a sugary sweet smile. “Bury the hatchet?”

His eyebrows shoot up to the ceiling before he recovers. “Sure.”

Bile surges up my throat the moment he walks over and embraces me.

*Here comes the part I hate most.*

The vile part.

I almost chicken out but then I remind myself I’m doing this for Hayley.

Wrapping my hand around his neck, I kiss him...



And force my mind to go somewhere else so I don't actually have to think about it.

*Just like Hayley must have forced herself to do every time he violated her.*

Instantly, he freezes...

Not the reaction I was hoping for.

"Oh, my God." Feigning embarrassment, I take a step back. "I'm so sorry, I don't know what I was thinking—"

The words are barely out of my mouth before he closes the distance between us and shoves me against the door.

*Gross.*

Reaching inside my pocket, I press the record button on my phone.

When it's clear he's really *enjoying* our exchange, I put the brakes on.

"I'm sorry." I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand. "I can't do this."

*Come on, asshole.*

I turn to run away, but he grabs my arm. "I don't enjoy being teased."

"Get off me," I scream loudly as he edges away. "You're hurting me, Mr. Young. Please, stop." Lunging for him, I scratch his face. "Get off."

His mouth drops open in shock and for a moment I *almost* feel bad.

But then I remember what he did to Hayley and my mom.

He deserves to have his life ruined the way he ruined theirs.

I don't give a fuck what anybody says.

I quickly knee him in the balls and run out the door.

Sawyer and Dylan rush over to me when I reach the waiting room.

"Are you okay?" Sawyer questions.

Dylan scans over every inch of my face. "Did he hurt you?"

"No," I tell them as we start walking. "That's the weird thing...he kind of stopped and looked surprised."

We're almost to Sawyer's van when I realize. I'm gonna need some more evidence.

I look at Dylan. "I need you to punch me."

Dylan blinks. "I'm sorry, *what?*"

"I need you to punch me so I have more evidence."

Dylan shakes her head. "Are you out of your mind? I'm not punching you, Bianca."

Sawyer holds up her hands when I look her way. "Me either."

Annoyed, I growl, “I used to hate you, Dylan. Like literally wished you would die so I could piss on your grave. I haven’t gotten all my memories back, but something tells me I wasn’t very nice to you and I made your life a living hell. Therefore, you must have wanted to punch me at least a few—”

Her fist goes flying into my cheek. *Hard.*

“Jesus, Dylan,” Sawyer breathes. “What the heck is wrong with you?”

Dylan shrugs innocently. “She *asked* me to punch her.”

She’s right, I did.

But who knew the girl had such a mean right hook?

I rub my throbbing cheek. “That should do it.” I climb inside Sawyer’s van. “Let’s go to the police station.”

# Chapter 43

## Bianca

After what felt like an eternity filled with non-stop questions, the police finally let me go.

I'm not sure what's going to happen with Mark, but at the very least his medical license is in danger of being taken away since I made an appointment with his office and was therefore listed as a client.

Is it justice?

Not close to the kind Hayley deserves, but it's better than nothing.

It also made me realize something.

I kept my mother's secrets because I thought I was protecting her...but in the end they only ended up destroying me.

Maybe it's time for me to stop living in my cocoon and start letting people in.

But the only way to do that is to start being honest with the people I love.

*Let them inside.*

After putting more coverup on my bruise so Oakley doesn't freak when he sees me, I snap my compact shut.

My hand trembles as I knock on the door of Oakley's apartment.

I didn't want him to know about Hayley or my mother's affair with her dad, but I also don't think it's right to keep this from him.

He answers after the third knock. "Hey."

"Hey." I take a deep breath. "Can I come in? I really need to talk—"

"Is that the food?" some woman questions behind him.

A moment later she comes into view.

She's a little older than him, but very pretty.

Very pretty and very *blonde*.

My throat constricts. "I didn't know you had company." Heart heavy, I stagger back. "I'll talk to you later."

Oakley starts to say something, but I don't give him the chance because the wave of pain that washes over me is so severe it threatens to break me into a million tiny little pieces.

I feel so stupid. *So goddamn stupid.*

Why wouldn't Oakley be with another woman? It's not like we're together.

How could we be? I have a...

"You okay?" someone who sounds a lot like Stone says.

I was so out of it I didn't even realize I walked up the stairs to his apartment.

"I—" I shake my head, unable to process anything except for the fact that Oakley's in his apartment with some other girl doing God knows what.

"I've been trying to call you all day," Stone says as he ushers me inside. "Where were you?"

It hurts so much I can barely breathe.

"With Sawyer and Dylan."

He tips my chin, forcing me to look at him. "What's going on? What happened?"

I don't give him an answer.

*I can't.*

Instead, I just go numb.

Because the thought of Oakley being with another girl...a girl who's not me.

*Feels like death by a thousand cuts.*

I push Stone away when he tries to hug me. "I have to go."

# Chapter 44

## Bianca

### Past...

My heart's in my throat as I make my way into the seedy bar.

Flipping my freshly blown-out hair over my shoulder, I open the door. Almost immediately the stale scent of smoke fills my nostrils.

Across the room, there's a pool table and a dartboard set up on a wall. As if on cue, cheers erupt from a small group of what appears to be bikers playing a game of darts.

No one blinks an eye or asks for my ID as I saunter over to the nearly empty bar and take a seat.

It's so dim in this place, I don't notice Oakley right away, but the moment I see him pouring some old man a drink at the opposite end of the bar, my heart soars into overdrive.

Desperate to the bone, Hayley ended up telling Oakley that I texted her from his phone to meet up.

Needless to say, he was pissed.

Which is exactly why I'm here now.

I hate fighting with him.

But even more than that? I hate him thinking I betrayed him.

Therefore, I have to apologize and make things right between us.

I open my mouth to call him over, but some woman sidles up beside him.

She looks to be in her early forties with long blonde hair and legs for days. She has far too much makeup on her face and not enough clothing because her boobs—which I'm guessing are only perky because of the very obvious pushup bra she's wearing—are popping out of her tank top and she's in serious danger of giving everyone a free show.

The bitch is straight-up trashy looking...the kind of woman you'd end up bringing home when you've had one too many and you're in desperate need of a cheap screw.

In other words, she's *exactly* Oakley's type.

I clench my fists so hard my nails leave indents in my palms as I watch her shamelessly flirt with him—draping her arm around his neck to pull him close while she whispers sweet nothings in his ear that makes him smile.

A knot of dread forms in my belly when her hand caresses his stomach and he makes no move to push her away.

By the looks of things and how comfortable they seem to be around each other, it's clear they've fucked a few times already.

Tears prickle my eyes, but I force myself not to cry. *Not here.*

God, I feel so stupid. *So fucking stupid.*

I thought we were together. Hell, I thought we were a couple.

But that was foolish of me, because Oakley never once told me I was his girlfriend. He made it crystal clear when we started that we were just a fling and the end of summer would be the end of us.

*I just didn't want to believe it.*

“Bad night?” a deep voice asks.

I turn my head as some guy—a biker—by the looks of his white t-shirt, leather vest, and jeans takes a seat on the bar stool beside me.

“You could say that,” I mutter.

I debate grabbing my purse and heading home, but then he utters, “You're way too gorgeous to be upset, honey. Let me buy you a drink and take the sting out.”

It's on the tip of my tongue to turn him down...but then it occurs to me that two can play Oakley's little game.

I might be the one coming out of our little *fling* heartbroken, but I'll be dammed if I'm not going to give him a taste of his own medicine first.

I quickly appraise the guy. Closely cropped dark hair and warm brown eyes...short, scruffy beard. Looks to be in his late twenties, early thirties at most. He's not as tall as Oakley, but not short either. Overall, his face isn't bad to look at. Hell, he could even pass for good-looking in the right light.

He'll do.

I give him a sweet smile. “Sure. I'll take—”

“Nothing,” Oakley grunts as he glares at the man beside me. “Because she's only eighteen.”

The guy's eyes widen, but I lean into him and purr, “Eighteen's still legal.”

The guy drops his gaze to my chest briefly before he smiles. “In that case, why don't you get my new friend a soda?” He peels his gaze away from me

and looks at Oakley. "I'll take another beer."

Oakley's nostrils flare as he fills up his glass and for a moment I think he's going to pour the beer over his head. "What the hell are you doing here, Bianca?"

Ignoring the sharp ache in my heart, I flash him some teeth. "I was in the neighborhood."

Visibly confused, the guy looks between us. "Do you two know each other?"

Oakley's eyes narrow into tiny slits as he hands me a glass of soda. "Yeah. She's my—"

"Neighbor." I run my fingernail along the rim of the glass and focus all my attention on the guy sitting next to me. "Oakley rents the guesthouse in our back yard from my father."

The guy whistles. "Guesthouse, huh? Sounds fancy."

"It is." Slipping my foot out of my heel, I trail it up the length of his calf. "You should come see it. My dad's out of town for work right now, so we'd have the whole place to ourselves."

Intrigue flashes in his orbs. "Is that so?"

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Oakley's jaw clench.

"My name is Bianca." Holding out my hand, I sweep my tongue along my bottom lip. "And the name I'll be calling out later is?"

The guy's mouth nearly drops open as he takes my hand. "Ranger." He leans in. "Are you always so forward?"

I take a long sip of my drink. "Only when I see something I want." Biting my bottom lip, I add, "Now what do you say we quit all this small talk and go fuck in the bathroom?"

"Well, shit," he mutters as he stands up. "I'm not sure what your demons are, honey, but I have no objection to you taking them out on me tonight."

With that, he stalks toward the bathroom.

I'm about to join him, but Oakley's hand wraps around my wrist. "Bianca."

His voice is downright feral. However, it's no match for the dark, threatening glint in his eye.

I have to remind myself to breathe because if looks could kill, I'm positive I would no longer have a pulse.

"If you do this...we're fucking done."

I sharpen my gaze. "We were done the moment I walked in here and

caught you flirting with that skank you've been fucking behind my back." He tries to speak, but I yank my wrist out of his grip. "Enjoy the rest of your summer, asshole."

I force myself to keep it together as I head for the bathroom.



"I have a proposition for you," I tell Ranger as I lock the bathroom door behind me.

It's safe to say he's confused.

Especially when I take a small wad of cash out of my purse.

"What kind of proposition?"

"If you stay here with me for the next ten minutes and tell everyone in the bar you fucked me, I'll give you three hundred dollars."

He eyes me warily. "Why?"

"Because my demon happens to be the bartender who screwed some other woman behind my back and I'm not the kind of girl who takes that shit without making them suffer."

He studies my face for a beat. I have no idea what he sees but it has his own face softening. "Honey I can promise you he'll be suffering plenty for letting someone like you go." He juts his chin at the cash in my hand. "Keep your money. I'll help you out for free."

I'm about to thank him for being so kind, but my phone vibrates with an incoming text.

**Oakley:** The woman you saw me with is the owner's wife, and the old man at the bar is my boss and her husband. And yeah, sometimes Janet does get a little handsy, but I've never fucked her. I'd tell you not to jump to conclusions next time, but it doesn't fucking matter because we're over.

I feel the color drain from my face with every word I read. By the time I'm done, my stomach is coiled so tight it physically hurts.

As someone wise once said—if you play stupid games, you win stupid prizes.

However, in my case, I didn't win anything.

*I lost everything.*



“Don’t tell anyone anything,” I call out as I run out the bathroom door.

I quickly scan the bar, but there’s no sign of Oakley.

Swallowing my pride, I walk up to the woman he *wasn’t* flirting with before.

“Do you know where Oakley is?”

“You just missed him, sweetheart. He said he wasn’t feeling well and took off a few minutes ago.”

*Shit.*

I sprint out the door. Dread twists my guts when I don’t see his car in the parking lot.

A powerless feeling rises up my throat as I fish my phone out of my purse and bring it to my ear.

It goes straight to voicemail.

“No, no, no,” I mutter as I dial his number a second time.

He’s like grains of sand slipping through my fingers. And I have no one to blame but myself because I let my jealousy get the best of me and ruin what we had.

My heart does a painful flip when it goes straight to voicemail again.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper into the receiver.

*So fucking sorry.*

# Chapter 45

## Bianca

“You’re upset,” Oakley says when I open my door.

So much for trying to keep my expression neutral.

“Did you fuck her?”

My stomach knots. His silence is *deafening*.

I’m about to slam the door in his face, but he wedges his foot between it and the frame.

“Would it bother you if I did?”

My glare is glacial. “Fuck you.”

That answer has his lips curling into a smug smirk. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

Irritation mixed with pain strikes. “Go away.”

He takes a step in my direction, causing my heart to go haywire. “We both know that’s not what you really want.” Another step. “Unless you’ve turned into a coward.”

I hate the way he always calls me on my shit. The way he forces me to face the things I’m not ready to face yet.

“I have a boyfriend.”

Indignation slices through the hard angles of his face. “You have a crutch, baby girl. A crutch you conveniently use whenever we get too close.”

I don’t even know what to think right now, only that his words are making my head spin...because there’s so much truth laced in them.

But I refuse to let him know that.

“You don’t know what the hell you’re talking about.”

“Yes, I do.” He leans in, his voice a penetrating rasp. “Because I know you, Bianca Covington.” He clasps my jaw in his hand. “We speak a secret language that no one else can understand, and we feel things for each other that don’t make sense to the rest of the world...just us.”

My heart pounds a steady tattoo against my ribs as I reach up and clutch his t-shirt, drawing him closer.

I hate that he’s right.

I hate that I have all these feelings for him, because my life would be way less complicated if I didn't.

But mostly?

I hate that he has the ability to tear me wide open and break me...

Because I love him in a way I've never loved anyone else.

A way I never *can* love anyone else.

And I didn't even need all my memories to come back in order to realize it.

*I just needed him.*

I can feel the tears falling down my cheeks as I peer up at him. "Did you fuck her?"

I *have* to know.

"I didn't." A dark note enters his voice. "But maybe I should have."

His words are the equivalent of a slap.

My expression must give away how that statement makes me feel because he says, "Not that I owe you an explanation, but I met her at a meeting. I told her to come by because she said she was having a hard time and needed someone to talk to. I ordered us some takeout and we talked. That was it."

I search his eyes for signs that he's lying, but there aren't any. "That was it?"

His expression softens the slightest bit, as if he knows how much this conversation hurts me. "Yes."

Evidently, I jumped to conclusions about him hooking up with a woman...

Just like I did in the past.

The silence stretches out between us until the only sound in the room is my frantic heart beating.

"You said you needed to talk when you came to my apartment," Oakley says after a few minutes have passed. "What's up?"

Sadness blooms in my chest because I know what I'm about to tell him won't be easy to hear.

I gesture to my bed. "You should sit down."

He doesn't.

"What's going on?"

I draw in a deep breath, gathering the courage to tell him.

Writing a note is one thing, saying the words aloud is another.

"You remember how I told you my mom committed suicide?"

He nods solemnly.

“Well, I never told you this, but she was talking to someone on the phone beforehand. She was really upset, and she kept screaming things like she loved him and that he promised they’d get married and be together.”

I can see the exact moment it dawns on him. “So your mom was having an affair?” He rubs his face. “Christ. I’m sorry—”

I hold up a hand, silencing him. “There’s more.” I motion to my bed again. “You’re gonna want to sit for this. Trust me.”

When he does, I continue. “Obviously, I never told anyone what I overheard before the accident. Hell, I didn’t even understand what it was I was hearing until I was older. Liam suspected something, but I didn’t...” I let my sentence trail off.

“Want to believe it,” Oakley finishes for me.

“Exactly. My father and her had some issues, but I thought they were in love. I never thought my mom would cheat on him.” I cross my arms over my chest. “Anyway, when I was fourteen I decided I had enough of not knowing and did some digging. I found her old cell phone stashed away in a box in the closet and looked up the last number she called.” The band around my chest tightens. “It turns out it was her psychiatrist...Dr. Young.”

For a moment he looks downright incredulous, but then he hangs his head. “Shit.”

“I know...but, Oakley?” I wait for him to look at me before I say, “There’s still more. And none of it’s good, so I really need you to let me get this out.”

Despite the concern that floods his face, he nods. “Okay.”

“I sat on the knowledge for a bit because I didn’t know what to do with it. But then when I was sixteen, I decided to start targeting him.”

He raises a brow. “Targeting him how?”

“I blackmailed him. I didn’t need the money obviously, but I didn’t want him having any...so I used to make him write me large checks and cash them in exchange for not telling his wife or daughter about the affair.”

It was relatively easy because my father was so oblivious back then, he never checked the bank account he set up for me.

“After, I’d donate them to various charities.”

Not that doing so makes me an upstanding citizen by any means.

Oakley blows out a ragged breath. “Jesus Christ, Bianca.”

“I know.”

His head snaps up. “You could have come to me. We could have figured out a better way—”

“You hated me remember?” I remind him.

His blue eyes harden. “I *never* fucking hated you.”

Well, he might after I tell him this.

“Dr. Young wasn’t the only one I blackmailed,” I whisper. “Hayley became my target, too.”

He makes an angry noise in his throat. “Fucking hell.” He stands. “The videos.”

I give him a sheepish nod.

His fury is tangible. “Goddammit, Bianca.”

“I know it was wrong. I wish I never did it.”

Even though I didn’t go public with them, it still doesn’t matter.

The intent was there.

One wrong move on her end and I would have ruined her life.

*A life that was already ruined by him.*

“It gets worse,” I croak, the room tilting beneath me. “Do you remember the night I stole your phone and met up with Hayley?”

“Yeah.” His face turns grim. “What did you do?”

“Nothing.” I look down at the floor because I can’t bear to look him in the eyes. “But I figured out that Hayley was feeding you a bunch of lies about me on purpose...and that she knew about her dad’s affair with my mom.”

“Nah.” He shakes his head. “Hayley and I were close. Even after we broke up, we remained friends. Plus, she knew Jace and Cole were my boys. She would have told me if her dad had an affair with your mother.”

“No, she wouldn’t.”

A snarl rumbles in his chest. “The fuck she wouldn’t—”

“She wouldn’t because she was used to keeping her father’s secrets,” I blurt out.

“What the hell does that mean?”

I start pacing. “She confessed something to me that night. Something terrible.”

“Like what?”

I stop pacing and turn to face him. “Her father molested her.”

He looks like I just ripped his heart out of his chest and stomped on it. “No.” He takes a giant step back, as if he’s trying to put as much physical distance between us as he can. “She would have told me. Hayley knew she

could tell me anything.” His hands curl into fists as an array of emotions scatter across his face. “Jesus fucking Christ.”

I take a step closer, but that only makes him retreat even more.

“Oakley—”

He’s out the door before I can stop him.

# Chapter 46

## Bianca

I bang on his door. “Let me in, Oakley.”

I know he’s home because I saw his motorcycle in the parking lot.

“Please,” I implore. “You don’t even have to talk, just let me in so I can be with you.”

I press my forehead to the wood of the door. “Don’t make me beg.” Desperation flickers in my chest and I try again. “Dammit. If you *ever* fucking cared about me, you’ll—”

Finally, the door swings open.

Oakley looks so out of sorts, so *dejected*, my heart breaks.

And that’s when I spot the bottle of Jack Daniels sitting on his coffee table.

*Fuck.*

I knew it would be hard for him to hear what happened to Hayley, but it never crossed my mind that it would trigger a relapse.

“I was high the first time we had sex,” he says, discernibly lost in deep thought. “I didn’t even remember it. I just remember her telling me it was her first time after.” He plops down on the futon. “And the first time she told me she loved me...I panicked.” His eyes close. “Because all I could think about was how bad she was in bed and that I needed to end things before she got even more attached to me.”

I know how much regret and guilt can twist a person up inside and I want nothing more than to take his pain away.

I go to touch him, but he pulls away. “Oakley.”

“And now she’s dead.” Reaching over, he grabs the bottle. “Because of me.”

I place my hand over his. “This won’t fix it.”

“You’re right.” His Adam’s apple bobs. “But it will help me go numb, so I don’t have to feel this fucking shit anymore.”

“You can’t stay drunk and high your whole life,” I remind him. “Sooner or later you’ll be sober...and the pain will still be there.” I draw in a painful

breath. “But so will the people who love you.” Reaching up, I cup his cheek. “So, before you take that first drink and throw everything you’ve worked so hard for away...trust me enough to get you through this. Because I love you, Oakley, and that means you won’t ever have to fight your demons alone.”

I’ll fight them with him, for him, and beside him.

*Whatever it takes.*



He’s still staring at the bottle of unopened whiskey on his coffee table when there’s a knock on the door.

I ended up texting Dylan and asking her to come over...along with Oakley’s dad.

I figured the more support Oakley has right now, the better.

His father doesn’t look happy to see me on the other side of the door. “What’s going on?” He bounces a sleepy C.J. in his arms. “Dylan told me I needed to come over right away.”

As if on cue, Dylan treks up the stairs. “What’s wrong?”

Closing the front door behind me, I whisper, “Oakley’s sitting inside with a bottle of whiskey.”

“What?” Dylan hisses.

Mr. Zelenka’s disappointment is tangible. “Dammit.”

“He didn’t open it...yet,” I inform them. “But he heard some really bad news and he’s having a hard time digesting it.”

Mr. Zelenka gives me a look. “What kind of bad news?”

Given I might need a lawyer, he’s not the worst person to tell. However, now isn’t the time. “I’ll tell you later.” I open the front door. “Right now, let’s focus on Oakley.”

Oakley shoots me a look of annoyance when we all enter his apartment. “You called my dad.” His eyes flick to Dylan. “And Dylan.”

I let his animosity roll off my back because I know I did the right thing. “Yes, I did.” I take a seat next to him on the futon. “Because we all love you, and we’re gonna stay here with you for however long you need us.”

Dylan plops down on the other side of him. “What she said.” She gives his shoulder a squeeze. “You can’t get rid of me, butthead. I’m like a hemorrhoid that won’t ever go away.”



At that lovely visual, Oakley snorts.

Oakley's dad sets up a blanket on the floor for C.J. to sleep on, but she wakes up the moment he lays her down.

Her sleepy gaze roams around the room, stopping on her big brother. "Uh-oh."

Oakley melts like butter in the sun.

A moment later he's scooping her into his arms.

"Hey, pipsqueak. What are you doing up past your bedtime?"

She giggles.

Oakley's father, however, doesn't. "I dropped everything and came right over."

Oakley's jaw tightens. "You didn't have to do that."

His father holds his gaze. "Yes, I did."

Fortunately, C.J. breaks the tension by grabbing Oakley's cheeks and blowing raspberries in his face. "Love, Uh-oh."

Yeah, she does.

*We all do.*



It's almost two in the morning by the time Dylan and Mr. Zelenka leave.

I'm stifling a yawn as I drain the bottle of Jack down Oakley's sink.

Oakley joins me in the kitchen. "You know what's weird?"

I toss the empty bottle in his trash. "What?"

"I don't know what enjoying a single glass of alcohol even means. I hear people talk about it all the time, like it's normal." He leans against the counter. "But I always need the excess to drown it out." A hefty sigh escapes him. "And pretty soon one glass leads to ten, which leads to a few lines of coke, which leads to popping some pills. But I didn't think I was an addict like my mom...I thought I had the shit under control." His eyes meet mine. "But I don't, because it was controlling me. It's *still* controlling me."

"That's because you have a disease," I point out.

"I wish I didn't."

I tell him the cold-hard truth. "There might not be a cure, but you can manage it. You just have to want it bad enough. You have to fight for your sobriety and make it the first priority in your life. And you have to surround

yourself with people who love and support you.”

“You mean the people I’m constantly disappointing because I fuck shit up.”

“No one was disappointed tonight.”

We were relieved.

Because the old Oakley would have given in.

And even though temptation was sitting right in front of him, summoning him to fall down the rabbit hole, and he could have listened...he didn’t.

He let me in instead of going to the dark side.

*Just like I did with him.*

Once upon a time, I built walls up to keep people out...

But now I’m realizing those same walls also kept out my happiness.

The ability to trust and love people.

Including my own family.

I will always love my mother and wish she was here...but I’m tired of keeping her secrets.

*I want to be free.*

# Chapter 47

## Bianca

“I’ll be right outside if you need me,” Oakley declares when we pull up to the house.

“I know.” Pressing my cheek to his shoulder blade, I squeeze my arms around him, soaking the strength he’s giving me up like a sponge. “Thank you.”

Nerves bunch in my stomach when I look around the driveway and spot my father’s car along with Jace’s royal blue Lexus.

They’re all inside waiting for me.

And they have no idea what kind of missile I’m about to launch.

My legs shake as I get off the bike, and for a moment, I debate telling Oakley to drive me back to my dorm.

But I don’t.

A groan lodges in my throat when my phone rings. Stone’s been blowing up my phone all morning, despite telling him I was busy studying for a test.

I suppose I could have told him what I was really up to, but then he’d have a bunch of questions for me.

I’d rather tell him everything after I tell my family.

I’m about to hit the ignore button, but I realize it’s not Stone calling me after all.

I don’t recognize the number, but I answer anyway.

“Hello?”

“May I speak with Bianca Covington?” a deep voice asks on the other line.

“Speaking.”

“Hello, this is Detective Pollard with the Special Victims Unit. I was calling to give you an update about your case.”

To say I’m surprised would be putting it mildly because I was told it would take a while to gather evidence and get the ball rolling.

“Oh. I didn’t think it would be so soon.”

The detective clears his throat. “Yes, well unfortunately the case will be

closed.”

Anger rushes through my veins. “What the hell do you mean the case will be closed—”

“Dr. Young was murdered late last night.”

My head whirls and a stunned gasp flies out of me.

“Wait, *what?* Murdered? By who?”

I see Oakley tense. “Who was murdered?”

I quickly hold up a hand, silencing him because I need to know what happened myself before I can tell him.

I hear the detective’s sharp inhale of breath over the extension. “I’m not at liberty to disclose all the details, but the department was conducting another investigation involving a different victim. However, the victim’s father decided to take matters into his own hands.”

Holy. Shit. I’m literally speechless.

“I...wow.”

“Even though the case will be closing, if you would like some counseling or to come by and speak with—”

“No,” I quickly say. “Thank you, though.” I can’t deny that I’m awfully curious as to who’s responsible for giving this piece of shit his due karma. “Do you know who murdered him?”

“We have someone in custody, yes.”

When it’s obvious he’s not going to tell me who that person is, I thank him for calling and hang up.

Then I look at Oakley.

I ended up telling him about my plan to take down Mark late last night, but there’s obviously been a new development.

“Someone killed Mark.”

His blue eyes go wide. “Holy fucking shit.”

“I know.”

I pull up the search engine on my phone. If the police have someone in custody there’s a chance a local news station might know who and report it.

My heart drops to my stomach when I click on the first article and see the man’s mugshot.

I recognize him.

*Angelica’s dad.*

Oh, God.

Emotions tangle in my chest and I have to force my lungs to take in air so

I don't pass out.

I gave her my bracelet and told her to be strong.

*But then a monster came along and ripped all her strength away.*

Oakley gets off his bike and rushes over to me. "What—"

"Does your dad ever take pro bono cases?" I choke out.

Needless to say, Oakley's confused as hell. "Not really. Why?"

I hold up my phone. "This little girl...Angelica. Her dad...he killed Mark because he..."

My stomach coils and I can't bring myself to spit the words out.

Fortunately, I don't have to.

Those long fingers of his draw tiny, soothing circles up and down my back. "I'll call him." Wrapping his arms around me in a giant bear hug, he kisses the top of my head. "My dad will take the case. I'll make sure of it." He buries his nose in my hair and inhales audibly. "Maybe I should take you home. This is a lot for you to deal with right now."

"No," I quickly say, because if I don't go in there and rip the ginormous Band-Aid holding my freedom back off, I'll lose my nerve. "I have to do this."

"Are you sure?"

I nod. "Positive."

He pulls me into another bear hug. "If it becomes too much, I'll be right out here, baby girl."

*I know.*

My legs feel like rubber as I make my way into the house.

Stomach churning, I head into the kitchen where I find my dad, Nadia, Jace, and Cole seated at the kitchen table.

I asked Dylan and Sawyer to join us at the house later because I'm positive my brothers are going to need them.

But right now it needs to be just us.

I look at Nadia. "I'm gonna need to talk to my brothers and dad alone."

Everyone looks at each other in confusion, but neither them nor Nadia protest.

After kissing my dad on the cheek, she stands up.

She's passing me when I reach for her hand. "Don't go too far, okay?" I offer her a warm smile. "He's gonna need you after this."

Nodding her head softly, she gives my hand a small squeeze. "Okay."

Then she's gone.

And it's just me, my family...  
*And all the secrets I've been keeping from them.*

# Chapter 48

## Bianca

“I don’t even know what to say right now,” Cole utters. “I keep hoping this is just a bad dream.”

Jace mutters a curse. And then before anyone can stop him, he picks up a glass and throws it at the wall.

“Fuck her.”

I startle in my seat. “Jace—”

“No.” He turns his furious glare on me. “She almost killed you. And Liam.” A shudder runs through him and he closes his eyes. “I was always there for her. I did whatever she needed. I kept everything together in this house when she couldn’t even get out of bed.” He looks at our father. “I believed whatever she told me...all so she could cheat on Dad and try to kill her children before she offed herself.”

“She was sick,” Dad croaks. “Your mother loved you very much, Jace.” Grief floods his face and he hangs his head. “She loved you *all* very much. You kids were her life.” He reaches across the table for my hand. “I wish you’d told me sooner, sweetheart. I could have gotten you into counseling —”

Cole snorts. “Yeah, because look how well *that* worked out for Mom and Liam.”

“Counseling wasn’t the problem,” I point out. “Dr. Young being a piece of shit was the problem.” My chest heaves as I avert my gaze. “So was me forcing Liam to keep Mom’s secret when he wanted to tell someone.”

It’s something I’ll always have to live with.

*A mistake I’ll never forgive myself for.*

Because I was the one who told him to be tough and resilient.

To never let anyone inside...

*To be silent when things are bad.*

And in the end, that silence ended his life.

Cole squeezes my shoulder. “Don’t do that, Bianca. You were just a little girl. You thought you were protecting Mom...your idol.” He slaps his chest.

“If anyone is to blame for Liam’s death, we all know it’s me. He tried to talk to me that night and I wouldn’t fucking let him. His death is *my* cross to bear, not yours.”

Dad slams his hand on the table. “Goddammit. Stop blaming yourselves. Liam and your mother were sick. I should have gotten Liam more help when I saw the signs, but I didn’t. I let it go when he threw a fit about seeing someone...because I was too wrapped up in my own grief to step up and parent. You all were kids, but *I* was the adult. I’m the one to blame. I crumbled when you needed me to be strong.”

No one says a word.

Except Jace.

Who’s looking at our father with something I’ve never seen before.

*Pity.*

“You didn’t seem surprised to find out Mom was having an affair.”

Dad tries to change the subject, but Jace won’t let him.

“You knew she was cheating...didn’t you?”

Dad’s green eyes turn dim. “People make mistakes, Jace. I didn’t want your mother to be remembered for hers.” He rubs his chest. “The only thing that matters is that you all know how much she loved you.” His voice cracks. “I want you to have good memories of her.”

Jace’s jaw tenses. “You never cheated on her with your secretary, did you?”

“No.” He scrubs a hand down his face. “I won’t sit here and pretend I’m a saint. When things became bad in our marriage, I thought about it... but I could never go through with it. I loved her too much and I kept hoping we could work it out.”

Jace looks so pissed that for a second I think he’s going to throw another glass. “You let me believe you were the one having the affair all these years.”

“I tried to tell you I didn’t, but you wouldn’t believe me.” His voice is barely a whisper. “After a while, I stopped trying to convince you, because it was better you be angry with me than with her.”

Jace looks so defeated I want to wrap my arms around him.

“Dad.”

It’s the first time Jace has called him that since...

*He found Liam in his closet.*

When Dad looks at him, he utters, “I’m sorry.”



Cole and I exchange a stunned glance. Jace never apologizes for anything.

Unless it's to Dylan.

As if on cue, Dylan and Sawyer enter the kitchen.

Sawyer wraps her arms around Cole, and Dylan does the same to Jace.

"Can we go see Liam?" Cole buries his head against Sawyer's chest. "I want to talk to him."

She cups his face in her hands. "Of course we can."

Wordlessly, Dylan takes Jace's hand and they start to walk out.

But not before Jace stops to wrap me up in a hug. "I don't know what the fuck to say. Just know that I love you."

I kiss his cheek. "I love you, too."

After they all leave, it's just me and Dad who looks like he's fighting back tears.

"I'm so sorry, sweetheart."

I give him a hug. "It's okay, Dad."

His green eyes become glassy. "No, honey. It isn't."

He's right, it's not...but maybe one day it will be.

The genuine sadness in his expression pulls at my heart.

"I should have been there for you."

He's not wrong, however, I know he was fighting his own battles.

"It's not too late to start now."

With a heavy sigh, I make my way out of the house.

I sometimes wonder how different I'd be if these tragedies in my life didn't happen.

Would I still be the little girl who wanted to be a ballerina...the one who was so desperate to fit in with the rest of the world?

Or would I still have ended up the callous bitch...the one who's wicked demeanor was a shell she built around her for protection.

Either way...one thing still remains unchanged.

Regardless of the amnesia, I've never known who I am, because home still feels like a fairy tale I've been searching for my whole life.

However, the moment my eyes land on Oakley who's still waiting for me at the end of the driveway, just like he said he would...

I can't help but think I've finally found it.

Given Jace and Cole left before I did, I'm sure there was one hell of a confrontation he had to deal with.

Not that he looks like he gives a single fuck about that.

He watches me with concerned eyes before those safe arms wrap around me. “I’d ask if you’re okay, but...”

But I’m not.

The tips of his fingers press into the curve of my jaw. “What do you need?”

*Just him.*

“Can you take me somewhere?” I whisper. “I want to forget the world and disappear with you for a little while.”

His warm breath and deep voice caress my skin. “You got it.”

# Chapter 49

## Bianca

### Past...

The sound of my phone ringing jolts me out of my sleep.

*Oakley.*

My heart jumps out of my chest as I reach for my phone, but my hopes are dashed when I see Jace's name flash across the screen.

I quickly hit the ignore button and fall back into bed.

It's been two days since I've spoken to Oakley.

Two days since he's been home.

*Two days since I've fucked everything up.*

At this point, I don't even care if he's with another girl...I just hope he's not off somewhere doing drugs.

Bringing my phone to my ear, I dial his number for what has to be the millionth time, but as usual, it goes straight to voicemail.

I groan when my phone rings and Jace's name flashes across my screen again. Given he's in New York with his girlfriend, you'd think he'd be off having fun instead of blowing up my phone.

Frustrated, I take the call.

"What?" I snap.

"Are you okay?" Jace questions.

There's no mistaking the worry in his tone.

That's...*strange.*

I highly doubt Oakley told him about our argument.

I sit up in bed. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"I don't know," he gripes. "How about the fucking fires? Why the hell do you think I've been trying to call you all afternoon?"

"Fires?" I utter. "What fires?"

The only thing I've lived and breathed for the last forty-eight hours is Oakley.

Jace sighs. "There are wildfires spreading across the state."

“Seriously?”

I quickly find my remote and flick on the television. Sure enough, every local news station is covering the gigantic wildfire spreading through parts of California.

“Shit.”

“I know,” Jace says. “I’m trying to get a flight back there, but the earliest one I can find isn’t until later tonight, and even then, it’s still a six-hour flight.” There’s a long pause. “Bianca?”

“Yeah?”

“The news just said it’s starting to spread through Ship’s Haven and...” His sentence trails off...as if he can’t bring himself to say the next words.

But he doesn’t have to.

Ship’s Haven is only three towns over...which means it’s close.

*Too fucking close.*

“Oakley’s missing,” I whisper, realizing he could be anywhere. “I’ve been trying to call him, but it keeps going to voicemail.”

“Fuck,” Jace mutters. “I was hoping he was home so you weren’t alone.” I can practically hear his teeth clench. “Dad’s still in Japan, but I’m gonna see if he can get a helicopter over there to come pick you up.”

“You really think Dad can summon a helicopter during a *fire*?”

And even if he could...I wouldn’t get on it without knowing Oakley’s safe.

“I don’t fucking know, Bianca. But I’m not gonna sit here and do nothing.” I overhear Cole saying something to him in the background. “Hold on, Cole wants to talk to you.”

“Hey,” Cole greets me a moment later. “So, I’ve been thinking and I’ve come up with a plan so you don’t get roasted.”

“Gee thanks.” I pinch the bridge of my nose. “What’s your plan?”

“Get your ass in the swimming pool. This way when the fire passes over Royal Manor, you’ll be safe...because you know...water and shit.”

All things considered, that’s not a horrible plan. “Yeah, that might—”

I don’t get to finish my sentence because Jace snatches the phone from him. “I’m gonna try calling Dad again to ask about that helicopter and see if there’s anything he can do on his end.” The fear in his voice is palpable. “Don’t start freaking out yet though, okay? I’m gonna figure something out.”

“Okay,” I tell him, even though it’s pretty hopeless at this point.

The only positive is that my family is out of harm's way.

My stomach churns. *Oakley, however, isn't.*

"I love you," Jace says and it's all I can do not to lose it because we don't say those words unless it's serious.

"I love you, too."

I'm ending the call when it occurs to me that I might not get the chance to tell Oakley the same.



I draw my knees to my chest as terror ripples through me.

The fire blazed through Ship's Haven and is currently burning its way through the next town...which means it won't be long before it reaches Royal Manor.

If I close my eyes and concentrate...I can hear the sirens looming in the distance and smell the smoke in the air.

I should pull myself together and try to escape, but I have nowhere to go.

And even if I did, all the roads are congested due to people trying to evacuate.

I'm literally trapped.

But that's still not the worst part about what's happening.

The worst part is that Oakley's out there somewhere and I have no idea if he's okay.

*And I'm probably going to die without ever making things right between us.*

I start rocking myself, desperately trying to ease my anxiety as tears fill my eyes.

I'd give anything to go back to that night at the bar and do things differently.

Because despite us being a train wreck waiting to happen and me always feeling like I was one breath away from drowning every time he was near.

I've never been happier in my whole life.

I'm so lost in my thoughts, I barely register the sound of the front door opening and heavy footsteps rushing up the stairs.

"Get up."

My head snaps up at the sound of Oakley's voice, and for a moment I

honestly think I'm hallucinating because how is he standing right in front of me?

Getting off my bed, I rush toward him. "Where the hell were you?" Tears clog my vision as fear and anger spiral through me like a boulder rolling downhill. Before I can stop myself, I shove him. "Do you have any idea how worried I was?" I shove him again, harder this time. "How hard I cried myself to sleep the past two nights because you *abandoned* me—"

I don't have time to finish yelling at him because he scoops me up and tosses me over his shoulder...right before he starts charging down the staircase.

"What the actual fuck are you doing?"

Ignoring me, he continues out the front door.

"Where are we going?"

He doesn't answer, but he does put me down when we reach the driveway.

I'm puzzled when I notice a sleek, black motorcycle parked at the end of it.

"Why is there a bike in the driveway?"

"It's my dad's." Jaw clenched, he tosses me a helmet. "Get on."

He's out of his mind. "Are you crazy? I'm not getting—"

"Christ," he seethes as he straddles the bike. "Shut the fuck up and hop on so we can get out of here."

Shaking my head, I back away. I've never been on a motorcycle before and I don't know much about them, but everything I do know isn't good. "There's no way in hell I'm getting on that thing."

Muttering a curse, he looks up at the night sky, like he's trying his hardest not to reach over and throttle me. "Bianca."

He says my name like a threat and a promise.

"What?"

His glare grows glacial. "Get on the goddamn bike. *Now.*"



Turns out riding a motorcycle through town was the smart thing to do because we were able to speed past all the bumper to bumper traffic.

However, I'm confused when Oakley pulls into the parking lot of the

beach. “Why are we here?”

He doesn’t say a word as he gets off the bike and starts walking.

I follow close behind him and I’m even more baffled when I see a small tent at the end of the beach.

Given it was set up before we got here, he must have done it earlier.

Which makes no sense...unless.

“Have you been here the whole time?”

I don’t know why I didn’t think to check here in the first place. Oakley once told me it’s one of his favorite places to go when he wants to be alone.

Wordlessly, he takes a backpack out of the tent and pulls out a few bottles of water, not even bothering to look my way.

His silence cuts like a knife.

“I know you hate me but can you at least tal—”

“I don’t hate you.” He gives me a look that robs me of breath. “Trust me it would be a lot easier if I could.”

I swallow against the pounding of my heart. “I know I screwed up, but you can’t just disappear like that. You can’t—

“You don’t get to have a say in what I can or can’t fucking do.” His deep voice rumbles through the air, wrapping around me. “You lost that right when you stole my phone and started accusing me of shit.”

My heart sinks. “I—”

“Did you fuck him?”

The inquiry snaps like a whip.

I’m briefly thrown off, but I answer honestly. “No. I wouldn’t do that—”

“It’s late.” He turns his back to me, directing all his attention toward the ocean now. “There’s an air mattress in the tent you can sleep on. It’s not that comfortable, but it’s better than nothing.”

I shuffle my feet in the sand. “What if the fire comes?”

“Then we swim.”

I’m about to tell him Cole came up with a similar plan, but I stop myself.

Because our connection—the one I’ve always felt in my marrow—is no longer there.

*I severed it with my obnoxious game fueled by jealousy.*

I take a step closer to him. “Oakley?”

His shoulders tense. “What?”

My heart hurts at the hollowness of his voice.

“I’m sorry.” Closing the distance between us, I press my body against his

back, breathing in his scent. “I never should have taken your phone to text Hayley. And I shouldn’t have jumped to conclusions when I saw you with that woman at the bar.” A sharp kick of pain hits my heart. “And I definitely shouldn’t have let you think I was fucking some random guy as payback.”

Truth be told I can’t blame him for being so angry with me. What I did was not only immature...it was hurtful.

Turning his head, he speaks over his shoulder. “This won’t work if you can’t trust me.”

I press a gentle kiss to his shoulder blade. “I do trust you.”

Deep down, I know Oakley would never hurt me.

However, the thought of anyone else having him...doesn’t sit well with me.

“But I don’t like sharing you,” I whisper. “I want you all to myself.”

And maybe that’s wrong of me, but I can’t help how I feel.

I start to walk away, but his next words stop me in my tracks.

“That’s the thing, Bianca.” Slowly, he turns. His expression is twisted in pain, as though he’s battling something stronger than him. “You do have me.”

I’m not sure what he’s saying. “What—”

Jaw bunching, he grits his teeth. “The harder I fight whatever this thing is between us...the stronger your hold on me gets.” Heaving out a long sigh, he shrugs as if succumbing to his fate. “So I’m done fighting it.”

The air between us grows so thick you could cut it with a knife. “Does that mean—”

“That we’re together?” He scrubs a hand down his face. “Yeah...yeah we fucking are.”

My heart pounds so hard it feels like it could burst from my chest as I run and jump into his arms.

His mouth finds mine and once again I’m drowning in him, sinking faster into his abyss.

But for the first time in days...I can finally breathe.



I feel the rapid thump of Oakley’s heart against my back as he holds me close, keeping me safe and warm in his embrace.



Neither of us have been able to sleep but it has nothing to do with the air mattress.

The fire is coming.

All the news outlets have officially confirmed Royal Manor is next on the path of destruction.

At this rate, it would take nothing short of a miracle to stop the blaze from ruining our town.

“We might die,” I whisper into the darkness.

I expect Oakley to tell me I’m being dramatic and to reassure me we’ll be okay, but he doesn’t.

Instead, he holds me tighter, as if his arms alone can protect me from the impending flames that will turn us into nothing but ash.

Tears blur my eyes as I try to speak. “Oakley?”

I’m so scared.

Not just of dying...but of everything I’m going to miss.

*The things I’ll never get to experience.*

He presses a soft kiss to the crook of my neck. “Yeah, baby girl?”

Shifting to face him, I peer into his eyes. “I don’t want to die without knowing what it’s like to feel you inside me.”

Heat flashes in his orbs before he closes them. “Baby—”

“Holy shit,” I groan in frustration. “Why won’t you fuck me?” A horrible thought flits through my head. “Oh my God. It’s because I’ve never had sex before, isn’t it? I’m a virgin which means I’ll be bad in bed and you don’t want to have to teach me—”

“Jesus Christ.” He cups my cheekbone. “It’s *not* that.” A crease forms between his brows. “Fine. You want the truth? Back when we first started hooking up I didn’t want to fuck you because I didn’t want you getting attached to me...but now...”

“Now *what*?” I urge when his sentence trails off.

He inhales deeply. “I don’t want you being impulsive and making a mistake you’ll end up regretting one day.”

I don’t know what hurts worse. The fact that he obviously thinks our relationship is still temporary.

Or that he thinks I’ll regret him. *Regret us.*

“Oakley?” I grab his face, forcing him to look at me. “No matter what happens between us, being with you—feeling all the things I feel for you—it will *never* be a mistake.”

I have to stop myself before I utter those three words. Not because I don't feel them, but I'm afraid they might push him away when I want to hold on to him with everything I've got.

I don't know what to make of the expression on his face.

"Say something," I whisper. "I need to know what you're think—"

His mouth crashes against mine in a kiss so electrifying, I feel it in my bones.

I'm breathless the second I feel his tongue brush mine and he deepens the kiss...as if I'm the thing he needs most in this world.

A knot of hunger forms in my chest when he pushes my tank top past my ribcage, exposing my belly.

"So fucking beautiful."

The pads of his fingertips skim the underside of my bare breasts, and I swear I lose all my senses when his mouth moves to my neck and his teeth graze my pulse point. "That feels so good."

Heat flares over my skin when he slips my tank top over my head and his mouth dips lower. "Christ. I love your fucking tits."

Plumping one in his big hand, he teases my puckered nipples with his lips, barely touching them.

"Oakley," I beg. "Please—"

"I know what you want." There's a wicked gleam in his eyes as he licks a slow, deliberate circle around one of my nipples. "Now be a good girl so I can give it to you."

God, I love his dirty words. The way he makes me anticipate his every touch.

It's a struggle to keep still when he finally wraps his mouth around the brown bud, giving it little wet pulls that shoot straight to my core.

"More," I whisper when he switches to my other nipple, paying it the same attention. "I need more."

My heartbeat drums in my ears as his hand skates down my torso before disappearing inside my shorts.

Shooting me a coy look, his hand stills above my panties, not going any further.

I shiver, silently begging him with my body while his thumb leisurely coasts along my pubic bone.

His attention drifts from my face to my body as he plucks the waistband of my shorts, causing them to snap against my skin. "Take these off."

I eagerly do what he says.

My eyes flutter closed and a slow tremble works through me when he strokes the crotch of my underwear with his knuckle. “You’re so wet your little panties are sticking to your virgin cunt.”

*Jesus.* Sucking in a sharp breath, I ease my thighs apart, desperate for more of his touch.

A groan of frustration leaves me when his movements come to a halt.

“Why are you stopping?”

I hear him rustling around for something in the darkness before the tent becomes flooded with a dim light. “I need to see you.”

His eyes flare with hunger as he drags his gaze down my body.

Slowly, those long fingers slip under my panties and he moves them to the side.

A gruff noise escapes him as his stare zeroes in on my exposed sex. He’s eyeing it like he’s just found the buried treasure he’s been looking for his whole life.

Propping himself up on one of his elbows, he glides a finger down the length of my swollen flesh. “So fucking pretty.”

His hot breath gusts over my nipples as the calloused pad of his thumb grazes my clit. He spreads my slickness around before submerging his finger. “You gonna let me eat this sweet pussy?”

“Yes.” Mewling, I arch into his palm as he curls the long digit inside me. “I’ll let you do whatever you want.”

“Good answer.” I’m completely transfixed as I watch him lick my arousal off his fingers. “Fuck me.” The heat in his eyes is penetrating. “I’m gonna need more of that.”

Making a deep almost savage noise in the back of his throat, he tugs my panties off and spreads my legs as wide as they can go.

I barely have time to blink before his head is buried between them.

Warmth rushes my insides when he drags his tongue along the length of my slit. “Oh, God.”

My breathing speeds up as he fucks me with his tongue, growling against my throbbing flesh like a man starved.

Shifting gears, he sucks my clit and plunges two fingers inside me with a force that makes me cry out his name.

Those blue orbs pierce me, holding me captive as his mouth works me into a frenzy and he fucks me with his fingers.

A delicious curl of desire races up my spine when he hits a spot that lights me up from the inside out. “Oh, Fuck. Right there.”

My legs begin shaking while he deliberately extracts every ounce of pleasure from my body. A low groan leaves him and I watch his shoulders flex as he continues feasting on my pussy like it’s his favorite meal.

“Oakley.”

I’m so close. So fucking...

I bite my lip so hard it hurts as my orgasm spirals through me, drawing a sharp cry from my lips. Gripping his hair, I come apart with tiny fervid whimpers I can’t hold back.

“Please,” I plead as he proceeds to lap at the remnants of my climax.

I swear I might actually die from impatience if he makes me wait another second for his dick.

The sound of his zipper lowering is almost obscenely loud in the small tent.

I should be nervous about what’s about to happen...but I’m not.

My mouth waters when he wraps his fist around his length. I can’t recall ever being so attracted to a guy’s cock before. Then again, Oakley has a spectacular one.

Long, thick, and veiny with a wide, shiny pink head complete with a silver barbell.

If I wasn’t the jealous type, I’d suggest a sex toy company make moldings of what he’s packing because they’d sell like hotcakes.

But Oakley and his perfect dick are mine. *All mine.*

Kneeling in front of me, he lines himself up with my entrance.

My toes curl when he circles my sensitive clit with his barbell, teasing me into oblivion all over again.

“You love it when I tease your little pussy, don’t you?”

My pulse quickens. “You know I do.”

His lips curve as he drags the head of his cock through my slickness...but then he pauses.

“Are you sure?”

I’ve never been more sure about anything in my life.

“Positive.” I spread my thighs wider. “I’m ready.”

*So fucking ready.*

But Oakley’s not apparently.

“Wh—” My mouth drops open when I see him remove his piercing.

“Why are you doing that?”

“It’s gonna hurt when I pop your cherry.” Reaching for the hem of his shirt, he peels it off. “Figured the least I can do is not add to the pain.”

I can feel myself pouting. “But I like your piercing.”

Smirking, he settles himself between my thighs. “I’ll put it back in after.” Gently, he runs his knuckle across my cheekbone, his face going serious. “You need to tell me if it hurts too much.”

“I can take it,” I assure him.

The tip of his dick nudges my entrance. “I’ll go slow.”

“You don’t have to—” I start to tell him, but the words get trapped in my throat when he starts to enter me, inch by aching inch.

I force myself to breathe through the pain as I stretch around him.

“Are you okay?” he says when he’s about halfway.

I’m not, but I give him a nod anyway. “Keep going.”

He stops moving. “I’m hurting you.”

“It’s fine.” I bury my face against the crook of his neck. “I want it to hurt.”

His brows furrow. “Why?”

Brushing the hair out of his eyes, I give him the truth. “Because the most beautiful things do.”

A furrow grows between his brows as he studies me...as if I’m the most interesting thing he’s ever laid eyes on.

“Oakley,” I urge when I can’t take the torture anymore.

With a deep grunt, he pushes forward, working to fit his thick cock inside me.

There’s a sharp stabbing pain once he’s filled me to the hilt, causing my entire body to tense up.

I take a few deep breaths, forcing myself to relax.

A moment later, the pain subsides and I feel different...fuller somehow.

*Whole.*

I peer up at him, watching an array of emotions cascade across his chiseled face.

Deep inside my chest, my heart thumps heavy against my ribcage, as if beating solely for him now. “You’re inside me.”

His blue eyes darken as he leans his forehead against mine. I press my palm to his chest where I feel his own heart racing a mile a minute.

A shudder runs through him as he stares down at me. “I know.”

I run my hand along his back, trying to gather the courage to tell him because I need him to know how special this moment is to me.

How special *he* is to me.

“It was never meant for anyone else, Oakley. Just you.”

*Only ever him.*

Another shudder rolls through him as he burrows his face against the curve of my neck. “Bianca.”

He whispers my name like a prayer and an oath.

A promise that he’ll never hurt me.

*Never leave me.*

Slowly, he begins thrusting, going a bit deeper each time.

I wrap my arms around his shoulders as he starts to move in a rhythm that feels so good I gasp.

I’ve heard girls say that sex always sucks the first time, but either I’m one of the lucky ones—or Oakley is just that incredible in bed—because it’s the complete opposite of suck.

My hips rise to meet his, craving more of the addicting friction he’s creating between us.

He makes a low almost growling sound in his throat. “That’s it, baby girl. Fuck me back.”

My entire body responds, throbbing with need as I slide my hands to his delectable ass which flexes with every thrust.

“Christ.” The corners of his mouth curl as heat enters his eyes. “I knew your pussy would feel good...but not *this* fucking good.”

I start to respond, but he goes deeper, hitting a spot that sends everything reeling. “Holy shit.” I claw at his back. “Don’t stop. Don’t *ever* stop.”

My breath gets trapped in my lungs as he picks up his pace, fucking me so good I finally understand what it means when people say they see stars.

Because right now? I see the whole entire universe and he’s at the very center of it.

Reaching between us, he strums my clit and the slow, sweet ache he’s triggering within me rises.

My nails dig deeper into his skin as a sharp hiss leaves my lips. “God, I’m so close.”

I can feel my orgasm building as each stroke of his cock hits me exactly where I need it.

I clench around him as the band of tension snaps. His name is a strangled

cry on my lips as my orgasm barrels into me with the force of a freight train.

Oakley trembles as I ride out the last wave of my climax. “Fuck yeah. Milk my dick.”

Shifting, he grips the back of my neck, his face straining with pleasure. A tortured sound escapes him and he slides his hand down my back, drawing me closer as he comes with a deep groan.

I’m breathless, my mind spinning a hundred different directions as I curl up beside him and lay my head on his chest.

And then I hear it.

The soft pitter-patter against the tent.

“Oakley...it’s raining.”

A smile starts to spread across his delectable mouth...but then he sprints up like he’s been singed. “Fuck.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I have to cover the bike.”

Before I can stop him, he’s running out of the tent. Naked.

A laugh bubbles out of me as I zero in on the way the moonlight illuminates his sweet bare ass while he races across the beach...and then I’m chasing after him.

Because where he goes, I will always follow.



Sunlight peeks in through the fabric of the tent, rousing me awake. Everything is slightly hazy when I open my eyes.

*Everything but him.*

It’s as if the world is black and white, but he’s the only one in color.

I’m not sure if it’s the sex that’s fundamentally changed me, or all the time we’ve spent together this summer...but I feel different somehow.

As if all the heaviness I’ve been carrying inside my chest my whole life has finally lifted.

I snuggle against him as he wakes up. “Morning.”

Those gorgeous blue eyes travel over my face and his lips curl into a soft smile. “Good morning.” A soft chuckle escapes him. “I figured you’d be asleep for a few more hours at least.”

Normally, I would because mornings so aren’t my thing, but the more

time I spend asleep...the less time I'm spending with him.

My heart melts as I take him in. There's so much more to Oakley than people give him credit for.

I trace the curve of his eyebrow. "I could stare at you forever."

"Oh yeah?" His expression turns pensive. "What would you see?"

I give him total honesty. "All the things no one else does."

Most people think Oakley's nothing but a stoner who likes to goof around all the time, but he's not.

Deep down he's brilliant and introspective...sensitive yet profoundly complex and guarded.

He doesn't let just anyone in, but when he does?

It's like feeling the sun's rays for the very first time and you can't help but bask in everything he is.

There's only one flaw. Thanks to his piece of shit mother abandoning him, he doesn't think he deserves everything he gives back.

But if he lets me...I'll spend my whole life undoing what she did and proving to him he's worthy of being loved too.

I'll give him everything he wants. *Everything he needs.*

Bringing my hand to his lips, he kisses the inside of my wrist. "You have no fucking idea—"

The sound of his phone ringing cuts him off before he can finish his sentence.

With an irritated groan, he picks it up.

"Loki?" I ask, secretly hoping it's not Hayley.

His face tenses. "My dad." He presses a button on his cell. "I'm ignoring it."

"Don't—" I start to tell him, but it's too late.

I won't pretend to know all the mechanics of Oakley's strained relationship with his dad, but I do know how much Wayne loves him.

He's always calling to see if Oakley's okay and if he can stop by to talk—yet no matter how hard he tries to reach out to his son—Oakley keeps pushing him away.

And it's not because he doesn't love his father...it's because he's ashamed of the secret he's been keeping from him.

*The guilt from sleeping with his stepmother is slowly eating him alive.*

And the worst part is Wayne has no idea why his son started acting like he suddenly despises him.



“He probably wants to make sure you’re all right.”

“I can’t talk to him.” His grip on the phone tightens. “Besides, he’s in the Caribbean with the conniving, cheating *gold digger*.”

He spits the last word out like it’s rancid.

I kiss his shoulder blade, wishing I could make everything better for him. “I know it’s hard talking to your dad, but at least let him know you’re okay.”

“Fine,” he concedes.

Begrudgingly, he taps the speakerphone button.

Wayne answers on the first ring. “Oak? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Oakley assures him. “I’ve been camping at the beach.”

I can hear Wayne’s deep sigh of relief over the extension. “Thank God. I’ve been worried sick. Jace called me last night and told me about the fire, but he said he couldn’t get ahold of you. I must have called you about a hundred times since yesterday.”

“The reception sucks here,” Oakley lies.

“Right.” Another long sigh. “I sure picked a shit time to go on vacation, huh?”

Oakley snorts. “I’d say you picked a pretty good time considering Royal Manor almost burned to the ground.” His expression evens out. “Look, don’t freak, but I borrowed your motorcycle. The roads were jammed due to everyone trying to leave town and I needed to get to Bian—” Catching himself, he gives my hand a squeeze. “I needed to get to safety. I’ll return it before you get back.”

“Oak,” Wayne says. “I don’t give a shit about the motorcycle. I’m glad you’re okay.” He gives a hearty laugh. “I guess I can tell Crystal to stop packing since now we don’t have to catch the next flight home anymore.”

“Yeah.” For the briefest of moments, pain flickers in Oakley’s eyes. “I should go. Enjoy the rest of your vacation—”

“Wait,” Wayne says before Oakley ends the call.

“What’s up?”

“Maybe you can stop by when we get back. Clarissa Jasmine...she’s getting so big now. Just the other day she took her first steps.” The sadness in Wayne’s voice is palpable. “She’d love to meet her big brother.”

My heart folds in on itself. As far as I know, Oakley’s never even seen his little sister.

Oakley closes his eyes. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. I’m busy.”

“Come on, Oak. Please.” His voice cracks. “I miss my son goddammit.”

“I miss you too, Dad,” Oakley whispers and there’s no denying the pain laced in his words.

“I don’t know what happened, but whatever it is we can fix it—”

“I have to go,” Oakley interjects.

“Okay.” Wayne clears his throat. “But please stop by soon and meet Clarissa Jasmine.”

“I’ll think about it,” Oak finally says before he hangs up.

Silence sits heavy between us for what feels like an eternity.

Finally, I find my voice.

“I’m not trying to tell you what to do—”

“Then why does it sound like that’s *exactly* what you’re about to do?” Oakley snaps.

I’m not the type to tiptoe around shit—even when my boyfriend’s being a dick—and right now is no different.

“Look, I get that everything is fucked-up when it comes to you and your family, but don’t punish your baby sister for it.” My gaze rises to his. “She deserves to know you.”

As much as I hate the thought of Crystal being back in his life, I really want him to start a relationship with his sister.

His jaw tics. “Trust me, she’s better off *not* knowing me.”

“That’s not true,” I argue. “You’re her big brother. You’re the one she’s supposed to go to when she fucks up so bad and she’s too afraid to tell your dad, but she needs someone to help. You’re the one she’ll look up to and spill all her problems to. You’re the one who’s gonna put the fear of God into every boy she likes and try to protect her from all the bad shit in this world. You might not realize it yet, but take it from me...that little girl is going to *need* her big brother, Oakley.”

My chest squeezes. “I don’t know what I’d do if I didn’t have Jace or Cole...” Tears prickle the back of my throat. “Or Liam.”

For as short of time as he was here, I’ll always be grateful for him.

Shoulders slumped, Oakley scrubs a hand down his face. “I want to meet her. So fucking bad, but—”

“But *nothing*.” I wrap my arms around him. “Fuck Crystal—and no, I do not mean that in the literal sense because I’ll saw your dick off—but you have to stop blaming yourself for what happened in the past because you can’t change it.” I drop my forehead to his. “Focus on repairing your relationship with your dad and building one with your sister, because they

love you and they're your family. And at the end of the day, that's all that matters."

He hugs me so tight it hurts. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"Being you." His blue orbs take on a sincere glint as he cups my cheek. "You might just be the best thing that ever happened to me."

I start to tell him the same, but then *my* phone rings.

Huffing, I bring it to my ear. "Hey, Jace."

I hear the hustle and bustle of people in the background. "I'm leaving the airport now and should be at the house in twenty. Where are you?"

Late last night I told Jace that Oakley scooped me up on his dad's motorcycle and brought me to shelter. He was so relieved we were safe he didn't give either of us the third degree and I'm pretty sure he's going to worship the ground Oakley walks on for the next month or so.

However, being the overprotective brother he is, he decided to cut his trip short to come home and make sure I'm okay.

"We're leaving soon," I tell him.

"Good. Do you guys want me to stop and pick up breakfast? Ask Oak if he needs anything."

I cup the phone. "Jace wants to know if you need anything?"

Oakley waggles his eyebrows seductively and mouths, 'I need to fuck you again.'

A rush of heat flows through me.

"Nope, Oakley's good," I tell Jace in a hurry as Oakley proceeds to kiss down my neck. "However, there's still a lot of traffic on the road so we might be a little while."

I quickly disconnect the call so I can give Oakley exactly what we both need.

# Chapter 50

## Bianca

My chest feels like it's going to cave in.

Everything was so perfect between us—so *right*—and I have no idea how or why we went wrong.

“We were happy,” I whisper, looking out to the ocean.

I now realize that Oakley took me to the same place where I lost my virginity to him.

The violent waves slapping against the rocks and the turbulent gray sky above tells me there's a storm brewing.

*It matches the one going on inside my heart.*

Oakley—who was walking along the shoreline—freezes.

“Yeah,” he says after a minute passes. Blue eyes pin me with a look so severe my stomach knots. “We were.”

Not knowing what went down is *killing* me.

“What happened between us?”

His jaw clenches and I can see the knot of tension rolling through his shoulders. “You said you wouldn't ask me, remember?”

My back teeth meet with a frustrated clack. “I know, but after today I'm starting to realize just how bad secrets are.”

How they have the ability to tear people apart.

Turning to look at the ocean again, he snorts under his breath. “That's awfully hypocritical of you, don't you think?”

I blink, not understanding. “What's that supposed to m—”

“You're still wearing *his* ring.” His voice is a harsh rumble of smoke and ashes. “And *I'm* still your dirty little secret.”

There are daggers in his eyes when he glares at me.

However, he's not the only one who can dish out reality checks.

“Because that's all you seem to want to be,” I toss back.

It's his turn to appear confused. “What the fuck does that mean?”

Feeling stupid, I give my head a shake. “Nothing. Forget it.”

It's obvious he's not interested in repairing whatever happened between

us in the past, because he refuses to tell me anything that might enable us to do that.

As usual, I never know if I'm coming or going with him.

I fucking hate it.

Oakley's lips press together in a hard line, and before I can inhale my next breath, he's stalking toward me like a lion who's found his prey.

"You want me to fight for you?"

His words surprise me, and I take a cautious step back.

That only makes him advance forward.

My spine meets the gigantic boulder behind me. "No."

The dark look he gives me makes it clear he thinks I'm full of shit.

Placing his arms on either side of my head, he cages me in with his big body. "Why?"

An impulsive—almost dangerous—current runs between us, buzzing through my skin.

I force myself to stay silent.

Because my answer will change everything between us.

Oakley leans in. The heady, addicting scent of him fills my nostrils and it takes everything in me to stay still.

"Say it."

I can't. I *shouldn't*.

His heated stare lowers to my lips. The muscles along his arms clench as he inclines his head, his mouth a mere centimeter from mine. "Say. It."

His deep voice is a forceful dagger slicing through the tension.

I should be trying to sever this connection between us...but I can't.

It's too strong. Too powerful.

*Like trying to fight against gravity.*

Defeat rushes through me. "Because you'll win."

The sky crackles and thunder booms above us the moment his mouth crashes against mine.

His kiss is laced with pure greed and possession, every brush of his tongue a fierce punishment immediately met by an intoxicating reward that sends all my senses spiraling.

My fingers curl into the fabric of his gray tank top. "Oakley."

His name is both a warning and a plea.

A fight between heaven and hell.

*Right and wrong.*

Groaning, he cups the back of my neck, keeping me right where he wants me as he deepens the kiss.

A strangled sound leaves me when his hand slithers down the length of my body, his slow, torturous touch lighting every single nerve ending of mine on fire.

“Lie to yourself all you want, baby girl. But you can’t fucking lie to me.” His mouth finds my neck. “Because I fucking know you.”

I hiss when his teeth scrape against my pulse point and he grips my hips like he owns me. “I know the way you like to be touched.”

Proving his point, he sucks my flesh hard enough to leave his mark.

My knees start to buckle when his hands slide underneath my dress. “The needy, wild sounds you make when you’re about to come.” He runs the pad of his thumb along the crotch of my damp panties. “The way you taste.”

*Oh, God.* I should put an end to this, but I can’t.

*I crave him too much.*

Blue eyes hold me captive. “I know he doesn’t satisfy you, Bianca.”

Before I can stop him, he snatches my engagement ring and places it on the tip of his middle finger.

The heat in his stare sears me. “Not the way *I* can.”

In one fell swoop, he moves my panties to the side and plunges a finger inside me.

His tone is taunting. “I bet he has to lick his fingers before he does this.” He withdraws the digit and replaces it with two, stretching me so good I moan. “But I don’t...because you’re always so fucking wet for me.”

His teeth nip at my neck almost painfully as he proceeds to finger fuck me into oblivion.

“Oakley.”

Not done punishing me yet, he circles my swollen clit with the diamond on my ring, his blue orbs darkening. “You were *never* his, baby girl.”

I have no argument for that.

Only a sheer, desperate need for him and the wicked things he’s doing to me.

I claw at his back, desperate for more of his sweet torture.

“Please.”

Both my plea and the wet, forbidden sounds of his fingers thrusting into my slickness echo against the thunder.

Tugging my panties down my legs, he sinks to his knees.

A sharp gasp escapes me when he buries his head between my thighs, inhaling my arousal like a drug before he peppers sloppy, hungry kisses along my slit.

The gesture is so personal, so *intimate*.

So us.

The sky opens up and a soft drizzle starts to fall as he hitches one of my legs onto his shoulder.

The first swipe of his tongue is so insatiable, pleasure snaps through me like a hot whip.

Oakley groans, lapping at my pussy with long, greedy strokes that turn me into putty.

My hips rock against his face as he continues working me into a frenzy.

The world could implode right now, and I wouldn't even notice.

Those long fingers curl and pump inside me as he spears my cunt with the length of his tongue, slowly fucking me.

It feels so good I'm not capable of forming a coherent thought even if I wanted to.

Reaching down, I grip his hair, keeping him right where I want him. "Feels so good."

Just when I think his movements can't get any better, his mouth wraps around my clit and he sucks the swollen bud with a fervent, precise rhythm that has me pulsating.

A moment later, I'm gone—convulsing, squeezing, and erupting into a hard and fast orgasm.

However, this is far from over, because he's lit a fire within me.

One that's burning for him.

The moment he stands, I attack the button on his jeans and shove the denim down his thighs.

"My turn."

His mouth curls into a cocky smirk as I drop to my knees. "No objection here."

I tug on the waistband of his boxers and his cock springs out, hard and ready for me. The sight of his thick, long dick with the naughty silver barbell running vertically through the tip makes my mouth water.

I wrap my fingers around his base and give the shiny pink head an opened-mouth kiss that has him hissing my name.

I should tease him the way he teased me, but my need for him is so

consuming that I don't want to waste another second.

I stretch my mouth over his wide crown, flicking my tongue against the barbell.

Leaning forward, he braces one hand on the boulder while the other threads through my hair. "Fuck yeah."

I lick him from root to tip, savoring his taste before I relax my throat and suck him deeper.

"Fucking hell," Oakley groans.

He's so big I have to use my hand and jerk the part of him I can't take.

"Yeah" His voice is a rough, almost painful scratch of control against pleasure. "Suck it just like that."

Taking him deeper, I cup his balls, giving them a gentle tug.

"Fuck." A long, pained groan rips from his chest. "Suck my balls."

I love his uninhibited commands. The way he's not afraid to ask for exactly what he wants.

Using my hand to pump his length in a steady rhythm, I move my mouth where he wants it, licking and sucking his weighty sack.

"Jesus Christ." His face strains with pleasure as he stares down at me. "I want to fuck you." The look in his eyes is pure temptation. "Now."

Grunting, he hauls me up until I'm standing.

Then before I can blink, he presses me against the rock and slides his hands under my ass.

I look down at his throbbing cock. I want him inside me more than I want my next breath.

My pulse kicks up when he lines himself up with my entrance...  
and then I hear it.

My phone chiming Stone's ringtone.

*Stone...my fiancé.*

My mind reels, breaking off in a thousand different directions.

Until one sobering thought breaks through the haze.

I'm cheating on Stone.

Like mom cheated on my dad.

*I'm just like her.*

I don't even have to look at Oakley or tell him to stop for him to sense the disconnect between us.

And the cause of it.

Stepping back, he tucks his dick back into his jeans.



His features twist in anger as he places my engagement ring in the palm of my hand.

A lump clogs my throat. "I'm sorry."

He averts his gaze, like he can't bear the sight of me before he starts stalking toward the parking lot.

But I faintly hear him whisper the words, "Me too."

# Chapter 51

## Bianca

It takes every ounce of willpower I have to unhinge myself from Oakley when he pulls up to my dorm.

Things aren't awkward between us—because they never are—but there's certainly tension in the air when I unstraddle his bike and hand him his helmet.

There are so many things I want to say, but it's hard when I have all this guilt surrounding my heart.

I'm a certified cheater. There's no getting around that.

But what's worse than facing the cold, hard truth is the fact that I don't regret it.

Yes, I regret hurting Stone—because I know how much this will kill him.

But I don't regret what I did with Oakley.

*Because he was my first choice.*

And if the accident never happened and I never got amnesia...he would have been my only choice.

But life doesn't always play fair.

Sometimes it throws you a monkey wrench that's downright brutal.

Sometimes—no matter how much you don't want to—you still end up hurting people you care about.

Hitching my purse up my shoulder, I palm the stubble on his cheek. "I don't regret it."

Oakley's eyes close and he pulls me closer, engulfing me in his warmth.

I want to tell him I'm ending things with Stone for good. However, I'm so scared of being one of those girls who end one relationship and jump headfirst into another. Especially with someone who refuses to tell me things about our past.

*No matter how right being with him feels.*

"I'll call you later."

At the sound of my voice, his eyes snap open. The longing in them has my heart doing its best to pound right out of my chest.

Without warning, he grasps the back of my neck, hauling me even closer to him.

His kiss is desperate and a little messy, like he's afraid he'll never have the chance to do it again.

*Like this is goodbye.*

A jolt of panic floods my system because he left me once before and turned my life upside down in the process.

I'm afraid I won't survive it if he does it again.

"Don't leave me."

"I promised you I wouldn't." His fingers lock around my jaw and he kisses me again, as if punctuating the sentiment. "I fucking meant it."

I clutch the neck of his shirt. "Goo—"

I pause mid-sentence when I feel something solid. Curious, I tug the lanyard out of his shirt.

And stop breathing.

For a moment I'm positive I'm hallucinating, because why in the world would he have the St. Christopher pendant Liam got me along with the feather I paired with it?

Perplexed, I step back. "Why do you have my pendant?"

His chest lifts on an inhale and he starts to reach for me but stops himself. "You gave it to me." A furrow appears between his brows, like he's ashamed. "I should have given it back...but I couldn't." The sheer agony in his voice cuts into my heart. "It was the only thing I had left."

He starts to take it off, but I stop him. "No." I might not be able to remember why, but I must have given him the most important thing in my possession for a reason. "Keep it."

"Are you sure?"

I answer with no hesitation. "Positive."

My head feels heavy as I turn to walk away.

His bike roars to life behind me.

"Bianca."

I freeze, the pounding in my chest growing worse.

"Don't say it," I croak out.

Not now.

*Not until I end things with Stone.*

I don't want the significant words on his tongue to be tarnished by the weight of all the guilt I'm carrying.

I close my eyes, forcing myself to take several deep breaths as he peels out of the parking lot.

I'm walking up the stairs to my dorm when my phone rings and Cole's name flashes across the screen.

Part of me wants to hit ignore, but considering the bomb I dropped on them earlier, he might need someone to talk to.

I quickly swipe the green button and bring it to my ear. "Hey."

"Hey," he says. "Listen, Jace and I are on our way with dinner. Is there anything, in particular, you want us to get?"

I rub my temple, thwarting off a headache.

"I appreciate the offer but—"

"Don't shut us out," Cole interjects. "We're worried about you."

I don't know whether to laugh or cry. I'm the one who should be worried about *them* after everything I disclosed.

"I'm okay," I assure him.

"You don't sound okay."

*He's got me there.*

Deciding to be honest with him, I utter, "You're right...I'm not." I exhale sharply. "I'm breaking up with Stone."

If Cole's surprised by the news he doesn't let on. "I figured that would happen sooner or later."

"Why?"

I can tell he's mulling his answer over before he responds. "You've been different lately. More *you*."

A small laugh flies out. "Is that your way of saying I'm back to being a bitch?"

"Nah." He pauses. "Well, not today at least."

"Dick."

It's his turn to laugh. "Look, I'm not the guru of giving advice or anything, but life's way too fucking short to spend it miserable. If breaking up with Stone feels like the right thing to do, then you gotta do what you gotta do, you know?"

He's right. "Thanks for your support."

"Don't mention it." He clears his throat. "I'm gonna go before this turns into some Ya-Ya Sisterhood shit and you start calling me for more relationship advice." A serious note enters his voice. "You sure you don't want us to stop by? We're grabbing some burgers."

I stick my key in the lock and turn the knob, but to my surprise, it's already open.

The moment I open the door I realize why.

Stone's sitting on my bed.

And even in the dark, the force of his rage and hurt is so rich it's palpable.

I swallow hard. "Cole, I have to go."

# Chapter 52

## Bianca

“How long have you been fucking him behind my back?”

The accusation whips through me like a belt.

And the worst part is...there’s absolutely nothing I can say to defend myself.

Because he’s right.

I might not have been physically cheating on him with Oakley—well, until today—but my heart definitely didn’t belong to Stone.

And if I’m being completely honest with myself, it hasn’t for a while.

I just kept hoping things would get better between us.

But now I’m realizing that while I care about Stone...what I felt for him wasn’t love.

It was security.

Stone was the refuge and safe haven the new Bianca desperately needed after the accident.

But now that I’m able to stand on my own two feet again...he’s not what I need now.

I don’t try to make excuses or deny it. Instead, I woman the fuck up, look him in the eyes, and apologize.

“I’m sorry.”

His face twists in disgust as he gets off the bed and charges toward me. “So you admit it? You’ve been fucking him behind my back.”

I’m not sure getting into the gritty details of what Oakley and I did will make anything better for him. “It doesn’t matter.” I hold his gaze. “You have every right to hate me, but I never meant to hurt you.”

It’s the truth. I didn’t want this to be our ending.

I didn’t want to be the one to rip his heart out.

*The princess turned wicked villain in his story.*

Looking back, I should have ended things between us a long time ago.

But I didn’t, because I was scared of hurting him.

Scared of letting him go because our relationship had gotten complacent

and comfortable.

Until Oakley showed up and flipped everything on its head because I realized what I'd been missing and felt this intense connection tethering me to him in my marrow.

I hand Stone back his ring. "Give this to someone who deserves it."

Someone who won't hurt him.

Eyes going wide, Stone starts pacing. "I did everything for you." The glare he shoots me is almost threatening. "I loved you, asked you to spend the rest of your life with me...and you fucking cheated on me with that lowlife *junkie*. What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"Stone," I warn, the tiny hairs on my arms standing on end. "I get that you're upset, but talking shit about Oakley won't change—"

"Don't you fucking say his name." He punches the wall beside my head. "Don't you dare fucking say his name like he means something. He means nothing, and he is *no one*." He points at his chest. "Because *I* picked up your fucked-up pieces and made you a better person while that crackhead loser was stuck in a jail cell for killing an innocent girl." He shrugs helplessly. "*I'm* the one who was there for you. The one who did everything for you."

There's no use arguing with him. He's upset and lashing out.

Which means he can't see past his own tunnel vision.

"I'm sorry."

He shakes his head, his dark eyes glistening with tears. "That's the thing, Bourne. I don't think you are." Anger illuminates his features. "God, I let you inside my head...inside my heart. You were nothing but a poisonous, worthless cunt who deserved to die...but I craved you. Goddammit, I fucking *craved* you." He grips my chin forcefully. "And then I got you...and you sucked the life out of me until you broke me."

My chest sinks with remorse. Watching him unravel like this hurts far worse than I expected it to.

"I didn't mean to hurt you," I whisper. "I care—"

"No, you don't." He jabs his head with his pointer finger. "You don't fucking care about me."

"Yes—"

Words die in my throat when he pulls a knife out of his pocket. "Then prove it." He holds the blade up to his jugular. "Prove it or I'll slit my goddamn throat and end it."

My stomach cramps up and the room starts spinning.

He's found my Achilles' heel.

Because he knows the thought of losing another person I care about to suicide would utterly destroy me, and I'll do literally anything to prevent that from happening.

"Stone," I say slowly. "Please, put the knife down. Harming yourself isn't the answer. You have people who love you. People who care—"

"Prove you're still one of them." He presses the blade deeper against his skin, challenging me. "Or else."

I know enough about psychology to know there's a certain approach you have to take with someone who's reached their breaking point.

Right now, he needs to feel like he's in control.

That he's not losing everything.

That his life didn't end just because our relationship did.

"What do you need?"

His answer is automatic. "I need you to call that piece of shit and end it with him for good." His nostrils flare. "Right fucking now."

I look down at the phone in my hand. "Okay. I can do that."

I start to dial 911, hoping they'll overhear our conversation and send help, but Stone's already onto me.

"Goodbye, Bi—"

"No," I quickly say. "I'll do it."

"Tell him we're eloping tonight," he demands. "That you made a mistake and can't be with a killer."

For a moment, I honestly consider not doing what he wants because the thought of saying that to the man I love is...

A shudder rolls through me.

Stone's sick and he needs help.

After I get him that help, I can explain everything to Oakley.

Oakley picks up after the second ring. "Hey."

I force myself to remain detached and unaffected because Stone's eyeing me like a hawk. "I can't do this anymore."

Oakley sounds so confused, it breaks my heart. "What—"

I don't let him get a word in because it will only make it hurt worse. "I can't...I'm in love with Stone. What happened between us was a mistake."

I can hear his sharp inhale of breath over the extension. "You don't mean that."

"Yes, I do." I try to ignore the way my heart pinches. "But even if I didn't



love Stone, I can't be with a killer."

Oakley goes silent.

Stone narrows his eyes, urging me to say the rest.

"We're eloping tonight, putting everything behind us and starting fresh. Please don't contact me again, Oak."

With those parting words, I hang up.

"Is that good enough—"

The knife Stone was holding falls to the floor and his hand wraps around my throat and squeezes.

I barely have time to register what's happening before his fist goes flying into my mouth.

Everything inside me shatters.

It's almost a surreal, out-of-body experience. As if my brain doesn't want to accept the fact that in the blink of an eye, I just became the girl whose fiancé punched her.

Correction—ex-fiancé.

Shame snakes up my spine.

There was a time when he used to give me butterflies...but now all I see are the warning signs I've excused.

Like his need to control my every move, the way he ridiculed my outfits, how he'd screw me while I was sleeping...or pinch my thigh when I said the wrong thing in front of his friends.

*The first time he called me a slut.*

And the last time he tried to control me by mistaking my kindness for weakness just so he could manipulate me.

Because he sure as fuck won't get a chance to do it again.

God, the fact that he actually thought I was the kind of girl he could do this to is revolting.

Because I'm sure as hell fucking *not*.

Wiping the blood trickling from my mouth, I glare at him. "Did you enjoy that?"

He tries to say something, but I don't give him the chance.

I kick him in the balls so hard he yelps and crouches over.

I snatch a fistful of his hair, because I want him to look me in the eyes when I say this. "I really hope you did, because that's the first and last time you ever fucking put your hands on me." Snickering, I add, "On second thought, that baby dick of yours probably didn't get the full message." I strike

him in the balls again and he howls. “Did you feel that, bitch? Or do I need to get a magnifying glass and burn it—”

The sound of my door flying open cuts me off.

Oakley storms into the room like a hurricane. He quickly scans the scene, his hard stare darting from Stone to me.

His gaze narrows on my mouth, and then all hell breaks loose.

His voice is a lethal low rasp, shaking me to the core. “I’m gonna fucking kill you.”

That’s the only warning Stone gets before Oakley pushes me out of the way and charges him.

The only thing I can hear over my erratic pulse is the sound of Oakley’s fist flying into Stone’s face repeatedly, as if it’s his own personal punching bag.

They grapple for a moment, but Stone has nothing on Oakley and it’s not long before Oakley has him pinned to the ground.

Shifting so he’s on top of him, one hand wraps around his throat while the other continues taking jabs at Stone’s bloody face.

Stone tries to get some leeway, but it’s impossible because Oakley’s strikes are filled with so much venom, I can practically taste it.

And then I realize, Oakley wasn’t kidding before...he’s actually going to kill him.

Oakley halts his movements momentarily, but only so he can snatch Stone’s arm and bend it at an abnormal angle.

Seconds later, the sharp snap of bone assaults my ears. It’s immediately followed by the sound of Stone screeching in pain.

“Oakley, *stop*,” I scream.

Not because I give a fuck about Stone, but the last thing I want is for Oakley to go back to jail.

It’s like he doesn’t even hear me.

He goes back to punching him with so much vigor I’m surprised Stone’s still breathing.

It’s only when I scream at the top of my lungs that Oakley suspends his swings momentarily.

“Stop—” I start to say again, but Stone takes the opportunity to punch Oakley in the head.

I can tell the move takes him by surprise, but he doesn’t let it deter him. He seizes his leg next and begins twisting...

Until he starts violently shaking.

*Oh, God.*

Three things happen in that moment.

Oakley starts seizing.

Stone picks the knife up off the floor and plunges it into Oakley's side.

And my brothers walk in.

# Chapter 53

## Bianca

“What the fuck happened?” Jace barks, rushing over to us.

“Stone has a knife,” I shout before focusing on Oakley who’s still seizing.

Cole looks down at Stone who’s now laying limp and kicks him. “Not a problem. He looks dead.”

The rise and fall of his chest tells me he’s not.

I peer down at the blood soaking Oakley’s shirt. Normally you’re not supposed to touch someone who’s having a seizure, but I have no idea how deep the gash is and I don’t want him to bleed out.

I reach for one of my shirts and place pressure on the wound to stop the bleeding.

“What happened?” Jace repeats before his eyes drop to my mouth. “Why the hell is your lip bleeding?”

Ignoring him, I give my undivided attention to Oakley. I wasn’t able to keep track of the time, but it seems longer than usual. “He’s been seizing for a while now.”

“I’ll call 911,” Cole starts to say but then we hear sirens outside my window. “On second thought, it sounds like someone already did.”

“Jesus fucking Christ. Start talking, Bianca,” Jace grunts.

My stomach knots with dread and I inhale a deep breath.

“Long story short, Stone was hiding out in my room. He held a knife up to his throat and threatened to kill himself if I didn’t call Oakley and end things with him. However, right after I did, he put his hand around my throat and punched me.”

“Motherfucker did *what*?” this from Cole.

“I’m gonna kill him,” Jace seethes, lunging for Stone.

“Hold on,” I snap. “I’m not done.”

Jace and Cole are practically foaming at the mouth.

“Oakley barged in and beat the shit out of him...but then Stone grabbed the knife off the floor and stabbed him...and you guys walked in.”

Relief fills me when Oakley's seizure finally subsides.

However, a sharp knock on the door makes me jump.

"Police, open up."

Emotion lodges in my throat as I run my hand over his sleepy face. He's so out of it my heart can't take it.

"They're gonna send him back to jail." I look at Jace and Cole, imploring them to understand the gravity of the situation. "Oakley was only protecting me. He doesn't deserve to get in trouble."

But the police won't care, because Oakley has a rap sheet and he's supposed to be keeping his nose clean. In their minds, he's automatically at fault and guilty as hell.

"Oakley tried to warn me about Stone a few weeks ago," Cole mutters. "But I didn't believe him and told him to fuck off."

This is news to me.

Jace grips the back of his neck. "Goddammit." Running a hand down his face, he looks at Cole. "You were coming up here with Oakley to see Bianca, okay? You heard commotion outside her dorm room and when you opened the door, Stone and I were already fighting." Jace looks at me next. "Your part of the story stays the same. Stone assaulted you. Only instead of Oakley beating him up...it was me who did it."

Cole raises an eyebrow. "What about Oakley getting stabbed?"

Jace shrugs. "He tried to stop the fight when he walked in and Stone stabbed him."

There's another sharp knock on the door. "Police. Open up."

I can't believe he's about to take the fall for this. "Jace—"

"Stick to the story." With that, he punches Stone's face and sends a sharp kick to his groin. "Let them in."

I hover over Oakley protectively as Cole opens the door.

"I love you," I whisper, wishing like hell I hadn't stopped him from saying it before.

# Chapter 54

## Bianca

Once I get the go-ahead from a nurse, I sprint toward the hospital room to see Oakley.

Just when I'm about to open the door, someone snaps, "Not so fast,"

When I look up, I see Oakley's dad standing there with a cup of coffee in his hand. The cross expression on his face makes it clear he's not happy to see me.

"Hi, Mr. Zelenka." I give him a terse smile. "I'm just here to check on Oakley."

The nurse wasn't able to tell me anything since I'm not family, but she did say he was allowed to have visitors.

I try to open the door again, but Wayne wedges himself in front of it, blocking me from entering. "I'm sorry, but that's not going to happen."

I blink, not understanding. "Why?"

He looks at me like I've sprouted another head. "My son was just stabbed...by your fiancé."

"Ex-fiancé," I correct.

And yeah, I understand his concern, but Stone's out of my life for good.

The only thing that matters now is Oakley.

Wayne's eyes narrow. "I tried to step back and let Oak make his own decisions, but I've had enough of this shit."

I raise a brow. "Enough of what shit?"

"I don't know how to make this any clearer, but I want you out of my son's life." His hand clutches the coffee cup. "Ever since you two got together, it's been one tragedy after another. First, he got drunk and high and ended up killing someone, then he chose to go to jail—despite the deal I worked out for him with the DA, and now, he was stabbed by your fiancé for defending you. What else has to happen for you to realize you two are the very definition of toxic and you leave him the hell alone?"

It would hurt less if he slapped me.

I had no idea Oakley chose to go to jail.

*That he left me on purpose.*

My heart folds in on itself. “I didn’t mean to...” I clear my throat and try again. “Look, I understand why you feel that way, but I love—”

“Maybe I’d believe that were true if you would do the one thing he can’t and walk away.”

My vision blurs as I take in his words.

“I can’t just walk away from him,” I argue. “I love him.”

“Then let him go,” Wayne pleads. “Because Oakley is loyal to a fault, and if you don’t sever ties he’ll keep hanging on with everything he’s got until he either ends up dead or rotting away in a jail cell for the rest of his life because of you.” His features twist in pain. “I can’t lose my son, Bianca. I *won’t.*”

The raw concern swimming in his eyes nearly brings me to my knees.

It’s obvious he loves his son.

And even though a parent’s love is a foreign concept to me given my own father was an absentee parent for most of my life...I do have two brothers who would do anything to protect me from harm.

I just didn’t realize until this moment that Oakley and I were so poisonous together.

I thought we were happy and in love.

*Two broken pieces of the same soul.*

But maybe we weren’t?

Maybe we were fire and gasoline instead.

Maybe what we felt for each other was a lethal addiction.

And the only way to save ourselves from total destruction is to quit each other.

*Maybe that’s why my mother made me promise her I’d never fall in love.*

Because she knew all along what it could do to a person.

The way it could annihilate you until there was nothing left but a barren, hollow spot where your heart used to be.

And that death was a fate far better than a love you were forbidden to have.

I try to blink away the tears threatening to surface, but it’s pointless. “Can you at least tell me how he is?”

I have to know that he’s okay.

Wayne scrubs a hand down his face before he answers. “He’s still drowsy and out of it. The grand mal seizure was a bad one. Plus, there was also blood

loss from the stab wound.” When I wince, he says, “However, it missed his organs and arteries and only required fifteen stitches. He should be discharged later as long as he remains stable.”

Relief fills my chest. “Thank God.”

He nods. “As far as your brother’s concerned, he’ll be released in a few hours. I haven’t heard if Stone’s going to press charges yet, but if he does, he’ll have a weak case.” His gaze drops to my swollen and bruised lip and he frowns. “Considering what he did to you and all.”

“Right.”

He takes a sip of his coffee. “It goes without saying that I’ll defend him if he needs it, on account of...you know.”

Jace taking the rap for it.

“Thank you.” Sorrow sinks like a stone in my gut and I look down at the floor. “Can you tell Oakley I’m sorry for what happened.” My voice cracks, betraying me. “And that I love him.”

*Until the day I die.*

Wayne stands stoic like a statue. “I’ll tell my son you wish him a speedy recovery.”

The apathetic statement slices through my heart like a jagged shard of glass.

I take a breath, trying to steady myself as I turn and walk away.

“I know it hurts, but you’re doing the right thing,” Wayne states.

*Then why does it feel so wrong?*

A deep, wide pain spreads through my chest as I wander down the hall, my shaky legs threatening to give out at any moment.

I always thought the worst moments of my life were losing my mother and Liam.

But I was wrong.

Because I didn’t have a choice when it came to that.

And now that I do, I can’t help but think how different things might be if the accident never happened.

If I didn’t end up engaged to another man.

And just like that, pure rage sears my belly, growing so thick it almost chokes me.

Maybe it makes me a horrible person to want to see Stone suffer—because he clearly has some mental issues—but I no longer give a fuck.

All I want is vengeance.



To make him pay for what he did.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spot a young guy wearing scrubs standing in front of what appears to be a medicine cart.

There are a few vials on top of the cart and he's currently drawing a clear substance into a needle.

Plastering a sexy smile on my face, I saunter over to him. "Hi."

It takes him a moment to notice me, but when he does, his eyes gleam with interest. "Hey."

I bat my eyelashes. "I'm sorry for bothering you. I was just wondering if I could ask you a few questions?"

He doesn't look troubled in the least. "Sure."



Stone's sleeping when I enter his hospital room. No doubt drugged up on all the pain meds they gave him.

I zero in on the arm that's in a cast and the leg that's in traction.

He couldn't go anywhere if he wanted to.

Doesn't mean he can't scream, though.

Slipping my hands underneath my dress, I take off my panties.

He stirs when I reach the bed and the moment his eyes open, I stuff the material into his mouth.

Coughing, he goes to remove them, but I take the scrunchie out of my hair and tie his free hand to the bed.

Studying my nails, I circle his bed like a vulture. "You know, some people would feel pity for you and say you're nothing but a victim of circumstance." Halting my movements, I hold his gaze. "But fuck that and fuck you."

He could have chosen a different path.

He didn't have to end up using his fists on me like his dad did with his mom.

"Being in the same room with you makes me sick to my stomach, so I'm gonna make this nice and short, okay?"

I pull two vials and a needle out of my bra. The nurse was so enraptured by my shameless flirting, he didn't even notice me steal them.

"Pop quiz, hotshot. Exactly how much insulin does it take to kill

someone?" I snicker. "Oh, that's right. You can't answer." Shrugging, I remove the cap from one of the needles. "Guess I'll just have to find out myself."

His eyes go big and he starts wriggling and moaning.

"I suggest you stop that," I warn. "Or mommy dearest *will* be planning your funeral tonight."

His body goes slack, his chest rising and falling with quick uneven breaths.

I scrape the bevel of the needle along the calf of his good leg. "I could feed you lines about how there was a time where I thought I actually loved you." Narrowing my eyes, I add, "But you're not worth the air I breathe, Stone. You never were."

I tap the tip of his nose. "So, here's the deal, sunshine. You and the rest of your lowlife family are never allowed to go anywhere near me or the people I love again." Shooting him a sadistic grin, I pinch his nose so he can't breathe. "And, yes, that includes Oakley."

When he doesn't give me a response, I pinch him harder. "Show me you understand the terms of the agreement, asshole."

Finally, he nods.

"Good boy." I drag the needle along his thigh. "In exchange for your cooperation, you can stay in the premed program and I won't end your miserable life."

His relief is tangible.

Flashing him some teeth, I jab the needle into his skin.

"On second thought...that's not gonna work for a poisonous cunt like me." Leaning over, I whisper, "See you in hell."

The look of fear on his face and the pathetic moans emitting from him fill me with so much pleasure I can't help but smile.

It's safe to say the war between our families is officially over.

My hand is on the doorknob when I pause. "Relax, Stone. It's just saline." Peering over my shoulder, I issue him one final warning. "But the next time you fuck with me or my family. I swear to God, I *will* kill you."

# Chapter 55

## Oakley

I grip the phone so hard I'm surprised it doesn't break when it goes straight to voicemail again.

It's been three days since I've seen or spoken to Bianca.

I've called her to no avail. I've shown up at her dorm, only to stand there talking to her door like a psycho because she won't open it.

*She wishes you a speedy recovery.*

My father's words burn like acid in my throat.

That detached response doesn't sound like her at all.

Not when it comes to me, anyway.

Kind of like how I knew something wasn't right when she called me *Oak*, because she's the only person in my life who never shortens my name.

She uses all two syllables...like it's important to her.

Trepidation slams into my chest. *Maybe she had another memory?*

"Stop fucking ghosting me," I bark as I get off the elevator. And because I'm nearing the end of my rope I add, "I'm coming by later. Don't think I won't break your goddamn door down if you give me the shaft again. Because I motherfucking will."

I'm growling the last part into the phone when the door to the studio opens.

Dylan's eyebrows shoot up to the ceiling. "And this angry bear is my cousin Oakley."

Some dude with a mohawk and glasses—who I can only assume must be Landon—laughs. "Well, he certainly has a way with words."

I look at Dylan. "Have you spoken to Bianca lately?"

Dylan shakes her head. "Nope. I called a few times to check up on her, but she hasn't picked up."

On one hand, it's good to know it's not just me she's ignoring.

But on the other? It means she's shutting *everyone* out.

Dylan waves a hand. "I'm sure she just needs some time alone to deal with everything."

Fuck that noise.

Dylan's stare falls to my stomach. "How's the stab wound?"

At that, Landon's eyes widen.

"It's fine." Gripping the back of my neck I utter, "How's Jace? He out of the slammer yet?"

"Yup. He got out the same night." Her forehead creases. "Evidently, Stone isn't pressing charges."

That's...interesting.

"Good."

She nods. "Yeah."

I decide to lay it on the line. "I appreciate what Jace did, but I'm not gonna suck his dick."

Landon chokes on his drink.

"Trust me, no one expects you to suck his dick, Oak. He did you a solid because he knew you were protecting Bianca." She shrugs. "And because deep down he still gives a shit about you." She turns to Landon. "But enough about our drama. Landon, this is Oakley. Oakley, this is Landon Parker. The amazing musician I was telling you about."

We give each other a pound.

I hadn't planned on meeting him so soon, but given he's only in town for a few days, it was now or never. Ergo, I took the day off.

"What up, man? I've heard a lot of good things about you."

He nods. "Same here. Your poems are sick."

Goddammit.

I turn to Dylan who's shuffling her feet, looking anywhere but at me.

"Hand it over."

Grumbling, she pulls my notebook out of her purse and slaps it in my hand. "Fine. But just so you know, I really love them."

That does nothing to ease my nerves because I'm positive I'm not cut out for this shit.

Landon rubs his hands together. "Ready to make some music?"

Dylan grins. "And that's my cue to let you two work your magic." She must sense my uneasiness on her way out the door because she stops and grabs me by the shoulders. "You've got this, Oak. Even if you don't write a single word, I'm still proud of you for stepping outside your comfort zone." She smacks a kiss on my cheek. "Love you, butthead."

"Ditto," I grumble.

She gestures to Landon. "Take care of my boy."

Landon raises his glass. "You got it, boss."

The moment she leaves, Landon assesses me. "Do needles freak you out?"

Yeah, not what I was expecting him to say.

Then again, he is a musician, so I guess it's not completely out of left field.

My chest coils and my palms begin to sweat. "I don't fuck with drugs."

And I know enough about myself to know I need to get the fuck out of here. *Fast.*

Landon blinks, noticeably confused. "I don't mess with that stuff either." He holds up a thick blue pen. "But I'm diabetic and have to take my insulin. Sometimes needles freak people out so I always ask first."

And just like that, the ball of tension in my chest dissipates.

"Nah. It's cool. Do what you gotta do."

Nodding, he lifts up his shirt, pinches some skin on his stomach, and jabs the needle into his flesh.

"I'm in recovery," I explain, feeling like an idiot for losing my shit before.

If there was any judgment from him, he doesn't show it. "That's awesome. How long?"

"One year, six months, and eight days."

*But who's counting?*

His smile is genuine. "Good for you."

Since we're exchanging medical info and shit, I disclose my own. "By the way, I have epilepsy. So, if you see me shaking and jerking, that's not me attempting to twerk."

Concern lines his face as he sits down at the piano. "Anything in particular you need me to do if you have a seizure?"

I shake my head. "Nah. I mean, it would be cool if you could make sure I don't crack my head open, but sometimes shit happens. I won't hold you accountable if it does."

"Well, I'll try my best to make sure it doesn't," he assures me with a half-hearted laugh.

His eyes scan the room, stopping on the guitar. "Do you have a preference? I can play either, but the piano is what I gravitate toward."

Safe to say I feel like a fish out of water.

“I don’t really know. To be honest, this emo shit isn’t really my thing.”

Cue the awkwardness.

Making a face, he assesses me. “Dude, you’re looking at it all wrong. Chicks dig the raw emotion that comes from leaving parts of yourself in a song.” His lips curve. “Dudes, too.”

A couple years ago I would have used that to my advantage to score some pussy, but nowadays there’s only one pussy I give a fuck about.

“That might be true, but I’m not looking to get laid.” I take a seat next to him at the piano. “Not that I don’t like sex. Hell, I fucking love it, but...” I let my sentence fall by the wayside because I’m not used to being so candid with anyone.

Well, except *her*.

Landon raises an eyebrow. “But what?”

Fuck it. “Well, there’s this girl.”

His eyes lock on something in front of him. “Every great love song always starts with a girl.” He smirks. “Or a guy.” Dark eyebrows dance with humor. “Sometimes both at the same time.”

I’m not exactly sure what the fuck to make of *that* obscure statement. However, I soon connect the dots when I follow his line of sight to the picture frame on his piano.

A thick girl with long red hair and tons of freckles is in the middle, attempting to pull what looks like a jersey out of a golden lab’s mouth. To the right of her is a tall dude with blond hair who looks irritated as hell with the dog.

And to the left is Landon—who’s watching all three of them with a giant smile on his face.

As if sensing my curiosity, Landon says, “That’s my girlfriend and boyfriend,” He chuckles. “And our crazy dog.”

“Oh.” Yup. It all makes sense now. Although dating two people at the same time has to be complex as fuck. “That sounds...”

“Complicated?” He nods. “Yeah, at one point it was, but now...I don’t know...it feels right. We just fit together.”

Good for him.

“Hey, man. Whatever works.”

He places his fingers over the piano keys. “Ready to write some emo shit?”

Hell motherfucking no.

“I don’t know. I’ve never done it before.”

“Well, it’s simple.” He presses down on the ivory keys, filling the room with a melodic sound. “I just need you to give me the good, the bad...and the ugliest parts of your heart and soul.”

*There’s only one person who has that.*



I’m leaving the studio with two songs written and a weird sense of accomplishment buzzing through my skin.

I didn’t think I’d be into it, but hearing my words put to music was pretty fucking dope.

It’s something I definitely want to do again.

I’m stepping into the elevator when my phone rings. Hoping Bianca decided to pull her stubborn head out of her ass and talk to me, I pluck my phone from my pocket.

An ugly feeling rises up my throat when I see Crystal’s name flash across the screen.

“Not today, Satan,” I mutter.

I’m getting ready to hit the ignore button but then it occurs to me that there might be something wrong with C.J.

I quickly swipe the green button. “What happened?”

Crystal’s sobbing on the other line, which immediately makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. “You need to get to the hospital right now. Your dad...” She’s crying so hard she can barely make out her next words. “He’s been shot.”

# Chapter 56

## Bianca

Everything hurts.

The excruciating pain is back in my chest again with a vengeance.

I miss him so much it's far beyond any pain I've ever felt.

A big part of me wants him to knock down my door like he threatened to earlier today.

*Just like he knocked down my walls.*

I glance at the clock on my nightstand. It's just past eight, which means he should be here any moment.

As strange as it sounds, I've looked forward to him pounding on my door the past three nights, urging me to open up and talk to him.

I'm going to despise the day he finally decides to give up and move on.

*Even though it's what he needs.*

Curling up in a ball, I press my head to the wooden floor, near the spot where he almost bled out.

Most of my life I've wanted to die...until Oakley made me feel alive.

*The pain will pass*—I try to tell myself, even though no part of me actually believes it.

*You're strong*—I reassure myself, even though I don't feel very strong right now.

I feel like a vital part of me is missing, and I'm going to walk around feeling like half of a person for the rest of my life.

My phone buzzes on the ground next to me, but I ignore it.

I've already lied to Jace and Cole and told them I've been busy studying.

The phone rings again, and I see Dylan's name flash across the screen.

She's called me a few times this week—Sawyer's called even more—but I don't feel like telling them anything.

I'd rather just be miserable by myself and deal with my shit on my own.

I hit the ignore button, but it rings yet again.

*Dammit.* Sawyer's the clingy friend, not Dylan.

I click the ignore button for the second time.



A moment later an incoming text comes through.

**Dylan:** I know you're going through stuff, but Oakley's dad was shot. We're at the hospital with him, but I think you should be here.

Instantly, I bolt up like there's an electric shock going through my body. I don't think. Hell, I don't even breathe. I throw on some shoes and head out the door.

# Chapter 57

## Oakley

“Did they catch who did it?” Dylan asks.

“I can’t believe someone shot him,” Sawyer whispers.

I hear them talking, but I can’t see them or process what they’re saying.

The only thing I can think about is the fact that my dad—the man who raised me—is in surgery.

Fighting for his life.

All because some motherfucking asshole shot him while he was walking out to his car.

“Maybe it was a drive-by?” Sawyer says.

Dylan rubs my shoulder. “Maybe. Whoever it is, I’m sure they’ll catch them. Crystal’s talking to the police now. She was on the phone with Wayne when it happened.”

Sawyer touches my arm. “Is there anything I can get you? Food, coffee... anything?”

Yeah. An eight-ball of coke and a bottle of Jack to wash it down with.

Gripping my neck, I close my eyes.

The last thing my dad told me was that he was proud of me.

Our last conversation was right before I left my apartment to meet Landon at the studio.

I told him I was going to try my hand at writing music.

I half expected him to tell me it was a pipe dream and I was wasting my time.

But he didn’t.

Instead he told me he was happy I was trying something new.

Proud that I was staying sober.

And now?

He’s dying on an operating table.

*I need her.*

After my mom walked out, I swore I’d never let myself need another person again.

Because needing someone only led to disappointments and letdowns.  
But right now? I. Fucking. Need. Her.  
Not to tell me it will all be okay—because one of the things I love most about Bianca is that she doesn't sugarcoat shit.  
I need her to keep me grounded and ride out this storm with me.  
To just be here.  
*Reaching all the places inside me that only she can.*  
Because with her I can't go numb and I can't turn it off.  
I can't cover it up with jokes or drugs.  
With her, I feel everything full throttle.  
And without her...  
I fall apart.

I don't even realize Crystal's come back until I hear Dylan say, "Where's C.J.? Do you need me to watch her for the night?"

Crystal shakes her head. "No, that's okay. Clarissa Jasmine is staying with one of my girlfriends for the time being." She blows her nose with a tissue. "God, I can't believe this is happening. How the hell am I gonna tell my little girl that her daddy—"

"Wayne will pull through," Dylan assures her. "He's strong."

"He was walking out to his car when he was shot, right?"

It's the first time I've spoken since I've been here.

"Yeah," Crystal says with a nod. "Wayne had just left his office and was walking out to the parking garage to get in his car. We were making arrangements for him to pick up Clarissa Jasmine when I heard some man say something followed by two shots." She blows her nose again. "I was so terrified I dropped the phone twice before I could call 911."

Frowning, Sawyer hands her another tissue.

I'm about to park my ass in the waiting room to get away from this shit when a strange thought hits me.

"You said you heard the guy say something *before* the shots?"

Crystal takes a sip of her coffee. "Yeah, but it made no sense. Wayne doesn't even like comic books." She shrugs. "I think it was just some homeless deranged person wanting to steal money from him."

"Comic books?" I question, not understanding. "What the fuck do comic books have to do with anything?"

Rolling her eyes, she fishes her phone out of her purse. "Because right before he shot Wayne the man said—*Loki says hi.*"

# Chapter 58

## Oakley

### Past...

“Don’t stop.”

Bianca’s throaty command has my balls tingling.

She braces her hands on the mattress I have her bent over as I speed up my thrusts, fucking her so hard she’s going to feel me for days.

I look down and groan. She has these sexy little indents on her lower back that drive me out of my goddamn mind.

Hell, everything about this girl does it for me.

Her gorgeous face, her hot little body, her feisty attitude...that sassy fucking mouth that loves to put me in my place.

*The heart she likes to pretend she doesn’t have.*

Goddammit. I have to force myself to focus because she hasn’t come yet.

I grab a fistful of her long dark hair and tug her head back. Like me, she likes it rough and I ain’t complaining. “Baby girl.”

Her eyes flutter closed. “Yeah?”

I drag my teeth along the nape of her neck because I know how much it drives her crazy. “You’re dripping all over my balls.”

Balls that are currently slapping the back of her thighs with every punishing thrust.

Her mouth falls open. “Oh my God.”

I splay my hand on her flat belly and lightly graze her clit, giving her that extra rush.

She moans as I fuck her hard and fast, working her just the way she likes it.

The walls of her pussy grip me so tight it almost hurts as she mewls and sputters a bunch of incoherent things into the air.

*Fucking hell.* I love the way she comes.

All my senses spring to life with her sounds, scent, and touch until the only thing I see and breathe is her.

Pleasure blurs my vision and muddles my brain. A moment later, I'm right there with her.

I silently thank my lucky stars she's on birth control because coming inside her is pure fucking heaven.

"Jesus Christ," she breathes, her body sagging forward.

Kissing the crook of her neck, I slap her ass. "Most people just call me Oakley."

She tosses her head back and giggles.

Yes, ladies and gents. Bianca Covington *giggles* like a schoolgirl after she gets some supreme dick.

Which is awfully ironic right now considering she's currently wearing her RHA uniform since it's the first day of her senior year.

She starts to move away, but I halt her. "Not so fast."

"Wh—"

I stick my finger inside her and bite back a groan when I feel my cum. "Do you have any idea how much it turns me on knowing you'll be walking around with my cum inside your sweet pussy all day?"

Hell, I'm getting hard again just thinking about it.

Her breathing hitches. "I don't have to leave for school for another five minutes."

I'm the one who's laughing now. *My little eager beaver.*

Kneeling, I fix her panties and press an open-mouthed kiss to her now covered pussy. "Enjoy the souvenir."

Head cocked over her shoulder, she looks down the length of her body at me. "Dick."

I grin. "Yeah, but you love it."

There's a slight smirk on her lips as she turns around to face me. "More like I'm a *sucker* for it." Wrapping her arms around my neck, she pulls me in for a quick kiss. "I don't want to go to school." Her mouth drops to my jaw. "It was so much more fun when you went there." Those pouty lips of hers travel to my earlobe next and I can't resist cupping one of her tits. *So firm and perky.* "Think of all the hot sex we could have had. I bet we could have found an abandoned classroom where you could bend me over a desk and—"

I give her ass a playful swat because I know exactly what she's doing. *Giving it as good as she gets it.*

"Stop making my cock hard and get your ass to class."

"Fine," she says with a pout before she saunters out of the bedroom.

She's almost to the front door when she pauses. "I'm only a phone call away if you need me."

And just like that, my good mood dissipates.

While Bianca's at school today, I'll be heading over to my dad's to meet Clarissa Jasmine for the first time.

It's been a little over three weeks since he begged me to stop by and he won't let up.

However, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't nervous as fuck about it.

Bianca must sense this because she treks back over to me. "Everything will be fine."

I highly disagree. There are too many variables to consider. Too much shit that can go wrong.

First one being the most obvious. I'm not cut out to be an older brother.

Jace—the responsible motherfucker in our crew—is the one who's made for this shit.

My reckless ass can't even manage to buy groceries.

"She's gonna love you," Bianca assures me.

I snort. "She's only nine months old, she has no idea what love is."

Shit, *I'm* only just starting to realize what it is now.

*Thanks to the girl standing in front of me.*

She palms my cheek. "Doesn't matter. You two will have a bond. You'll see."

I start to argue, but she removes her necklace and places it over my head.

Perplexed, I stare at it in confusion. I know how much the St. Christopher pendant Liam gave her back when they were kids means to her. "What are you doing?"

She fingers the pendant I'm now wearing. "Liam was not only a great brother, he's also a great guardian angel." Sadness lingers in those baby brown eyes as her fingers drift to the silver feather she pairs with the charm. "I want him to watch over you today and give you some big brother luck."

*Jesus.* This girl. She never fails to split me wide open when she shows me her heart.

"Bianca, I can't—"

She silences me with another kiss. "Yes, you can." A smirk plays on her lips as she edges away. "Besides it's the least I can do since you refuse to let me go with you."

"Only because it would turn into a bloodbath."

And she knows better than to try and deny it.

My girl has a sharp set of claws and a jealousy streak that's about two miles too long.

There's no way in hell I'm putting her in a room with Crystal because chances are my vindictive stepmother won't make it out alive.

And fuck knows there aren't enough conjugal visits in the world to ever satisfy my appetite for Bianca.

Ergo, it's safer if she goes to school and I head there alone.

"I appreciate you loaning me your necklace," I tell her because there's no use arguing about it.

Once Bianca sets her sights on something, that's it. Game fucking over.

Speaking of which. "We still doing that thing tonight?"

That *thing* consists of sitting her brothers—my two best friends—down and telling them I'm boning their baby sis on the regular now, but not to worry because I've developed serious feelings for her and intend to do right by her.

*Yeah.* The whole thing's gonna go over like a sloppy blow job in the middle of church on a Sunday, but shit's gotten too deep between us to keep them in the dark any longer.

Therefore, I'm ripping the Band-Aid off.

Although I'm starting to suspect Dylan already knows the truth about us, but she doesn't want to bring it up because then she'd have to keep it from her boyfriend Jace.

Either way, Bianca deserves a man who's not afraid to stand up and declare to the world that she's his.

Even if doing so is bound to cause more than a few waves.

Hopefully it won't cost me my friendship with Jace and Cole, though.

But if it does? Hell, Bianca's worth it.

"We don't have to—" she starts to say but I shake my head.

"We're doing it."

I don't want to be her dirty little secret anymore.

I did that shit with Crystal and I'll be damned if I have to do it with Bianca too.

Things are different between us. *Stronger.*

Because unlike Crystal, I know Bianca would never use or betray me. *I trust her.*

Apprehension flashes in her eyes. "Everything's gonna change, Oakley."

Are you sure you're ready for that?"

I tip her chin. "Everything's already changed."

She gives me one of her gorgeous smiles. "True."

I drop my mouth to hers, enjoying the way her soft lips sweep against mine.

There's still one more thing I have to tell her.

"I'm gonna be taking more shifts at the bar."

Her forehead crinkles. "Why?"

"Because I'm no longer working for Loki...or rather, I won't be after I give him the rest of my stash and tell him I'm out."

I made the decision a couple days ago when I took Bianca for her road test. I was so proud of her when she passed, and it hit me how hard she's worked to come this far. How strong she was for conquering her fears. It dawned on me what I could lose if I ever got caught and landed in the slammer.

Being a bartender at a sketchy bar won't give me access to a lot of cash, but it's better than dealing drugs.

Her smile is so bright it practically lights her up from the inside out. "Really?"

"Yeah." I rub the back of my neck. Talking about this shit makes me feel like less of a man and I hate it. Bianca's not the gold digger type, but she grew up rich and is accustomed to certain things. I hate not being able to give her what she wants. "But my money situation will be tight for a while. I won't be able to take you anywhere fancy—"

"Are you kidding?" she interjects. "I don't care about going anywhere fancy. As long as I'm with you, that's all that matters to me." She laughs. "You could be a janitor for the rest of your life for all I care. What you do for work doesn't change how I feel about you."

*Oh, hell.* There she goes again. Tugging on the strings of the dead thing in my chest.

Rising on her tiptoes, she gives me another kiss. "I'm really proud of you for ending things with Loki. I know it wasn't an easy decision."

That's the thing, it *was* an easy decision.

Once I realized I could lose her...it was like something in my head finally clicked.

Do I still struggle with my cravings for drugs? All the damn time.

Sometimes the urge is so strong—so consuming—I have to stand in a



cold shower and scream my brains out so I don't run off and snort something or drink my weight in whiskey. It's a challenge I'll always struggle with, and there are days I'm afraid I'll screw up and give in.

But right now? I'm trying my hardest to take it one day at a time and not go down that dark path, because I don't want to fuck this up.

I want to be a better man for her.

And for *me*.

"You're late for school," I remind her.

She gives me one last kiss. "See you later, handsome. Everything will go great today, you'll see."

When I grumble, she kisses my hand and whispers, "Just pretend I'm right there. Holding your hand the entire time."



I'm not the type to get nervous. Usually when I walk in a room and spot someone I don't fuck with, I ease the tension with a joke and keep it moving.

But not this time.

Because I loathe the woman standing in front of me.

The bitch who broke my heart into a million different pieces without a second thought.

Unfortunately, she's the gatekeeper to my family.

"Hi."

Crystal's face screws up when she answers the door, like she smells something rotten. "Your dad's still stuck in a meeting with a big client. He should be here soon."

"Oh." I take a step back. "I can come back lat—"

"No. He's been dying to see you and he'll be upset if I let you leave." She opens the door wider. "Come in."

It's weird being invited into your childhood home.

I take a tentative step inside. "Thanks."

Hands tucked into the pockets of my jeans, I follow her into the kitchen.

She buzzes around the open space like a busy bee and it's obvious she's on edge. "Can I get you something to drink? Water? Juice?" Her eyes narrow. "Whiskey?"

I let that dig roll off my back. "I'm fine, thanks."

We stare at each other for a beat.

Crystal's always been attractive—just like my cousin Dylan, she's just shy of too thin and has long blonde hair and bright blue eyes. Giving birth did nothing to change that.

However, unlike Dylan, Crystal's insides are ugly.

A weird twist goes through my chest when I realize there are no lingering feelings for the woman in front of me.

Well, other than resentment.

I was worried there might be, but I should have known better.

Bianca's hold on me is airtight and nothing's *ever* gonna fucking change that.

I open my mouth to ask where Clarissa Jasmine is, but then I hear it.

The sound of a baby crying.

Immediately, Crystal runs out of the kitchen and into the adjoining room. "Someone's up from their nap."

I flick my gaze to the playpen set up in the living room.

My heart does this weird stutter thing the moment Clarissa Jasmine's blonde head pops up and I can't help but wander over.

Reaching down, Crystal takes her out of the playpen and bounces her on her hip.

Innocent blue eyes peer up at me in wonder.

"Hey, Clarissa—" I stop myself because that name is a goddamn mouthful. Especially for someone so tiny. "C.J."

Crystal shoots me a dirty look. "Clarissa Jasmine."

*C.J. it is.*

"Can I hold her?"

Her stare travels over my face, focusing on my eyes. It's obvious she's checking to see if I'm high.

"For once your pupils don't look bloodshot," she remarks before she passes her over to me.

Whatever nerves I felt disappear the second she's in my arms and I want to kick myself for staying away for so long. I was scared I'd feel bitter or jealous, but I don't. It's the complete opposite. She's awesome.

I watch in amusement when C.J. yanks on the pink bow Crystal must have stuck in her hair at some point. I can't help but laugh as she grunts in frustration when it doesn't come out.

"She's beautiful."

Crystal beams as she leans over and secures her bow. “I know. We made a good-looking kid.”

My chest twists like someone stuck a knife through it.

*Because I’ll never know.*

Crystal had a miscarriage with our baby. And while that was in no way her fault—what *was* her fault was using me to get knocked-up so she could play it off as my father’s while she tried to convince him to ship me off to military school and live happily ever after.

Fortunately, my dad shot military school down real quick.

Unfortunately, Crystal lost the baby that would have been mine soon after that.

I’d be lying if I said I didn’t briefly wonder if I was C.J.’s father when I found out Crystal was pregnant again, but then I realized the timing didn’t match up so she couldn’t be mine.

Conceding to her plight with the bow, C.J. gives me a big happy grin that showcases her chubby cheeks and the three little teeth inside her mouth.

But that’s not what makes it hard to breathe.

While C.J. mostly takes after Crystal...that big cheeky grin of hers? That’s all my dad.

Fuck. I miss him.

*Whomp...*there it is. The unmistakable pang of guilt.

I want to confess. So fucking bad.

But I don’t want to be the one responsible for putting the proverbial nail in the coffin of his marriage with Crystal.

He loved my mother—so much so I know he never really got over her—but she hurt him too much.

Hurt us *both* too much.

I don’t want to destroy whatever happiness he thinks he’s found with Crystal and tear his family apart.

I look down at my baby sister and a sharp twinge of protectiveness surges through my gut.

I want better for her than I had.

C.J. deserves to have two parents.

Therefore, it’s best I find a way to get along with Crystal and keep this secret buried for the rest of my life.

“I’m Oakley,” I tell C.J., not that she’ll understand.

Giving me another cheeky grin, she starts babbling incessantly, telling me

a very *intense* baby story.

Then she clasps her hands around my face and I hear it.

It sounds a lot like *Uh-oh* instead of Oakley, but I'll take it.

"Uh-oh works too, kid."

Fuck knows I'm just one giant *uh-oh* waiting to happen.

Crystal smiles. "She's so smart. She's always trying to say every new word she hears."

No surprise there. My dad is one hell of a brainiac. Clearly my apple fell off the tree and landed in a goddamn ditch somewhere, but it's good to know C.J.'s didn't and she'll be able to make something of herself.

Before I can stop her, she reaches for my necklace and sticks it in her mouth.

"Clarissa Jasmine, stop that." Crystal rushes to remove it from her mouth. "You don't know where that's been."

I have to stifle a laugh when C.J. ignores her mother and does it again.

"Don't worry, it's my girlfriend's," I tell Crystal as I remove it from C.J.'s mouth. "She's clean."

Except when we're in bed. *Then she's my dirty girl.*

Grinning, I look down at C.J. "Can you say Bian—"

"I really don't want you talking about your little w-h-o-r-e-s in front of my child."

The tiny hairs on the back of my neck stand up. "My girlfriend isn't a whore."

Unlike her, I don't spell out the word.

Beside me, Crystal tenses. "Right."

It's on the tip of my tongue to remind her *she* was once on my roster too, but I don't.

Out of respect for C.J. not Crystal.

"She's *not*," I grit through my teeth. "She's smart and—"

I stop talking because I don't know why I'm telling Crystal about Bianca in the first place. It's none of her damn business.

Hell, I should be thanking her for doing a number on me, because I ended up with something so much better.

A ride or die girl that will always have my back.

And unlike Crystal, Bianca would never pull some shady shit.

Crossing her arms, Crystal makes an irritated sound in her throat. "If you say so." She sighs. "I have to go switch out the laundry. Can you keep an eye

on her?”

“Sure.”

She starts to walk away but pauses. “You can put her down if you want. She likes playing on the floor.”

“Okay.”

The moment Crystal walks away, I plop down on the couch. “Want to play on the floor, C.J.?”

I take the slimy raspberries she’s blowing as a yes.

I set her down and she immediately lunges for a blue stuffed bear on the carpet. It’s almost as big as she is.

“I guess he’s your favorite?”

Brows furrowed, she clutches him protectively, as if to say he’s hers and I’m not allowed to touch him.

Once again, I find myself laughing at her antics. “Don’t worry, sis. Mr. Blue Bear is all yours.”

This seems to please her because she gives me another toothy grin, letting me know I’m back in her good graces.

I watch as she starts doing this hoppy thing on the carpet, almost like she’s trying to stand on her own. I remember my dad saying she took her first steps a few weeks ago, but I guess she still hasn’t gotten the full hang of it just yet.

I hold out my arm so she can use it for leverage.

She licks it instead. Apparently, every new thing she comes in contact with must go in her mouth first.

I’m still getting slobbered on when my phone buzzes.

Reaching for it with my free hand, I take it out of my pocket and pull up the new text from Bianca.

**Bianca:** How’s everything going?

I quickly snap a picture of C.J. nibbling on my watch and send it to her.

**Oakley:** Being a big brother is pretty sweet. How’s your first day of school?

**Bianca:** Holy shit. She’s so freaking cute. I knew you were a natural. And ugh, school sucks big hairy monkey balls. Bitches be trippin’.

My eyebrows raise as I type out my next text.

**Oakley:** Bitches be trippin'? Or you be trippin' bitches?

Because with Bianca...it's usually the latter.

**Bianca:** It will be the second one if Caitlyn doesn't quit running her STD filled mouth and telling everyone that I'm a carpet muncher.

Well, shit.

I know Bianca doesn't exactly walk the *straight* line because she's fooled around with girls, but it's some bullshit that people are condemning her for it.

**Oakley:** Fuck em'.

**Bianca:** Nah. These skanks aren't my type. I'd much rather fuck you.

My dick twitches in agreement.

**Oakley:** I'm babysitting. Stop making my dick hard.

**Bianca:** Whatever. We both know a strong breeze gets you hard.

I grin as I type out my retort.

**Oakley:** Only if the breeze is blowing your skirt up.

**Bianca:** Tru dat. Oh, I forgot to tell you earlier, but I have to stay after school for cheerleading practice. I'll be home right after tho.

**Oakley:** Enjoy practice. Maybe a strong breeze will greet you when you walk through the door. ;)

I bring my knuckle to my mouth and bite it when she sends me a pic of what's underneath her cheerleading skirt.

**Oakley:** Tease.

I'm quickly brought out of my haze when C.J. starts wailing.

*Shit.* Gauging by the red mark on her forehead she must have bumped her head on the coffee table when she tried to stand.

Guilt prickles my chest as I pick her up. I should have been paying better attention. "I'm sorry—"

"What happened?"

Crystal rushes into the living room like a cyclone.

"I think she bumped her head—" I start to say and that's all it takes for her to go from zero to sixty.

"What do you mean you *think*? Weren't you watching her?"

"I was, but then I got a text and—"

She snatches a still crying C.J. out of my arms and cradles her to her chest. "I knew this would happen. God, you're the most irresponsible person I've ever met."

Given the events that just unfolded, her outrage is warranted.

I honestly feel like shit about it.

"I'm sorry." I check out the red mark on C.J.'s forehead. Luckily it doesn't look too bad and it's not bleeding. But still...I know I fucked-up. "Should I get some ice?"

"No. I don't want you going anywhere near her ever again."

She shoots me a death glare before she storms out of the living room.

I follow her to make sure C.J.'s okay.

Furious, Crystal sticks her daughter in her highchair and gives her some Cheerios. Then she plants a bunch of kisses along her head. "I'm so sorry, honey bunny. Mommy never should have left you alone with him."

*Stick the knife in deeper why don't you?*

Fortunately, C.J. doesn't harbor the same resentment toward me because once the first Cheerio hits her mouth she stops crying altogether.

Crisis averted.

Only it isn't...because Crystal's still mad as hell.

"I can't believe you let this happen."

"It was an accident," I tell her. "I didn't mean—"

"She's a baby, Oakley. You have to watch them all the time." She snorts. "Not that I expect *you* to understand that, because like I said, you're the most irresponsible person on earth."

The words are out of my mouth before I can stop myself.

"Right. Because fucking your stepson behind your husband's back is the

epitome of responsible.”

I regret taking it there when I see the horrified look on her face and she starts screaming at the top of her lungs.

“You were a *mistake!*”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to point out that a mistake is something that happens once...not multiple times.

“Was it a mistake before or after you got what you wanted from me?” I grind out, because I’m sick of this shit.

I came here to meet my sister and try to work on my relationship with my dad. Not be dragged through the mud by her.

It takes two to tango and I’m tired of being the only one to shoulder the burden of all this guilt while she gets to live her life like nothing happened.

I was still a teenager the first time we fucked, and I ended up paying the ultimate price and losing my family because of our *mistake*.

Hell, I’m practically an orphan now since I had to distance myself from my dad, and if it wasn’t for Jace and Cole saving my ass back when shit went south and taking me in, I’d have no one.

“My God,” she snarls. “You really need to get over your sick obsession with me.”

Obsession? More like *revulsion*.

However, I know exactly where to hit her so it hurts.

“Don’t flatter yourself, sweetheart. I’m over chasing women who like to fuck teenagers because they looked in the mirror and realized they’re not nearly as hot as they used to be.” I snort. “Fuck you and your mid-life crisis.”

The slap from her palm connecting with my cheek nearly echoes throughout the kitchen.

And then Crystal hits *me* where it hurts.

“I thank my lucky stars every day that she’s not yours.”

It’s a blow I wasn’t prepared for.

But she isn’t finished yet.

“Because you’re such a screwup.”

She’s right, I’ve done a lot of fucked-up shit in my life...fucked-up shit that ended up hurting the people I care about most.

But I don’t want to do that shit anymore. I want to be a better person.

“I get why you think that, but I’m trying—”

Tilting her head back, she cackles. “Oh yeah? For how long?” Her eyes



narrow into tiny slits. “You know as well as I do that it won't last. If you actually cared about your dad and baby sister, or this new *girlfriend* of yours, you'd go far away and leave them alone, because sooner or later you'll screw up again. Because that's what you do. You destroy lives and leave everyone else to clean up your messes when you're done. No wonder your mother left you. Dealing with you wasn't worth the crap you bring to the table.”

Every word out of her mouth feels like a bullet burning through my chest and leaving me to bleed out.

“You're a fuck-up, Oakley. Always have been, always will be. Do the world a favor and OD already you worthless piece of shit.”

Chest caving in, I brush past her and out the front door.

My dad is pulling into the driveway as I'm getting into my car.

“Hey, Oak.” His face falls when he realizes I'm bouncing. “What's wrong? Why are you leaving?”

I don't say a word as I drive off.

There's nothing to say.

*Because she's right.*

# Chapter 59

## Bianca

I spot Oakley in the waiting room standing next to Dylan and Sawyer.

He looks so broken it cracks my chest wide open and I can't get to him fast enough.

Like a magnetic force pulling me, I catapult myself toward him as quick as my legs can carry me.

The moment his gaze locks with mine, he opens his arms, catching me.

I wrap my legs around his waist as he fastens his arms around my back, gripping me like I'm a lifeline.

Wordlessly, he walks us over to a chair in the far corner of the room.

I bury my head in the crook of his neck as he sits us down.

He doesn't have to say anything for me to know how much he's hurting.

And I won't tell him false words of encouragement and pretend like everything will be okay, because right now his universe is falling apart.

A slight tremble runs through him as he breathes me in. "You came."

"Of course, I did." Shifting in his lap, I cradle his jaw. "I'll be here for however long you need me."

Closing his eyes, he tightens his hold on me, like I'm the only thing tethering him to this world.

And that's exactly how we stay for the next hour.



\* \* \*

"Your father is out of surgery," some woman wearing scrubs and a white lab coat informs us.

"That means he's alive, right?" Oakley rasps, his skin turning pale. "That he made it?"

The doctor nods. "The surgery went well, and we were able to retrieve the bullets." She smiles. "Your dad was really lucky. One of the bullets missed his lungs by a centimeter and the other one just missed his spine. If

everything continues to go well, he should make a full recovery.”

I can feel the relief coursing through his body as Dylan and Sawyer exchange hugs.

“Can I see him?”

“Sure. The nurses are getting him set up in his room so just give them another minute.” She glances around at all of us. “However, it’s only one at a time right now and immediate family only.”

Oakley peers down at me. “Do you mind if I go?”

“Not at all.”

I start to get off his lap, but he locks my chin in his hand. A moment later, our lips meet in a feather-light kiss before he pulls back to look at me.

“Thank you.”

If it wasn’t such a serious moment, it would be almost comical. “You don’t have to thank me.”

I swiftly jump to my feet so he can go see his dad.

I can feel Sawyer and Dylan boring holes into me the moment Oakley leaves.

“It should be weird,” Dylan tells Sawyer even though her eyes are trained on me.

Sawyer sucks in a breath. “I know, but it’s *not*.”

Dylan takes a bite of her Twizzler. “Not even a little.”

I roll my eyes. “Are you two done gossiping yet?”

Sawyer steals one of Dylan’s Twizzlers. “Nope. We’re just getting started.”

Given my brothers will be arriving any moment, I need them to put a cork in it.

“Well, get it out of your system now before Jace and Cole get here.”

They exchange a confused glance, which only makes *me* confused.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” I cross my arms. “You told them what happened, right?”

“Yeah,” Sawyer says softly. “We did.”

It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out something is off.

“So, they’re on their way...right?”

“Not exactly.” Dylan looks down at the floor. “They said they were busy.”

Hold the fucking phone.

I place my hands on my hips. “Busy doing what?”

What the hell could be more important than being here for Oakley?

Sawyer winces. "Working out at the gym."

Oh, for fuck's sake.

I know my brothers are stubborn...which undoubtedly makes them stupid most of the time, too. But not being here for Oakley is un-freaking-acceptable.

I'm about to pull up an Uber on my phone, but I realize it will take too long. I don't want Oakley to think I ditched him.

I turn to Sawyer. "Can I have the keys to your van?"

"Sure." Sawyer raises a brow as she fetches them out of her purse. "But, why?"

"So I can tell my idiot brothers to get their asses here before Oakley comes back and wonders where I am."

Sawyer looks at me like I'm insane. "Let me get this straight, you want me to let *you* drive *my* van?"

"Yes," I deadpan, not understanding what the big deal is.

Sawyer clutches her keys protectively. "I've never even seen you drive before, Bianca. I don't want you to wreck my baby."

"I have my license," I remind her.

Retrograde amnesia only impacts my memories, not the part of my brain that stores the skills I've learned in the past. Therefore, driving again would be like riding a bicycle. Kind of like how I was able to understand things like math and science when I went back to school without falling behind.

My brain already knows how to do it, the only thing standing in my way now is...well, Sawyer.

"True," Sawyer says. "But I still think it's risky."

I level her with a glare. "You drive a minivan that's older than I am." I pluck the keys out of her hand. "Trust me, if I wreck the damn thing, I'd be doing you a favor."

I stride toward the exit doors, but some woman barrels into me.

"Jesus, lady. If you're gonna wear a pair of Louboutin's you should at least learn how to walk in them first."

"*You*," she sneers, moving her finger up and down. "What the hell are you doing here?"

I do a quick once-over, but I can't recall ever meeting her before. Although she kind of looks like an older version of Dylan.

*Whatever*. I have more important things to worry about than some bitchy

chick inquiring about my whereabouts.

Tossing my hair back, I snap, “None of your damn business.”

Then I keep moving.

Because God gave me two dipshit brothers who constantly test my patience instead of agreeable, pleasant sisters who would do whatever the hell I told them to.



I screech to a stop next to my brother’s car just as Jace and Cole walk out of the gym.

After getting out of the vehicle, I charge toward them.

“You two have done some cruel shit before, but this takes the cake.”

Jace’s mouth falls open. “How did you—”

“Did you steal Sawyer’s van?” Cole questions. “Because that’s not fucking cool.”

It takes everything in me not to throttle them.

“You know what else isn’t cool?” Not waiting for a response, I hiss, “Ignoring your friend whose dad is lying in a hospital bed after getting shot.”

Jace averts his gaze. “I hope Wayne makes it through, but it’s not our place to be there.”

“Oak’s not our problem anymore,” Cole affirms with a nod.

“Exactly.” Jace pulls his keys out of his pocket. “Fucker dug his own grave.”

I block them when they start heading for Jace’s car.

“Jesus Christ. You two are such assholes.” And because I’m not above using guilt to get what I want, I add, “Mom and Liam would be ashamed.”

That gets their attention.

Jace’s nostrils flare. “Mom and Liam—”

“Would be *ashamed*,” I repeat. “Because we don’t turn our backs on one another. *Ever*.” I jab them both in the chest with my finger. “Boo-fucking-hoo my boy messed around with my sister. I’m gonna cry about it like a little bitch for the rest of my life. Get the fuck over it.”

“He almost killed you,” Jace snaps. “That’s not something you just get over.”

“Exactly.” Cole snorts. “Not to mention all the other fucked-up shit he’s

done.”

Jesus take the wheel and knock some sense into these morons.

“Yes, Oakley’s made some mistakes in the past—but unlike you two *angelic saints* who have never fucked-up—he’s loyal. And you know damn well he’d never turn his back on either of you if you needed him. Because he considers you his family.”

And our mother always taught us that family was the most important thing in the world.

Guilt colors their features. *Good.*

I shove them both. “Suck up your goddamn pride and get your asses to the hospital. Not just because it’s the right thing to do. But because he’s one of us, and I know deep down you still love him.”

# Chapter 60

## Oakley

“Can’t get rid of me that easily,” my dad says with a chuckle. “That asshole shouldn’t quit his day job because he has one hell of a lousy aim.”

The fact that he just had massive surgery after being shot and he’s already making jokes about what happened is...

Well, not unlike him...but still.

“Dad.” I can’t bring myself to look at him when I say the next words. “That asshole was an associate of Loki’s.”

Given Loki’s still in jail somewhere across the country—and will be for the next ten to fifteen—he must have hired someone to do it for him.

The shame snaking up my chest nearly chokes me.

My dad never would have been shot if it wasn’t for me.

A horrifying thought hits me like a brick to the head. *What if he goes after Bianca next?*

Or C.J., Dylan, Sawyer, Jace, and Cole?

What if he takes out everyone I care about in order to make me pay?

Nah, fuck that.

A ball of white-hot rage simmers in my gut.

He won’t get the chance...because the next shots fired will be by me.

And unlike the piece of shit he hired to attack my dad...I *won’t* fucking miss.

I’ll take out all his people one by one—and when they slap the cuffs on me and drag me to court—I’ll do everything in my power to make sure they send me to the same prison he’s in.

Then when he least expects it? I’ll shank the motherfucker in the shower and watch the life bleed out of his worthless existence with a huge smile on my face.

I stand up so fast the chair goes flying.

“Oak,” my dad barks. “Sit down.”

I can’t sit. I have too much shit to take care of.

I need to do this quickly before the next attack happens.

Wincing, he leans over and grabs my arm. “Let me handle this.”

“No.”

My dad’s done enough. It’s time for *me* to handle my business.

His grip tightens. “Crystal says she remembers the shooter’s voice, and I remember his height and build. We’re gonna find out who it is. And when that happens, the police will nail his balls to the wall, and he’ll cut a deal with the DA.” His smile is menacing. “In turn, Mr. *Loki* will get time added to his sentence. *That’s* the way it’s going down, Oak.” Letting go of my arm, he leans against his pillow. “I don’t want you taking matters into your own hands. I already lost you once over him. I’m sure as hell not letting it happen for a second time.”

Too late.

Because if I don’t put a stop to it now, the war will just keep brewing.

I refuse to let him hurt the people I love...*again*.

I look him in the eyes because I don’t know when I’ll have the chance to tell him after this, and I need him to know. “I love you, Dad.”

I start heading for the door, but a fuming Crystal barges in.

“You were shot because of Oakley?” she screams, balling her fists. “I should have known your lowlife son was responsible for this.”

“Crystal, calm down.” He tries to move but flinches due to the pain. “What happened wasn’t Oakley’s fault.”

She glares at me. “Like hell it wasn’t.”

“I’m taking care of it—” I try to tell her, but she’s so irate, she won’t let me get a word in edgewise.

“You’re *never* coming near Clarissa Jasmine again.”

It’s like a bullet straight to the heart.

My dad makes a low noise in his throat. “Crystal—”

“Don’t you dare *Crystal* me, Wayne. I mean it.” Her blue eyes narrow. “You’re lucky if I allow you supervised visitations with your daughter after this.” She stabs the air with her finger. “I’m getting sole custody.”

He laughs. “Like hell you are.”

Tossing her head back, she cackles. “Well, once I tell the judge how dangerous your son is and how you insist on being in his life, I’m positive he’ll give it to me.”

She’s right. No judge in their right mind would want a child around all this.

I open my mouth to inform her I won’t be in the picture for long, but my



dad growls, “And once *I* tell the judge you started an affair with my son when he was only sixteen, he’s going to realize that you have no goddamn business being around children.”

Mic-fucking-drop.

Crystal’s mouth falls open and she stumbles back.

But my dad isn’t done yet. “Fuck with me and my kids, Crystal. Because I swear on everything I love that I will *bury* you. I’ll tell the court you manipulated my teenage son. That you seduced him and tried to get him sent off to military school after you got pregnant. I’ll tell them about all the psychological damage you inflicted on him.” His gaze swings my way. “Better yet, I’ll put Oak on the stand and have him tell the court.”

Crossing my arms over my chest, I flash her some teeth. “I was just a kid when you exploited me for your own needs. A young, innocent kid who was looking for a mother figure to fill the void. And hey, who knows? Maybe a psychologist will attest that my love of alcohol and drugs started after your abuse, so what happened to my dad was really *your* fault.”

It’s not the truth. I knew exactly what I was doing when I initiated things between us, and my love affair with alcohol and drugs started long before we did.

However, you don’t fuck with the people I love.

If my dad needs me to play the victim so he gets rights to see C.J., it’s the least I can fucking do.

He’s a good dad. Hell, he’s the *best* dad, and depriving C.J. of him would be wrong.

Crystal looks like she’s going to throw up. “When we talked last week—you know, *after* I went down on you in a parking lot—you promised not to bring that up in court.”

Stunned, I give my dad the stink eye. “Dude.”

There are not enough drugs in the world to *ever* make me tap that again.

He shrugs like it’s no big deal. “What? She offered to blow me a few times in exchange for my silence. I’m only human, Oak.”

Fair enough.

Jaw set, he turns to Crystal. “We also agreed to joint custody, and that Oak can see C.J. whenever I have her.” Appearing calm again, he folds his hands in his lap. “But if you’re not going to stick to your end of the deal, I have no problem lighting you on fire and watching you burn.” He winks. “In a courtroom of course.”

Seething, she stalks out. But not before she mutters, “I hate you both.”

I cup my hands over my mouth. “Feeling’s mutual, Antichrist.”

Now that *that* shit’s settled, I can handle my business.

My dad tries calling me back when I leave the room, but it falls on deaf ears.

I’m digging my keys out of my pocket when Jace and Cole march up to me.

“Where are you going?” Jace questions.

“I’m taking care of some shit.”

I try to walk away, but Cole stands in front of me. “What shit?”

Are they fucking serious right now?

“Not that you give a fuck, but my dad was just shot by one of Loki’s associates.”

They exchange a glance.

Next thing I know they’re both hauling me into an empty hospital room.

“Don’t be stupid,” Jace barks.

“Too late,” Cole mutters. “This is Oak we’re talking about.”

I glare at them because they have a lot of fucking nerve.

“Don’t stand there and pretend you’re my boys. Or that you actually give a shit.”

I’m a lot smarter than they think, and I know they’re only here right now because either Bianca or their girls forced them to come.

As far as I’m concerned, they can both kick rocks.

Cole rolls his eyes. “Aw, I think he needs to hear us whisper sweet nothings and eternal promises so he’ll talk to us.”

I shove him. “It’s not funny, asshole.”

They made it perfectly fucking clear our ties were cut after the accident.

Truth be told, it hurt after they ditched me.

Way more than I thought it would.

But I don’t need them or their conditional friendship.

Hell, I don’t need anyone.

*Except her.*

I start to walk out, but Cole grips my shirt.

“Fine, I’ll start.” He makes a face like he’s pretending to think. “Let’s see, where should I begin? How about the time you gave my fiancé Adderall and she had a heart attack? Or when you were lying about working at a bar when you were really selling drugs? Or the time Sawyer flushed your stash

down a sewer, and you needed money to reup so Loki didn't bust a cap in your ass." He taps his chest. "Yeah, that envelope with the wad of money in it wasn't from Santa. You're fucking welcome, asshole."

I had no idea he was behind that. Although I probably should have, given Cole's the type to help someone out on the down low and never say a word about it.

"I didn't know—"

"I'm not fucking done yet," Cole grunts. "Where was I?" He snaps his fingers. "Oh, that's right. The time you were boning my baby sister behind my back and then got drunk and high behind the wheel and almost killed her."

He's got me there.

"I never meant for that to happen."

And if I could take back just one of the many fucked-up things I've done in my life...it would be that.

"But it did." He stomps the floor and curses. "And that's what fucking kills me. The fact that you could do all this shit and turn our lives upside down...yet I still fucking miss you."

*I miss him, too.*

"I never meant to hurt Sawyer or Bianca, Cole."

"I believe you. But it still doesn't change the fact that you did."

"I know."

Something I've learned in AA was to take responsibility for your mistakes and apologize to those you've wronged.

Draw in a heavy breath, I look at Jace and Cole. "I'm sorry."

"I know you are, and I'm gonna get over it one day." Cole scrubs a hand down his face. "In the meantime, promise me you won't do something stupid because losing you would...I'm not gonna fucking say it because I'm not a little bitch. Just don't be an idiot, okay?"

I won't feed him false promises. Not anymore.

I hold his stare. "I won't look you in the eyes and lie to you again."

I'm almost to the door when a fist goes flying into my face.

Glowering, I shove my assailant. "Goddammit. What the *fuck*, Jace?"

"That was for screwing my baby sister and lying about it." He punches me again. This time in the mouth. "That was for almost killing her."

He goes to strike me again, but I spit blood at him. "You only get one of those in your lifetime, motherfucker and you just cashed in. Twice."

I get his anger—and his need to assault my pretty mug—but I’m sure as shit not gonna stand here and be a punching bag for the rest of the night.

If he does it again, I’m gonna start throwing fists back and he doesn’t fucking want that.

Relenting, he backs up. “I won’t apologize for punching you, asshole.”

I snort. Everyone knows Jace doesn’t apologize for shit.

“Don’t expect you to, douchebag.”

“I also won’t apologize for cutting you out of my life. It needed to be done.”

Duly noted.

“Is there a point to this, or can I go?”

Jace clenches his hands into fists. “Dammit, Oak. I fucking hate you right now, but I’m not letting you leave this fucking room until you look me in the eyes and promise you won’t go after Loki.”

That’s a promise I can’t make.

“I can’t—”

A fist goes flying into my face. For a third time.

“Goddammit, asshole,” I roar, lunging at him.

He grabs me by the collar and shoves me against the wall. “You fucking owe me.” The anger in his eyes is like nothing I’ve ever seen before. “I’ve been putting up with your shit since we were kids. The alcohol and drugs, the seizures because of it. All the stupid shit you get yourself into—like screwing around with your stepmom, selling drugs to Dylan’s best friend, messing around with Bianca behind my back, and then almost taking her from me. The list goes on and on. Point is, I’ve demanded a lot of shit over the years, but I’ve never looked you in the eyes like a man and *begged* you for a damn thing. Except now. Now I’m begging you not to go after Loki.”

I’m not sure why the fuck it matters to him so much.

“Why—”

“Because you’re family,” he roars. “I was destroyed after I lost Liam. The grief was so bad I didn’t think I would survive it, but I had to go on for Cole and Bianca.” Taking a step back, he grunts. “I lost Liam and Dylan in the span of a day. I thought things would always suck and I’d be miserable forever. Until I met this crazy new kid in town who latched on to me like a lost puppy. A kid who did dumb shit, but always made me laugh. A kid I could talk to about how much it hurt to lose my mom and Liam, because he fucking got it.”

I start to speak, but he pushes me. “I lost a brother, but I also gained one the day I met you. So I’m begging you not to go after Loki, because if you die I’ll be destroyed again and I don’t think I can take that.”

Fucking hell.

Jace has always been important to me—Cole, too—and I considered them my family, but I never knew he felt like I was *his*.

The sound of someone sniffing has us both turning to Cole.

Jace’s expression twists in horror. “Motherfucker, are you *crying*?”

“Nah, man,” Cole says, rolling his shoulders back. “They got some onions up in this bitch or something.”

Jace and I start howling with laughter.

“Sawyer must keep his balls in a jar on the nightstand,” Jace jokes. “Right next to her Bible.”

“Dammit. I’m telling you, it’s the onions,” Cole argues.

“It’s okay, man,” I tell him. “I love you, too.”

Cole’s demeanor turns serious. “Does that mean you won’t go through with it then?”

“Which is it, Oak?” Jace gestures to himself and Cole. “Your brothers... or Loki? Because you can’t have both.”

I want my revenge on Loki so bad I can fucking taste it.

But I want my family back even more.

“I’ll let the legal system handle it...for now,” I tell them.

But if they don’t end up getting it right...then I fucking will.

Cole gives me a pound and hugs me. “For once you made the right decision.” He sniffs. “My baby’s all grown up.”

I shove him. “Asshole.”

“Yeah, but you still missed my ass.” He jerks his head in the direction of the door. “I’m gonna check on the girls.”

Jace’s glare is scrutinizing. “Given you beat the shit out of Stone and Bianca practically dragged Cole and I here by our ears, I assume you and my sister are talking again?”

I have no reason to lie to him. “Yeah.”

I expect him to give me shit and tell me to stay away from her, but the next words out of his mouth have my stomach filling with lead.

“Only because she doesn’t know everything.”

# Chapter 61

## Bianca

“Are you done yet?” Wayne questions, reaching for his tray.

*Please.* I haven’t even started.

“Nope.” I snap, wagging my finger. “Don’t you ever tell me to stay away from your son again. I love him, and unlike the rest of the women in his life, I will never hurt him...or abandon him.” I push his food tray toward him. “Now you can finish your water.”

Eyebrows raised, Wayne brings the straw to his mouth. “If this psychology thing doesn’t work out, you should consider going into law. You’d be a shark in the courtroom.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Huffing, I cross my arms. “Does this mean you support us being together?”

I know how much Oakley loves his dad, so having his blessing is important.

Wayne chokes on his drink. “Hardly.” He rubs his forehead. “But it’s obvious you love him, or you wouldn’t be in here fighting with me...*hours* after I had surgery.” Leaning back against the pillow, he frowns. “The love between you two isn’t the issue, Bianca. It’s the drama and toxic events that transpire. More than anything, I want my son to be happy. Happy and sober. I’m just not convinced you two being together is the right thing for him, because the *last* time you two were involved he ended up getting trashed and killing a girl.”

“That’s the thing, Mr. Zelenka. Oakley and I *were* happy together before the accident. Yes, tragic events occurred—so I get why you think I’m no good for him—but our relationship was healthy.”

*We changed each other for the better.*

My hands find my hips. “And just so we’re clear, Oakley’s sobriety is important to me.”

And I’m okay with being number two, as long as his sobriety always remains number one.

Despite looking like he wants to keep quarreling, Wayne heaves a sigh of

defeat. "I'm not going to win this argument, am I?"

"Nope." I throw up my hands. "But if you're even half as stubborn as I am, you'll never come around." I hold his gaze. "Just know that I can't wait to prove you wrong."

He eyes me skeptically. "We'll see about that."

"I'm being serious," I tell him. "In fact, you should start apologizing and kissing my ass now." My thumb hits my chest. "Because I'm gonna be your daughter-in-law one day and I've been known to hold one hell of a grudge. Just ask Dylan."

He starts choking on his drink again. "Anyone ever tell you you're *insane*?"

"Yeah, your son." I flash him a feisty grin as I saunter to the door. "Right before he fell for me."

Fluttering my fingers, I walk out.

And run straight into the woman from earlier.

The look she gives me makes me want to bash her head against the wall.

"Let me guess, you're here to console your junkie boyfriend."

The woman must be clinically insane or have a death wish.

"Excuse me?"

Rolling her eyes, she mutters, "Moron."

I have no idea who the hell this bitch is or what her issue with me is, but no way in hell am I going to stand here and let her call Oakley a junkie or me a moron.

"I'm sorry." I cup my ear. "I could have sworn you just called my boyfriend a junkie and me a moron...but I *know* you can't possibly be that fucking dumb, so I'm going to give you one second to apologize before I shove your Louboutins up your ass."

### **Past...**

I swear on all that is holy I'm going to kick that bitch's ass from here to kingdom come tomorrow.

So I messed around with girls? Big freaking deal.

Caitlyn was dicked down by half the football team last year.

*Whatever.* I refuse to let her ruin what's going to be a good night.

Squaring my shoulders, I walk across the lawn to the guesthouse.

Oakley always knows exactly how to make me feel better.

I twist the doorknob. “Honey, I’m h—”

Talking to myself...because he’s not home.

*Hmm.* He’s probably still at his dad’s.

Depending on how late he’s going to stay, I might have to reschedule the dinner we have planned with my brothers tonight.

After fishing around my purse for my phone, I bring it to my ear.

Oakley answers on the fourth ring.

I’m not sure what’s happening at his dad’s house, but it sounds like there’s one hell of a party going on in the background.

“Oakley? Hello—”

“Bianca,” he slurs on the other line.

And just like that, my heart crumbles.

“Are you drunk?”

He’s been sober for a month now. Well, with the exception of weed, but I know he mainly does that because it helps with his seizures.

I’m not sure why he’d throw his sobriety out the window like this.

“What happened? Where are you—” I start to say, but his next sentence steals the air from my lungs.

“I can’t do this.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Us.”

A flicker of panic shoots through my chest. There are a lot of changes happening in his life lately, and everything I’ve read told me change can be a major trigger for addicts.

Somehow, I manage to find my voice. “I know you’re nervous about telling my brothers, but we don’t have to—”

“It has nothing to do with your brothers,” he slurs. “I don’t want to destroy you, Bianca.”

Tears well in my eyes. Not only because of what he’s saying, but his lack of faith in us.

In *himself*.

“You won’t,” I assure him. “I know you would never hu—”

“You’re wrong,” he roars. “I *will*. Because that’s what I fucking do.” The agony in his voice sears my soul. “She was right.”

I have no idea what he’s talking about. “Who?”

His voice drops to a faint whisper. “Goodbye, baby girl.”

A swell of pain infiltrates my heart. “Goodbye? Oakley, this *isn’t*—”



The line goes dead.  
I try to call him back, but it goes straight to voicemail.  
Slamming my fist against the table, I mutter a curse.  
I don't know how one moment everything was perfect between us...and  
now.  
Everything's broken.  
Clutching my stomach, I let out a ragged breath.  
The last time I spoke to him he was at his dad's house, playing with his  
sister.  
And now he's getting drunk God only knows where and breaking up with  
me.  
It doesn't take a genius to figure out something must have happened  
while he was there.  
Snatching my keys out of my purse, I head for the door.  
I might not know what went down, but I do know one thing.  
Hurt people...hurt people.  
And I have every intention of finding out who's responsible for hurting  
the man holding my heart in the palm of his hand.



My heart beats like a drum as I march up the hilly lawn leading to Oakley's  
old house.  
I have to force myself to relax as I knock on the front door.  
Storming in there angry won't solve anything.  
I just need to know what happened, so I can fix it.  
A woman who looks a whole lot like Jace's girlfriend Dylan answers the  
door.  
She's holding a sleepy Clarissa Jasmine on her hip.  
My brain scrambles briefly because I realize that I'm officially face to  
face with the notorious Crystal.  
In other words, the cunt who broke Oakley's heart.  
I swallow my irritation. "Hi, I'm—"  
"Oh, my God," Crystal says. "I love what they've done with the uniforms.  
Super cute." She gives me a big smile. "I was a cheerleader at Royal Hearts  
Academy too." Her nose crinkles. "Well, back in the day obviously."

*Obviously.*

I open my mouth to tell her cheerleading isn't the reason I'm here, but she holds up a finger.

"Let me put the baby down and I'll run and get my checkbook, okay?"

*I don't need a donation.* I need answers.

"That won't be necessary," I quickly sputter. "I'm actually here for Oakley."

Her brows crash together. "Oh. I'm sorry, Oakley doesn't live here any —"

"I know." I swear it takes everything in me not to knock some sense into her. "I'm his girlfriend and he's—"

"Who's at the door?" a deep voice calls out behind her.

A second later Wayne comes into view.

Finally, someone who's not a total dumbass.

"Hi, Mr. Zelenka."

He blinks in confusion. "Is everything okay, Bianca? I thought your dad was still in Europe?"

"He is. But that's not why I'm here—"

"She's here for Oakley," Crystal interjects and there's no hiding the annoyance in her tone.

Concern colors his expression. "What's wrong with Oak?"

Crystal scoffs. "What *isn't* wrong with him?"

The tiny hairs on my arms stand on end.

I choose to focus my attention on Wayne because I'm liable to smack the shit out of her if she makes another jab at Oakley's expense.

"That's the thing," I begin. "I'm not sure. He was excited to meet Clarissa Jasmine and see you, and I thought everything was going great while he was here, but then he called me and sounded really ups—"

"Look, honey," Crystal cuts in. "I know you think you care about him but —" She frowns at Wayne. "Oakley has a serious problem. You seem like a nice girl, but don't try to save him because he'll only end up destroying you."

"That's not true," I argue.

Oakley has his demons, but who the fuck doesn't?

I shift my stare to Wayne again. "He's been working really hard and he's been sober for—"

It hits me like a brick to the head. *Destroying you.* Those were the very same words Oakley said on the phone before he hung up.

So many things roll through me. Sorrow, dread...but mostly?

Anger.

The kind that sends everything reeling.

This witch has already hurt him so much, yet she couldn't help herself from pouring salt in the wound.

"*You*," I seethe, my hands clenching into fists.

For a moment I honestly think about taking a swing at her, but then my gaze falls on Clarissa Jasmine.

It's not her fault her mother's a despicable whore and I don't want her getting caught in the crossfire.

Crystal's eyes become saucers. "I'm sorry, wh—"

"What the *fuck* did you say to him?"

Her mouth drops open. "Excuse me—"

"There is no excuse for someone like you," I growl before I turn my furious glare on Wayne. "If you care about your son—and I know you do—you'll never let your piece of shit wife near him again. She's toxic."

Wayne tries to speak, but Crystal doesn't give him the chance. "You better leave before I call the police. I refuse to stand here while some little girl on a power trip makes accusations and insults me."

That does it.

"Little girl on a power trip?" My eyes narrow. "How about a grown woman who bullied her stepson in order to keep her twisted secret safe? That's why you hurt him before, isn't it?" I take a step in her direction. "You figured if you sent Oakley away and kept driving a wedge between him and his dad, your husband would never find out about what you did and you could keep living your perfect little life."

Red-hot rage floods my stomach, bubbling and simmering until it reaches a boiling point. "I'd call you a bitch, but you're not...because a *real* bitch owns her shit. You're nothing but a pathetic cheater who likes to manipulate high school boys."

Wayne's eyebrows shoot up. "What the *hell* is going—"

"Nothing," Crystal says, panic rising in her voice. "She's crazy."

"No, I'm not." I look at Wayne. "You want to know why your son hasn't spoken to you in over two years?" I jut my chin at Crystal. "It's because your wife screwed him back when he was in high school and Oakley's been so riddled with guilt about it, he thought the best thing to do was distance himself from you."

Crystal's hands fly to her face. "That's not—"

"Oakley thought he was in love with her, but Crystal was only using him to get pregnant. It's why she wanted you to ship him off to military school. She was hoping Oakley would knock her up and she could pass the baby off as yours."

There's so much turmoil in Wayne's expression when he looks at his daughter, my knees go weak.

"She's yours," Crystal croaks. "I swear to God, Wayne. She's *yours*."

Tears fill his eyes.

"Oakley loves you and he never meant to hurt you," I whisper. "He feels so bad—"

"Bianca," Wayne chokes out. "I think it's best you leave."



It's almost midnight by the time I get back home.

After checking every bar and beach within a fifty-mile radius, there's still no sign of Oakley.

I'm pulling into the driveway when I spot his silver BMW. One of the rear doors is open as well as the trunk.

Hope springs eternal as I get out of my car and run to the guesthouse.

He's *here*. Which means I can fix this.

My heart does a painful flip the moment I walk inside.

The kitchen table is nothing but a pile of broken wood, the flat-screen television in the living room looks like someone took a bat to it, and the couch is flipped over.

But that's not the worst part.

The *worst part* would be the two duffle bags lined up by the front door.

I start walking toward the bedroom at the same time he comes out of it.

He's in such a rush he almost knocks me over.

"Oakley."

He doesn't say a word, but those eyes are filled with so much venom my insides coil.

I swallow hard. "What—"

He brushes past me like I'm nothing more than a piece of broken furniture in the room.

I tug on his sleeve. "Talk to me."

The muscles in his back tense. "I have nothing to say to you. Not now, not *ever*."

Both his words and the bitterness laced in them has me staggering back. "I know you're upset, but—"

"Upset?" He snorts. "Nah, I was upset while I was at the bar. But now? I'm fucking furious." I can smell the alcohol on his breath when he leans in. "I never want to see you again."

My heart snaps in two. "Wh—"

"You *betrayed* me," he sneers. "And don't you dare fucking stand there and claim you didn't because my dad already told me." A flash of pain flickers in his eyes. "I *trusted* you."

Oh. My. God.

I was so caught up in my anger with Crystal and wanting Wayne to know that she was the one responsible for the rift with his son...

I didn't think about the consequences.

Like how hurt Oakley might be once his house of cards came tumbling down and his secret was out.

It wasn't my gun...but I was the one who went behind his back and pulled the trigger that just imploded his life.

*Jesus*. I messed up.

I messed up so bad.

With shaky hands, I clutch my chest. "I'm so sorry. I never meant to hurt you. I was just trying—"

"Doesn't fucking matter." He strides to the front door and picks up one of his duffle bags. "Nothing you say or do matters to me anymore."

Thinking quick, I wedge myself between him and the door. "You have every right to be angry with me, but—"

"But nothing," he roars. "What part of *I don't ever want to see you again* don't you fucking understand?"

All of it. Because there's no way in hell I'm ever going to let him sever what we have.

I messed up. I'll own that. But I'll do whatever it takes to earn his trust again.

Grabbing his hand, I place it over my heart. "I know you're angry. You're entitled to it. But this belongs to you, Oakley."

He snatches his hand away like he's been burned. "I don't fucking want

it.” Inclining his head, his lips brush the tip of my ear. “My gut told me not to trust you because sooner or later you’d fuck me over. I wish I fucking listened.”

His words are like a fist to the face.

“What does your heart tell you?” I choke out. “Because mine is telling me that what we have is real. And even though I screwed up so fucking bad...we can still fix this.”

“No, we can’t.”

He tries to push past me, but I lock my knees and stand my ground. “Look me in the eyes and tell me this isn’t real.”

“It’s not real.” His expression contorts into something cold and vicious. “I just wanted to fuck you. And now that I got what I wanted...we’re done.” He holds my gaze. “Thanks for the mediocre lay.”

Any other girl would crawl into a ball and cry her eyes out.

But I know exactly what he’s doing. Because I’ve done it most of my life.

He’s hurting me with cruel insults in hopes it will push me away.

*But it won’t work.*

I peer up at him. “You don’t mean that.”

He bashes his fist against the wall beside my head. “Goddammit. What will it take for you to leave me the fuck alone?”

I tell him the truth. “Death.”

And even then, I’m sure I’d find my way back to him.

“Trust me, I *want* to fucking kill you right now. The only reason I’m not is because I care about Jace and Cole.”

Yeah, that hurts. However, I’m still not letting him go.

“Then don’t leave. Call my brothers and let them talk you off the ledge since it’s obvious I can’t.”

He snatches his second duffle bag off the floor. “Loki needs me to be in New York by Thursday.” Reaching in his pocket, he throws his house key at me. “It’s time to get the fuck out of this town for good.”

My chest fills with dread as he trudges past me.

*He’s leaving...permanently?*

To what? Sell drugs in New York.

Not only does that have *bad idea* written all over it...it’s straight-up reckless.

If he doesn’t want to be with me, fine. But I’m not gonna let him throw

his entire life down the toilet.

I care about him too much.

I chase after him as he hightails it over the lawn, walks past the gate, and continues down the driveway.

While he loads up his trunk, I block his driver's side door so he can't get inside.

However, he's a lot stronger than I am and he simply yanks me away like I'm nothing more than a feather.

My chest recoils the second I hear his car roar to life.

Heart lodged in my throat, I run around to the passenger side door.

But it's locked.

I grab the handle as Oakley starts backing out of the driveway.

He slams the steering wheel with his fist. "Let go of the goddamn door, Bianca."

I shake my head. "No."

"Fine."

I tighten my hold as the car gathers speed.

Oakley punches the horn. "Let go. Now."

"No!"

He accelerates and the motion is enough to bring me to my knees.

But I don't care. I'm never letting go of this door.

*Never letting go of him.*

The car comes to a stop and he rolls the passenger window down. "Jesus Christ. What the fuck are you doing? You're gonna get yourself killed."

I don't waste the opportunity. I wiggle my body through the now open window. "I thought you wanted me to die?"

Oakley slams on the gas. "You're fucking insane, you know that?"

*I've been called worse.*

Catching my breath, I situate myself in the seat. "You can't leave me."

He clutches the steering wheel as we start cruising down Royal Manor Road. "There's nothing left for me here." He glares at me. "I'm turning back around and dropping you off at your house."

I secure my seatbelt. "I won't get out."

"Then I'll call Jace to come remove you from my car," he grits through his teeth.

"No, you won't."

Because he cares about me. Even through all his anger I still feel it.

A muscle in his jaw bunches. “Don’t fucking test me, Bianca.”

“I’m not testing you,” I tell him. “I’m fighting for you.” The tears I was holding back spill over, streaming down my cheeks. “Because I love yo—”

The car swerves with a startling lurch. When I look over, I see Oakley shaking uncontrollably.

*Oh, shit.*

I go to grab the wheel, but a violent force propels me out of my seat...

*And then everything goes black.*



*He left me.*

I was fighting for him with everything I had...and he left me.

Because of *her*.

I can feel the ball of anger tightening inside me like a gigantic knot.

Before I can stop myself, I launch my fist into her face.

“You’re a fucking *pedophile*,” I scream at the top of my lungs, because I want people to know the truth.

Hell, I want everyone around to know just how venomous this woman really is.

She yelps when I go to punch her again, but a strong pair of arms wrap around my waist and tug me back.

“Enough,” Oakley grunts. “She’s not worth it.”

That might be true, but it sure feels good letting her have it.

Crystal’s hand flies up to her face, and I notice the bruise forming under her eye. *Good.*

“I should have you arrested.”

“And I should have punched you harder, *bitch*.”

I squirm and kick, trying my hardest to get out of Oakley’s grasp, but he tightens his hold on me.

“Get the fuck out of here before I let her go,” Oakley threatens.

“Pedophile,” I yell and point as she walks away. “That woman is a pedophile.”

A few people gasp and I can feel Dylan and Sawyer staring at me in shock the entire time, but I don’t care.

Watching Crystal hang her head in shame as she quickly scurries to the



exit fills me with such a rush of satisfaction, I can't help but beam.

Jace and Cole start walking over, but Oakley shakes his head. "I got this."

Before I can protest, he's walking us into an empty hospital room.

"I hate her," I yell, wishing he didn't stop me from beating her ass. "She's the reason you got drunk and high before the accident."

She's the reason for all of it.

"No, she's not," Oakley argues as he puts me down. "Yeah, Crystal was a bitch, but getting wasted was on *me*."

I hate that he's right.

I hate that I can't blame everything on Crystal because it would be so much easier that way.

"You abandoned me," I whisper. "I was fighting for you to stay...fighting for *us*...but you left."

So many things pass through his expression in that moment. Sadness, guilt...regret.

"I know."

He cups my face, studying me for several lengthy beats, before his lips are on mine.

Only his kiss isn't desperate and greedy like it usually is.

It's soft and gentle...almost like an apology.

Uneasiness twists my stomach.

*Almost like he's saying goodbye.*

# Chapter 62

## Oakley

I want to keep kissing her until we both run out of air and the secret I've been keeping from her dissolves from my lips.

I never meant for things to get so serious between us again when I agreed to be her friend.

I thought I could be there so she had someone to confide in, and in turn, she'd realize Stone was no good for her and leave his ass.

I thought I could live in this make-believe world where I could still have her for a little while longer.

But I should have known better.

Bianca Covington swooped in like a violent tornado—uprooting and rearranging the ugly parts of myself so I could finally confront my issues without needing to go numb.

But in the end, I was the one who caused all the destruction.

Pulling back, I look at her face, memorizing every perfect detail of it.

Her plump lips, her high cheekbones...those baby brown eyes so full of depth it's like looking into the ocean.

I fell in love with her when I least expected it.

And she'll have every fucked-up piece of my heart and soul until the day I die.

She places her hands on top of mine. "Oakley."

Bianca knows me well enough to know something's wrong, but there's no way to prepare her for this.

People make mistakes—but if they're smart enough to learn their lesson, they evolve.

Sometimes, if they're lucky—they earn forgiveness, too.

But there's no forgiveness for this.

Because what I took from her.

From *us*.

Can't ever be replaced.

# Chapter 63

## Oakley

### Past...

I'm so groggy from all the medication they pumped me with, I can barely see straight.

"No more," I tell the nurse, fighting my tiredness.

I want to be alert when Bianca gets out of surgery.

"You're clustering," she informs me, as if I didn't already know.

I eye the two police officers who haven't left my room.

"Where's my dad?"

"He went to the cafeteria."

The nurse squeezes my shoulder. "Try to get some rest. I'll be in to check on you in a little bit."

How the fuck am I supposed to sleep when the girl I love is fighting for her life?

My eyelids grow heavy as another wave of drowsiness surges through me.

I force myself to fight through it, but it's a losing battle.

The shit the nurse gave me must be strong because I hear footsteps enter the room followed by voices murmuring.

"Who are you?" one of the officers questions.

"I'm the brother of the girl who was in the accident," someone who sounds a lot like Jace grunts.

*Shit.*

"I'll give you both five hundred bucks to take a walk for five minutes."

My eyes open in time to see Jace place a wad of cash in their hands.

"You can't kill him," one of the officers warns before they leave the room.

"Jace—"

A punch to my face stops me mid-sentence.

"You motherfucker."

Jace has every right to be furious with me.

But there's only one thing I give a fuck about right now.

"How's Bianca?"

He looks like he wants to clobber me again. "How she's doing is none of your goddamn business."

The fuck it isn't.

"Goddammit, Jace. I *need* to know—"

"She just got out of surgery."

Relief surges through my chest, but it's short-lived because Jace gets close to my face and grinds out, "They said her HCG levels are elevated."

I have no idea what that means.

"What—"

"She's *pregnant*," he spits.

Red-hot panic slams into me and the room starts spinning.

How the fuck is that even possible? She's on the pill.

My voice is low, rippling with anxiety. "She's pregnant?"

Jace laughs, but there's no humor. "Given you look like you're about to shit yourself, it's safe to say I know who the father is."

*Goddammit.* This isn't how I wanted him to find out about us.

"It's not what you think. She wasn't just some booty call. I care about her."

More than care. *I love her.*

What Bianca and I have is far beyond a summer hookup.

She taught me things no one else could and made me a better person.

*Before I went and fucked it all up.*

And yeah, us having a baby right now isn't ideal—especially since I'm headed to prison and all—but maybe I can use my dad's connections and cut a deal.

Jace doesn't look convinced. "Then why did you lie about it?"

*Fucking hell.* He's got me there.

But explaining that it started off as a fling will only make things worse.

"Because I know you well enough to know you'd never be okay with me dating her." I meet his stare. "I was going to tell you, though."

Jace's eyes narrow as he fists the neck of my hospital gown.

"I swear to God, motherfucker. If she dies, I'll fucking kill you."

My chest recoils. *If she dies...I won't want to live.*

It looks like it's taking every ounce of his willpower not to punch me

again.

However, he doesn't have to punch me...because his parting words are like a dull blade twisting my heart until it snaps.

"She was pregnant," he whispers, gripping the door frame. "She lost the baby...because of *you*."

# Chapter 64

## Bianca

No. It's not true.

He's lying. He *has* to be lying.

My heart folds in on itself when I peer up at him, because the devastation etched in Oakley's features tells me this isn't some cruel joke and he's telling me the truth.

I clutch my stomach. *I was pregnant.*

How can that be, though? Amnesia or not, surely I would have remembered something that significant.

I rub my temples, not understanding how this happened.

I was on the pill. I know this because the moment Oakley and I started our fling, I made a doctor's appointment to get it.

And even though he refused to have sex with me for most of our relationship, I took it every day faithfully.

I close my eyes when I realize.

Until the day of the fire...

We left so quickly, I didn't have time to grab my birth control.

I didn't think it was a big deal because I took my next dose on schedule... but obviously it was.

God, how the hell did I not know I was pregnant?

There must have been signs...symptoms.

*Something* to let me know there was a life growing inside me.

Tears clog my vision and I expel a ragged breath. "I don't remember being pregnant."

How can I not remember my—*our*—baby?

I'm looking at him for answers, but his expression makes it clear he doesn't have them.

I start to walk away, but his hand clutches my face, keeping me there. "It was so early, Bianca." He swallows. "I'm pretty positive you didn't know."

"How can you be so sure?"

Because right now? I can't be sure of anything.

“You were only three or four weeks along.”

He says it like it doesn't count. As though it was just a whisper of something substantial.

I slap his cheek so hard it stings. “Don't you dare say that like it didn't mean anything.”

It was a baby. *Our baby.*

“That's not what I meant.” Closing his eyes, he rasps, “I just meant that you didn't know because it was so early and...” His voice trails off like he doesn't have the heart to say the words.

“I would have kept it.”

I see him flinch briefly before he recovers. “I know.”

Anger twists my insides. “But I didn't get the choice...because you took it from me.”

*He took everything from me.*

And the sick thing is...I could forgive him for getting mad and wanting to leave me that night, because I know how angry he was.

I could even forgive him for getting drunk and high behind the wheel and turning my life upside down...because people make mistakes.

But I can't forgive him for this.

I loved him so much...he was the only thing I cared about.

So much so I ended up doing the same thing my mother tried to do to me and Liam.

*I killed my child.*

Because if I had just let him leave...my baby would still be here.

“I'm sorry.”

I slap him again, harder this time. “Don't.”

*Sorry won't take it back.*

*Sorry won't undo what's been done.*

*Sorry doesn't give me our baby back.*

“I hate you.”

But really, I hate myself—because even though I should hate him—my heart won't let me.

It's incapable of it.

Oakley tries to put his arms around me, but that only makes me more irate.

I don't want him to hold me. I don't want him anywhere near me.

“Don't fucking touch me.” I shove his chest. “Don't *ever* fucking touch

me again.”

Finally, he backs up.

Chest caving in, I stagger to the other side of the room.

I’m almost to the door when it occurs to me.

*Jace* told him I was pregnant.

Which means Oakley wasn’t the only one keeping secrets from me.



# Chapter 65

## Bianca

White-hot fury crashes through my veins as I storm up the pathway to my brother's apartment.

I'm so enraged, I'm shaking as I knock on his front door.

Dylan answers it with a smile. "Hey, we got some pizza if you're hun—"

I walk past her and into the living room where Jace, Sawyer, and Cole are all eating pizza and watching television.

"Hey," Jace says when he sees me. "Grab a slice—"

I snatch the glass out of his hand and throw it.

Sawyer jumps when it shatters against the wall.

"What the fuck is your problem?" Jace roars, standing up.

"What the fuck is my problem?" I shove him as hard as I possibly can. "How about the fact that you didn't tell me I was pregnant?"

Sawyer and Dylan gasp while Cole looks down at the floor and mutters a curse.

Sadness flashes in Jace's eyes for a split second before his jaw hardens. "I was trying to protect you."

God, I'm so sick and tired of everyone using that as an excuse.

I had a right to know about Oakley.

*And the baby I lost.*

"Screw you," I yell. "You had no—"

"We didn't want to tell you anything that would add to your pain," Cole interjects.

I turn my fury on him. "You knew about this?"

Guilt flickers in his expression. "Jace told me at the hospital."

"So let me get this straight, *everyone* knew about my baby except me?"

"I didn't," Sawyer whispers, her voice trembling.

Pity illuminates Dylan's face. "I didn't either."

So just Cole then. *No surprise there.*

Disgust rolls through me as I turn to Cole. "I forgot you're nothing but a little bitch who follows Jace's every command like he's your goddamn

Messiah.” Scowling, I rock back on my heels. “If you wanted a better relationship with me so bad, you should have started one with honesty.”

I glare at Jace. “And you—I will *never* fucking forgive you for this.”

I expect Cole to lie—hell, he’s been doing it most of his life and we weren’t all that close before the accident.

But Jace? We’ve always been honest with one another. No matter how painful it was.

Bringing my fist back, I punch him with every ounce of fury I feel, because I want him to hurt as much as I do.

Bringing his shirt up, he wipes the blood trickling from his nose. “Dammit, Bianca. You were a mess after the accident. Finding out about Liam and Mom nearly broke you. You think I was gonna stand there and tell you that you were pregnant by the guy who caused the accident to begin with and then lost the baby because of it?”

“Yes.” I clutch my chest, feeling like a dam that’s about to give way at any moment. “That’s what you should have done.”

“I did the right thing.” The fact that he doesn’t look the least bit sorry about keeping this information from me only fills me with more bitterness. “I wanted you to have a fresh start.”

What he wanted doesn’t matter. It wasn’t his decision to make.

I might be his sister, but I’m not a little girl anymore.

I’m a grown woman.

A grown woman who deserved to know the truth.

And the fact that he thought it was okay to keep something so big from me is...unforgivable.

“You’re *nothing* to me anymore,” I teeter back, tears clouding my vision as I look at my brothers. “Fuck you both.”

Jace takes a step forward, attempting to grab me when I try to leave, but Dylan wedges herself between us. “Leave her alone, Jace.”

I startle when she wraps her arms around me.

A moment later Sawyer joins us.

“I’m so sorry,” Sawyer chokes out.

I stand there motionless as they both attempt to console me like I’m liable to break at any second.

And while I am fragile right now...I’m not fragile like glass.

I’m fragile like a bomb.

I almost feel myself cave when another wave of anguish flows through

me, but because wrath is so much easier to give in to than the guttural sadness slicing through my soul, I push them both away.

“Leave me alone.”

I scan the room, making sure I look at everyone because I want them all to know I mean the next words out of my mouth with every fiber of my being.

“Fuck this family. I’m *done*.”

# Chapter 66

## Oakley

There are a million things I wish I'd done differently that night.

I wish I never drank or did drugs.

I wish I never blamed Bianca for telling my dad the truth about Crystal.

I wish I never got behind the wheel and killed Hayley.

But most of all?

I wish I didn't hurt Bianca.

Not because she'll never forgive me—her forgiveness isn't something I'm seeking—but because it destroyed the trust and faith she had in me.

In *us*.

Because in the end, I did the one thing I swore I would never do to her.

I left.

And forced her to clean up the mess I made all by herself.

*Because it hurt too damn much for me to stay.*

I knock on the door of her dorm room, hoping like hell she'll answer it.

Dylan texted me a half hour ago and said Bianca showed up at their apartment ready to burn it down to the ground because Jace lied to her about losing our baby.

Honestly? I'm surprised she didn't.

I saw the way she looked at me—with so much pain and agony—I can only imagine the anger she must have spewed at her brothers.

Which is why I'm here now.

I can't make things right, and I can't force her to talk to her family again.

But I can show her where to direct all that resentment and pain.

Because while the universe obviously deems me unfit to ever be a father.

Bianca *will* make a great mother someday.

And I don't want her thinking that any part of what happened is her fault.

I need her to place the blame where it belongs.

This way she can heal and move on.

Because I want the best for her.

And whether or not she hates me, it will never change the fact that I will

always love her.

# Chapter 67

## Bianca

I ignore the incessant knocking on my door and toss some more clothes into my suitcase.

“Finally,” I mutter when it stops.

My relief is short-lived though because it starts up again.

*Holy hell.* Jace can be so goddamn stubborn it’s enough to make a person want to pull their hair out.

“Go away, Jace.”

I’m done with him. *Done with everyone.*

I want to run far away from this stupid town where nothing good ever happens and never look back.

“It’s me.”

I freeze at the sound of Oakley’s deep, thready voice.

I should tell him to go away.

Then threaten to call the cops when he refuses.

But I don’t.

Because he’s the only person on the planet who can understand my loss.

Because the baby wasn’t just mine.

*It was his, too.*

His eyes are bloodshot, and the sharp lines of his face are drawn tight—like he’s expecting me to kick him out but prepared to fight me tooth and nail about it.

“What do you want?”

He steps inside, despite not being invited. “To see you.” His gaze locks on my suitcase full of clothes. “Where you going?”

I close the door and lean against it. “I’m leaving town.”

*And all the fucked-up memories behind.*

He nods in understanding. “I get that.”

I open my mouth to ask what he means, but then he says, “I chose to go to prison so I could escape.”

I cross my arms over my chest. “Did it help?”

“No.” He holds my stare, his expression growing grim. “I thought about you and the baby every second of every day.”

His words send a pang of agony through me and I can’t help but flinch.

I don’t even know if it was a girl or a boy.

I never got to hear the heartbeat.

*Or hold them.*

“I don’t know how I can grieve something so much when it never even existed.”

And just like that, something sharp and raw unhinges inside me and the tears I was trying so hard to hold back stream down my face like rain.

Oakley wraps his arms around me.

“Our baby existed.” A low, painful sound leaves him and his voice catches on the last word.

My fingers curl into the folds of his t-shirt as a guttural cry leaves my lips.

He runs his hands up and down my spine, gripping me tighter. “I’m so fucking sorry.”

I allow myself to breathe in his warmth and comfort for a few moments before I push him away.

“I know you are...but I still can’t forgive you.”

*I can’t forgive myself.*

He cups my tear-stained cheeks, forcing me to look at him. “I don’t want your forgiveness. That’s a burden I would never put on you.”

“Then what do you want from me?”

His thumb glides over my damp cheekbone. “I just want to make sure you don’t blame yourself. Because it’s not your fault.”

He’s wrong. *So fucking wrong.*

“I was the one who chased after you even though you told me not to. I never should have gotten in your car. I never should ha—”

“Bianca, stop.” Sorrow and remorse flicker in his eyes and he punches his chest. “What happened was my fucking fault. *Mine*. Not yours...not anyone else’s.” He thumps his chest again. “*Mine*.”

His statement only makes me feel worse, because taking the blame doesn’t fix anything.

I close my eyes as another swell of pain engulfs me.

Everything was perfect between us.

We were in love. We were happy.

*Until one night destroyed it all.*

And I don't know how I'm supposed to get past any of this...because the only thing I can see when I look at him now is all the pain he caused me...

*And the baby we'll never have.*

"Look at me," he rasps. "Please."

When I do, he says, "You're gonna meet a man who deserves you. And when the time is right...you're gonna have his babies. You're gonna be the best mom—"

"Stop talking," I scream because he doesn't get it. "I don't want anyone else's babies. I wanted *yours*."

But that will never happen.

Because he got drunk and high and destroyed our lives.

Oakley tries to speak again, but I don't let him.

"Get out."

I shove him when he doesn't move quick enough. "Get the fuck out."

He starts to walk away, but pauses.

I'm about to yell at him again, but his eyes fall on my suitcase and he wraps his pinky around mine.

"Don't leave me."

The despair in his voice cuts into my skin like a knife.

I point to the door. "Get *out*."

The moment he's gone, the excruciating hollow feeling in my chest is back again.

Only this time...I don't think it will ever disappear.



# Chapter 68

## Oakley

“What are you doing?”

I stare up at Bianca’s angry face. “Good morning.”

Hands on her hips, she glares down at me. “You *slept* in the hallway?”

*Not exactly.* I tried to, but the hardwood floor made that shit impossible.

Sitting up, I rub the knot in my neck. “Depends what your definition of sleep is.”

She groans. “You’re crazy.”

I prefer to think of it as *determined*.

Stepping over me, she huffs, “You better be gone by the time I get back.”

I stand up and chase her down the hall. “Where are you going?”

I hear her growl under her breath as she hikes her purse up her shoulder.

“To class.”

Good.

Because if she’s going to class, that means she’s not leaving.

*That she hasn’t given up on me just yet.*

“See you later, baby girl.”

She flips me the middle finger. “No, you won’t.”

Grinning, I zero in on that pert little ass of hers as she walks away.

Yes...I fucking will.

# Chapter 69

## Bianca

As if Oakley camping outside my room last night wasn't enough, I find my brothers hanging around my dorm after classes are over.

Plastering a sugary sweet smile on my face, I root around my purse for my keys. "Look, last night I said some things that were really mean." I stick my key in the lock and open it. "And I just want you to know...that I stand by all of it."

I go to slam the door in their faces, but Jace wedges his foot between it and the frame.

"Let us in so we can talk."

"I'm not interested in talking to you."

"Fine," Cole says. "Then let *me* in so I can apologize."

I scan his face for signs he's trying to play me, but don't see any. "You can come in."

Jace tries to walk in after him, but I poke his forehead with my finger. "Not you, dipshit."

I firmly plant my feet, blocking him from entering.

Everyone knows Jace doesn't apologize and I'm not interested in hearing his bullshit excuses.

Cole opens his arms wide and circles my dorm room. "And just like that, I've been upgraded to number one brother."

I glare at him. "I wouldn't go that far. You still owe me an apology."

"Goddammit, Bianca," Jace grumps. "Let me in."

"That's the thing about being a grown woman. I no longer have to do what you tell me to." I tap my chest. "*I* get to decide what's best for me. Not you."

"I am letting you make your own decisions," Jace argues. "For instance—we both know I can easily pick you up and move you out of the way, but I'm not."

Yeah, I'm not amused.

Spinning around, I focus on Cole. "I sure hope you grovel better than he

does.”

Cole digs in his pocket, pulls out his wallet, and holds up a hundred-dollar bill. “How’s this for an apology?”

He’s got to be kidding me.

“You can’t bribe me, dumbass.” I swipe the hundred and tuck it into my bra. I’m angry and hurt. Not stupid. “Keeping the truth from me was wrong.”

“I know.” Cole sulks. “But Jace said—”

“Jace is an idiot.”

“Hey,” Jace snaps. “I’m right here.”

I turn around to face him. “You’re an *idiot*.”

Jace’s nostrils flare on an indrawn breath. “I only did it because I love you. And I know that’s hard for you to understand because you feel like the rug was just pulled out from under you—”

He takes a step forward, but I snap my fingers.

Exasperated, Jace crosses his arms. “Permission to enter?”

“Fine,” I grumble, but only because I’m curious what he has to say.

“Anyway,” he continues, closing the door behind him. “I never meant to hurt you. I just...” His voice trails off.

“You just what?” I press.

“If you were given the chance to erase the most horrible memories from a person’s brain. A person who you love and would do just about anything for. A person who was already so fragile because of everything she’s been through...wouldn’t you take it?”

I think about this for a moment. “No.”

Because I believe honesty is always the best policy. No matter how much it may hurt.

“Well, that’s the difference between me and you,” Jace says. “It’s my job to protect you, not the other way around.”

“What you did wasn’t protecting me.”

“Yes, it *was*,” he protests. “You don’t understand because you can’t see it from my perspective. I was planning on telling you, but then you looked at me with a shattered heart and big, fat tears welling in your eyes after you found out Hayley died in the accident, and I *couldn’t*.” Deep grooves line his mouth. “You were barely hanging on after you heard about Mom and Liam. Finding out about the baby would have destroyed you. Therefore, I figured the less you knew about the accident and Oakley, the better off you would be.”

“The doctor’s agreed with Jace. They told us not to push you.” Cole winces. “Granted, they *didn’t* say not to ever tell you—”

“Shut up, Cole,” Jace barks. “You’re not helping.”

That’s when it dawns on me.

“I couldn’t find anything about the accident online.”

Jace looks guilty as hell. “Yeah, about that. I might have installed some safety programs on your computer so you wouldn’t.”

He’s unbelievable.

“Jesus, you’re an asshole.”

“Fair enough, but I’m an asshole who loves you.” He points a finger at me. “Besides, you weren’t exactly innocent. You were seeing Oakley behind our backs for months.”

Cole nods in agreement. “Tru dat, sis.”

“That’s...different.”

Jace raises a brow. “How so?”

“The only reason I didn’t tell you about Oakley was because you guys are his family and there’s no way you would have been cool with us hooking up.” I look at both of them. “But after things got serious, we were going to tell you the truth. It’s why I asked you guys to come to dinner the night of the accident.”

Jace runs a hand down his jaw, pretending to think. “Let me get this straight—you didn’t tell us about your relationship because you were protecting him. Kind of like how I was protecting you?”

I see where he’s going with this, but it’s not the same thing. “It’s different, Jace.”

“Different how?”

Now that I think about it...I guess it’s really not.

A lie is still a lie. No matter how good your intentions are.

“I know your heart was in the right place, but you still should have told me.”

Jace makes a sound of agreement in his throat. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

I do a double take. “Hold on. I must be hallucinating. Did you just—”

“Oh, yeah,” Cole cuts in. “He said it.”

Jace rolls his eyes. “Christ. You two act like I’m heartless.”

“No. We know you have a heart...it’s just buried down deep.”

“*Mariana trench* deep,” Cole adds with a wink.

Cole laughs when Jace shoots him a murderous glare. “Sawyer said you

can be quite the romantic when you want to be.”

Jace looks like he’s about to choke him, but there’s a knock on the door.

The air in my lungs grows thin when I open it and see Oakley standing there. “What the hell do you want?”

Not looking offended in the least, he motions to the two bags in his hand. “I brought dinner. I didn’t know what you were in the mood for, so I grabbed some burgers and a bunch of healthy shit—”

I swiftly snatch the bags out of his hand and slam the door in his face. Because again, I’m hurt and angry...not stupid.

I can feel Jace and Cole staring at me as I set the food on my desk.

“You guys can go,” I tell them.

Reaching over, Cole takes a few fries. “Nah. I’m dying to see how this plays out.”

Jace grabs a burger off my desk and sits on my bed. “It was nice of him to bring refreshments.”

Cole nods. “Word.”

“This isn’t a joke,” I start to say but the sound of movement on the other side of the door snags my attention.

Huffing, I open it.

My jaw drops when I see Oakley setting up a sleeping bag outside my door.

Holy hell. He’s officially lost it.

“Are you out of your damn mind?”

He casually plops down. “Nope.”

“I don’t want you sleeping outside my room.”

Oakley’s smug grin is pure arrogance. “Then invite me in.”

I slam the door in his face for the second time.

Cole props his feet up on my bed. “This just keeps getting better and better.”

Jace takes a few of his fries. “Wonder what else he’ll do.”

“Show’s over,” I grunt, ushering them away.

“Oh, come on,” Cole whines. “It was just getting good.”

I point to the door. “Go.”

Sulking, they both stand up and head out.

I roll my eyes when they stop to give Oakley a pound before they leave.



I'm slipping into bed when a piece of paper slides under my door.

For a moment I debate leaving it there, but I find myself walking over and unfolding it.

*Would you have been strong and beautiful like your mother?*

*Or would you be lost and confused like your father?*

*All these questions in my head, but none of them will ever be answered.*

*And even though you were gone too soon, one thing's for sure.*

*You might not have been planned...*

*But were loved and you were wanted.*

My knees go weak and tears blur my vision as I take in his words.

The organ in my chest beats a painful rhythm against my ribcage as I drop to the floor and press my cheek to the door.

"It hurts so bad."

It's the worst ache I've ever felt.

His voice is a painful thread cutting through the silence. "I know."

I close my eyes against the surge of heartache. "I keep wondering what he or she would have been like."

It's probably a morbid thing to admit, but I can't help myself.

It's as though giving the baby characteristics makes them real and gives me permission to grieve.

"Me too." I hear his sharp intake of breath. "It goes without saying they would have been good-looking."

I find myself smiling. "Good-looking and smart."

He chuckles softly. "Probably a bossy know it all."

"Definitely."

Because let's face it...all Covingtons are.

"I'd want them to have your strength, your brain, your gorgeous eyes and smile...but mostly? Your heart."

I run my finger along the wood of the frame. "Why my heart?"

I hear him shift against the door "It's my favorite thing about you."

A weird twist goes through my chest. It's odd he'd want that, because I'd want our baby to have most of *his* traits.

"Well, I'd want them to have *your* eyes and smile, your passion and creativity, your loyalty...but most of all, your soul."

Because even though he's made some catastrophic mistakes...I know he

still has a beautiful one.

A low, guttural sound leaves him. He sounds so broken, something deep within my heart clenches.

“Good souls don’t take innocent lives.”

His statement is the equivalent of being submerged in ice water.

Words work like broken glass against my throat. “Oakley—”

“I don’t need you to make me feel better, Bianca. That’s not why I said that.” He draws in a ragged breath. “I just want you to know that if given the chance, not only would I take it all back...I’d gladly give up my life to spare theirs.”

*I know he would.*

But life doesn’t work like that.

And some mistakes are too painful to ever be forgiven.

However, Oakley’s made it clear that my forgiveness isn’t what he’s seeking. Which means he’s prepared to wallow in his guilt for the rest of his life.

“I don’t want you sleeping outside my door.”

I don’t want him showing up and fighting for me anymore...

Because he’s only going to tear himself apart trying to fix us.

And despite all the bad things that have happened between us...

I love him too much to allow that to happen.

# Chapter 70

## Oakley

“I know you’ve been sleeping outside her dorm room for over three weeks now and she still won’t talk to you,” Dylan says. “But you have to hang in there.”

Sawyer clutches her chest. “Even though it might not seem like it right now...Bianca still loves you.”

Dylan nods. “And you still love her.”

I take another bite of my pizza. Shit’s good.

Sawyer closes her eyes. “I know awful things have happened, but you guys are meant for each other.”

“You two are *soul mates*,” Dylan adds.

Sawyer blinks like she has something in her eye. “Two crazy halves of the same heart.”

I gesture to the pizza box on my coffee table. “Do you guys want any?”

They both look at me like I’m insane.

Dylan claps her hands. “Oakley, I need you to focus. What we’re saying is important.”

Sawyer rubs her temples. “I know Bianca’s stubborn and hard to handle at times. I get it. But you’re not always a peach either, mister.” Frowning, her shoulders sag. “Please don’t give up on her. You can make it through this.”

“I know you made some terrible mistakes and the guilt is weighing you down, but you’re still a good person.” Looking up at the ceiling, Dylan blows out a breath. “And I never thought I’d say this, but so is Bianca.” Her gaze cuts to mine. “I’m not saying it will be perfect all the time, but I know you two can work it out. Just don’t give up on her, okay?”

I place my pizza down and wipe my mouth with a napkin.

I appreciate Dylan and Sawyer coming here to try to knock some sense into me, but it’s not necessary.

“What the fuck makes you two think I would *ever* give up on Bianca?”

No matter how upset she is with me, or how stubborn she can be—I’m always going to fight for us.



Because I made her a promise that I'd never leave her.  
And I'm fucking keeping it.

# Chapter 71

## Bianca

The last thing I wanted to do tonight was pour myself into a skintight red dress and show up at some club.

However, I knew being here for Dylan's new client's show would mean the world to her.

Therefore, here I fucking am.

I don't miss the way the bouncer peruses my body from head to toe as I hand him my ID.

I've been cooped up in my dorm room for weeks and haven't gone out much—with the exception of class—so I made sure to take my time with my hair and makeup.

Seeing as the grimy dude's eyes are about ready to pop out of his skull, I'm starting to regret that decision.

"You're not twenty-one yet, so no wristband," he tells me.

It's on the tip of my tongue to tell him I don't plan on drinking, but then he says, "But if you want to meet me in the back and show me what that mouth can—"

"Wow, that's so sad."

He blinks. "What is?"

Patting him on the shoulder, I slip past him. "You thinking I don't have any standards." I crinkle my nose. "But it's okay, champ. By the looks of things, you're not packing what it takes to satisfy me anyway."

He tries to blow it off, but I can tell I ruffled his feathers. "Bitch."

I quickly snatch my ID from his hand and snap my clutch closed. "I guess we have something in common then."

Tossing my blown-out hair over my shoulder, I saunter past the velvet ropes.

Given the concert hasn't started yet, the venue isn't too crowded.

Looking around, I scan the room for my brothers and their girls, but I don't spot them.

Not wanting to stand around by myself like a loser, I decide to grab a seat

at the bar.

“What will it be?” the bartender asks after I sit down.

“Just a soda.”

I’m pulling some money out of my purse when I hear the girl next to me hiss, “Seriously, dude? How many times do I have to tell you to leave me alone?”

I take in her blonde hair with bright pink tips and the various tattoos and piercings she has.

She looks like a tough chick who can hold her own just fine.

“Come on, sexy,” the guy whines. “I just want to buy you a drink.”

Visibly aggravated, the girl slams her hand on the bar. “I’m good. Thanks.”

When the guy protests, she bites out, “You’re wasting your time, dude. I don’t play for your team.”

That doesn’t deter the guy at all. “No way in hell is a smoking girl like you gay.”

I bite back the urge to ask him what being beautiful has to do with someone’s sexual preference, but the girl scowls and says, “I’m serious, douchebag. You’re barking up the wrong tree.”

Deciding to help her out, I place my arm around her shoulders, “Hey, baby. Sorry I was late.”

She blinks up at me in confusion before she catches on. “It’s okay.” Leaning into my touch, she glowers at the guy. “I was just telling this asshole here that I was waiting for my gorgeous girlfriend.”

I narrow my eyes at the asshole in question. “You can fuck off now.”

He mutters something under his breath before he takes a sip of his beer and the bartender returns with my drink.

I go to pay for it, but the girl waves a hand. “Nope, it’s on me.”

When I protest, she shakes her head and says, “You did me a favor and came to my rescue. Paying for your drink is the least I can do.”

“Thanks.”

“I’m Kit.” She leans in. “And the name of my new girlfriend is?”

I can’t help but laugh. There’s a genuine aura about her that I dig. “Bianca—”

“If you two hotties are gonna hook up, can I at least watch?” the asshole from before cuts in.

I’m about to tell him off, but out of nowhere, some tall, scary guy rushes

over to us.

Before I can blink, he grabs the dipshit's collar. "If you don't stop hitting on my wife, the only action you're going to get tonight is that beer bottle shoved up your ass."

The guy's eyes widen and he looks like he's about to shit his pants. "Sorry, man. I didn't know she was taken."

Kit pinches the bridge of her nose and I notice the glint from her wedding ring. "Dammit, Preston. What are you doing here?"

His entire focus shifts to her. "We need to talk."

Despite my curiosity, I slink off the barstool because that situation sounds complicated as fuck and I want a drama-free night.

I'm about to go to the bathroom to apply some more lipstick, but my phone buzzes with an incoming text.

**Jace:** Where you at?

**Bianca:** At the bar. Where are you?

**Jace:** Look to the left.

When I do, I spot Jace, Cole, and Sawyer in the middle of the nearly empty dance floor.

Sawyer's pretending to reel Cole in like a fish and Cole's flailing his arms, pretending to be caught.

*Good Lord.* It would be embarrassing if they weren't so damn cute together.

I smack a kiss on Jace's cheek. "Hey. Where's Dylan?"

He takes a sip of his drink. "She's still backstage with Landon."

Sawyer practically has heart-eye emojis flashing in her brown orbs at the mention of Landon's name. "I can't believe we're hearing Landon Parker sing his new song tonight."

I have no clue who Landon Parker is, but he's obviously a big deal if Sawyer's this excited about it.

Then again, her favorite musician is *Nick Jonas*...so there's that.

Cole looks like he's bursting at the seams and ready to pop any moment.

"What's wrong with you?"

"I tried to wait for Dylan to come back, but I can't hold it in any longer." He looks at Sawyer. "I have to tell them."

Sawyer beams. "Do it."

Excitement lights up his features. “Okay, so...I have some really big news.”

Jace and I exchange a glance.

“Great,” Jace says. “Spit it out.”

Cole takes a breath. “The Patriot’s organization reached out and *strongly suggested* that I declare for the draft early. Obviously with Tom Brady leaving for Florida and all, they need a new quarterback.” He peers at Sawyer who’s blinking back tears. “And evidently...they want me.”

Holy shit. This is *huge*.

Jace and I both erupt in cheers and rush to give him a hug. I can’t believe my freaking brother is going to be an NFL football player.

“Damn, that’s huge,” Jace exclaims. “But what about finishing school?”

Cole shrugs. “What’s the point? Yeah, an education is important, but I’ve wanted to be in the NFL my entire life. Who knows if I’ll ever get another shot at it. Plus, I can always finish school on the off-season.”

He’s right. He needs to jump now before the opportunity slips from his fingers.

Jace hugs him again. “I’m really proud of you, brother. I knew you could do it.”

My heart swells. “Me too.”

He smiles at Sawyer. “Sawyer’s already agreed to move to New England with me after her senior year is over.”

Sawyer pulls him in for a quick kiss. “And I’ll visit whenever I can in the meantime.”

As sad as I am that Cole will be moving away—along with my girl Sawyer—I’m so happy his dreams are coming true.

Cole grins. “It’s crazy. Never in a million years did I think *I’d* be taking over for the best football player in the whole entire world. I mean Tom Brady is the GOAT and my favorite football player for a reason. He’s hands down the *most* skillful quarterback to ever step onto the field.”

*Oh, boy.* Here we go.

As proud as I am of my brother, I don’t want to hear him drone on and on about Tom Brady the entire night.

“Seriously,” Cole continues as more people pile inside the venue. “The dude has an arm that’s pure fire—” His jaw drops as he focuses on something behind me. “Holy shit.”

Grabbing Sawyer’s hand, Cole runs over to some tall blond guy wearing a

Saint's jersey. His arm is draped around a curvy redhead.

"Holy fucking shit," Cole yells, and I swear his voice cracks. "You're Asher Holden."

Smiling, the guy whispers something into the redhead's ear before he removes his arm and shakes my brother's hand. "Hey, how are you? I take it you're a Saint's fan?"

Cole looks like he's going to pass out. "More like a fan of you. Dude, you're my *favorite* football player in the world." He gestures to Sawyer. "I was just telling my fiancé how you're the GOAT and the *most* skillful football player to ever step on the field."

Jace and I exchange a humorous glance.

"Yup," Sawyer says dryly. "He talks about you all the time."

Not stopping for a breath, Cole continues hammering on. "I'm sorry about what went down at Duke's Heart. They did you dirty, man."

Shrugging, Asher puts his arm around the redhead again. "Yeah, but it all worked out for the best in the end." He gestures to the stage. "Have a good night. I'm gonna try to grab a good spot for the show."

Not taking the hint, Cole says, "Can I buy you a drink? It would be awesome if I could ask you a few questions and get your advice about a few things."

For a moment I think Asher's going to decline—because let's face it, Cole is acting like a crazy fanboy right now—but to my surprise he says, "My boyfriend will be on stage any minute and I really want to watch him perform, but come find me after the show, okay?"

Cole shakes his hand so hard I'm surprised it doesn't fall off. "Sweet. Talk to you after the show."

Cole turns back to us when Asher walks off. "I can't believe my favorite football player is here tonight."

Sawyer rolls her eyes and smiles. "Funny, I could have sworn Tom Brady had brown hair."

Jace smirks. "Not to mention...a lot older."

Cole's about to respond, but the lights in the venue dim and the stage illuminates.

A minute later, some guy with glasses and a mohawk strides out and takes a seat at the piano.

He clears his throat before speaking into the microphone. "I'd like to thank everyone for coming out tonight. I also want to give a very special

thank you to my manager Dylan Taylor for setting up this awesome gig.”

Sawyer, Cole, and I start cheering as Landon points to Dylan who’s standing in the front row next to Asher and the redhead.

Jace cups his hand over his mouth. “Yeah, baby!”

Landon waits for the applause to die down before addressing the crowd again. “I’m gonna perform some of my old songs tonight, but first—if it’s okay with you all—I’d *really* like to start off with a new one.”

The entire venue erupts in cheers.

Landon smirks. “I wrote this one with my new friend, Oakley. The dude is one of the most interesting people I’ve ever met...and that’s saying something.”

Everyone laughs...except me.

Because my heart is too busy trying to pound its way out of my chest.

Landon’s fingers hover over the piano keys. “Anyway, this one is for anyone who’s ever loved someone so much it hurt.”

A soft, melodic sound fills the air, siphoning everyone’s attention.

My skin breaks out in goose bumps and I stand there utterly transfixed as Landon begins to sing.

*Our love wasn't for show because I died for you in secret.  
But I'd still do anything for you...if only you'd mean it.  
Because you showed me things I can't see with anyone else.  
Now, look at this mess you made me.*

*But you know damn well.  
That for you I would break myself.  
Just to make you whole again.*

*And if wishes came true, it would be me and you forever.  
Because some things you just can't live without.*

*So I will never stop trying.  
I'll never stop fighting for you and me.  
I'll never stop chasing you down.  
Even when you want me to walk away and leave.*

I can't move—hell, I can't even breathe.

The melody is beautiful...but it's the lyrics that have my chest caving in.

*He wrote those words for me.*

Blood rushes in my ears and everything around me ceases to exist when I notice Oakley making his way through the crowd...heading straight for me.

There's vulnerability swirling in his eyes—no doubt because he just exposed his entire soul to the world—but there's also an unmistakable confidence seeping from him as his strides eat up the space between us.

A moment later, he's standing in front of me, looking at me like I'm the most important person in the room.

He's the first to speak. "If you tell me to let you go so you can move on and be happy with someone else...I will." His expression turns hollow, as if the thought of me being with anyone else would destroy him. "It will hurt like hell, but I can do that for you...if it's what you really want."

He moves closer, so close my heart stops beating altogether.

So close, the only thing I can breathe, see, and feel is him.

"But if any part of you still wants *me*—despite how much I've hurt you and how much I've fucked things up—then I'll never stop fighting for you. Because I'm in love with you—"

He doesn't get a chance to finish that sentence because I crash my mouth against his.

There are times in your life when you realize you're stuck at a fork in the road and the decision you make will change your life forever.

I think my mom was stuck at the very same fork when she met my dad. And even though she loved her children...she chose wrong.

Because she didn't follow her heart and choose love—which is why she spent the rest of her life searching for it.

She chose security instead.

She chose the easy road filled with less obstacles along the way.

I don't want to make the same mistakes she did.

I want to take chances, chase my dreams, and live life to the fullest.

And I want to do all those things with the man I love beside me.

Oakley isn't perfect...but he's perfect for me.

And the thought of pushing him out of my life for good isn't a decision my heart can live with.

I want the hard and unconventional road—the one that won't always be



easy...but will always be worth it.

Because it leads to him.

A low, growly sound escapes Oakley as his hands find the curve of my waist and he tugs me against him. "I love you, Bianca."

Rising on my tiptoes, I kiss him again. "I love you, too."

*So much it hurts sometimes.*

His fingers trail down my neck, sending shivers along my skin. "Good. Because you're it for me, baby girl." His hands roam lower, and he squeezes my ass like he owns it. "There will never be anyone else. Just you."

As much as I love hearing his sweet declarations, there's something else I want even more right now.

Pressing myself against the very prominent bulge tenting his jeans, I flick his earlobe with my tongue. "Prove it."

The slow, sexy smile he gives me sends a rush of heat to my core. "I mean, I had a whole speech planned but—"

He grabs my wrist and pulls me through the crowd.

We stop at the first room we come across. The bathroom.

I barely hear the lock on the door click over the frantic beating of my heart.

The second his hands are on my body and he drops to his knees, I go up in flames.

"I need you inside me right now."

He flicks the elastic of my panties, causing them to snap against my skin. "I need to taste you first."

The hunger in his voice makes it clear there's no room for argument.

His gaze is so smoldering it burns as he hikes my dress up and tugs my panties down my legs.

I quickly step out of them and kick them away.

Oakley makes a low noise in his throat, sliding me closer to his mouth.

His breath gusts over my sensitive skin, teasing me.

"Oakley, *please.*"

He spreads me open with two of his fingers. "You want my mouth on this pretty pussy?"

I whimper, the anticipation is so good it almost aches. "Yes."

He tilts his head to stare up at me. "Say it."

"I want your mouth on my pussy."

Ever so slowly, his tongue comes out for a taste.

My knees threaten to cave as he lightly grazes my clit, driving me out of my mind.

He moves idly, purposely drawing out every lick and suck like he's trying his best to savor me.

An impatient sound rumbles in his chest as if this is killing him just as much as it's killing me.

"Fuck this," he grunts.

Before I can blink, he bends me over the sink and attacks my pussy like it's the oxygen he needs to breathe.

Heat sparks within me, and I arch against him.

I'm seconds away from coming when his teeth sink into my ass and he spreads my cheeks. "Not yet."

"Oakley—"

Whatever words I was going to say die in my throat when he tongues my puckered hole.

"When I said I wanted to taste you." My thighs clench when he circles the hole with the tip of his tongue. "I meant *everywhere*."

God, he's so dirty.

Pleasure pulsates my veins when he pushes one finger inside my pussy. My inner muscles tighten around it and I moan, needing more.

He curls his fingers until they hit a spot that sends me spiraling.

"I need your cock," I tell him, reaching behind me to stroke him through his jeans. "So fucking bad."

I hear the sound of him undoing his zipper, and then his erection is sliding between my ass cheeks.

But he doesn't go any further. Instead, he circles my opening with his piercing.

"Oh, Jesus." My head falls against the sink. "Oakley, I'm dying."

He fists my hair as the wide head of his cock slides past my swollen lips. "Then you better come fast." He pushes in another inch, stretching me. "Because I want you so fucking bad, I won't last long."

I gasp when he lets out a husky groan and thrusts his hips forward, filling me to the hilt.

We both go still, trying to catch our breaths.

I feel so full I don't know where he ends and I begin.

His rough voice works over my skin like butter when he pulls back. "Fuck."

Arousal rushes through me when he slowly withdraws and I feel every hard inch of him.

His heated gaze holds mine when I glance up into the mirror. “My dick is coated in your juices.”

Using the wall for leverage, he works to fit his thick cock inside me again. “Goddamn, you’re so fucking tight.” He mutters a curse. “So tight and wet.”

The lewd sounds of him driving into my slickness turns me on so much I can’t take it.

“I should make you lick it up,” Oakley grinds out. “Make you take my big cock into that pretty little mouth so you can taste yourself.”

A breath shudders out of me. *Jesus.*

Grabbing my hips, he spins me around. “Get on your knees.”

It’s a command I wouldn’t dream of ignoring.

I’m on my knees so fast my head spins.

The corner of his mouth curls in a smug grin as he fists his cock and holds it out to me. It’s glistening, covered in my wetness.

“You want this?”

Smiling coyly, I nod.

“Prove it,” he taunts, repeating my words from earlier.

I wrap my fingers around his base and give him a slow jerk, teasing him the way he teased me before.

His palms slap the wall as he braces himself. “Put your mouth on it, baby girl.”

Dipping my head, I glide the flat of my tongue along the throbbing vein running up his length.

The muscles in his throat work as his teeth catch his lower lip. “Fucking hell that feels good.” His hand tunnels in my hair and he mutters another curse. “*Too* fucking good. That was a bad idea.”

He hauls me back up and sets me down on the sink. “Spread your legs and show me that pretty pussy.”

When I do, he buries himself inside me again, fucking me so good my brain scrambles.

I’m pinned against the sink, my thighs spread wide for him to take whatever he wants from me.

It strikes me that I’ll never get enough of him.

*He’s an addiction I’ll never be able to kick.*

Mid-thrust, our mouths meet in a messy exploration of lips and tongues. It's been so long since we've done this. *Too long.*

I dig my nails into his back as he fucks me hard and deep, working me up and down his cock.

Grunting, he sucks my earlobe between his teeth and grinds out, "Scratch my back so hard you leave scars."

His teeth clamp down on my neck as I claw my nails into his skin.

I cling to him as his pace turns greedy and he goes deeper, hitting a spot that makes my insides light up like fireworks.

"Oh, God."

He's fucking me so good I can't even think straight. The sink rattles with the force of his movements and for a moment I think it's going to rip off the wall.

His mouth moves to my jaw and those big hands slide to my ass, gripping me there. Then he's kissing me again, the pressure from his skillful thrusts hitting me right where I need it as he reaches between us and rubs my clit.

As if he can feel the orgasm rising within me, he presses his lips to the crook of my neck. "I love you."

It's the last thing I hear before my climax slams into me with a force that shocks us both. It's like nothing I've ever felt before. It's so strong it almost hurts.

Oakley's right behind me. Fingers digging into my hips, he makes a strangled groan deep in his throat, his hand coming up to grip the back of my neck as he comes.

I sag against him, my breath leaving me in quick, sharp pants. "I love you, too."

And that's when we hear it.

The awful, ghastly sound of someone screeching into a microphone.

"What the hell is that?"

Oakley makes a face. "It sounds like an animal dying."

And that's when I realize.

I can see the moment it dawns on Oakley too, because he chokes out a laugh.

It's not an animal dying.

It's my brother Jace trying to sing.

Oakley tucks his dick back into his jeans while I fix my dress.

Once we're both dressed, he grabs my hand and we walk back into the

venue.

Just in time for Jace to belt out the last verse of Dylan's favorite song.

Cole covers his ears and shouts, "Dear God, make it *stop*."

I'm not sure why Jace is making a fool of himself right now, but one thing is certain.

Dylan is loving every second of it.

Either the girl is tone deaf, or she's seriously head over heels in love because she's looking at Jace like he hung the moon.

Oakley stands behind me, wrapping his arms around my waist as we all suffer through the rest of Jace's torture.

After the song is over, he looks at Dylan. "Dylan, you're my best friend."

My mouth drops open when he gets down on one knee and takes a jewelry box out of his pocket. "But I was hoping you'd make me the happiest man in the world and be my wife, too."

Sawyer and I start squealing like a couple of crazy banshees.

I had no idea Jace was proposing tonight, but I'm so happy for them.

I'm about to walk over to congratulate them, but I look down at Oakley's hands and freeze.

With his fingers interlaced against my stomach, the letters tattooed on them don't spell '*back in a*' after all.

I tilt my head to look at him. "That's my name."

"I know." A slow smile unfurls. "Like I told you...I got the thing I love most in this world."

Warmth floods my chest as I spin around. He's always surprising me when I least expect it.

I blink in confusion when I notice the letter *K* on his left pinky.

"I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but my name doesn't have a *K* in it."

"Your middle name *Kennedy* does," he points out with an impish grin. "I just ran out of fingers."

I have to bite the inside of my cheek to stop from laughing. "God, I love you."

He cups my face with one hand, dragging his thumb across my lips. "Thank you."

"For loving you?" I question as he presses his lips to my forehead.

When he speaks, his voice is gravel. "For saving me."

# Epilogue

## Five months later...

I close my eyes and exhale, listening to the waves crash against the shoreline.

It's such a beautiful day, but all I can think about is that today marks the two-year anniversary of the accident.

It's crazy how different my life is now compared to then.

Wrapping his arms around me from behind, Oakley's lips find the shell of my ear. "I love you."

My heart thunders against my chest and I smile. "I love you, too."

*Yet, some things are still the same.*

And while I could sit here and dwell on the past and all the bad things that have happened, I'd rather just enjoy where we are now.

"What time do you have to be at work?"

A couple of months after Oakley started writing songs with Landon, a few other artists hired him.

It's awesome that he's able to make a living doing something that he's not only incredible at, but enjoys.

Although, he still insists on working as a custodian part-time at the college. He said it keeps him humble.

His nose skims the column of my neck and he breathes me in. "I took the day off."

Oakley's been acting a little strange lately—well, strange for him—and I'm not sure why.

But if I had to guess...I'd say he has something big up his sleeve.

I try my best to feign innocence. "Why?"

The corner of his lip quirks. "So we could celebrate."

My heart beats harder now, and an excited flutter goes through me.

*This is it.* It's happening.

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't waiting for Oakley to propose.

Two months ago, we moved into a new apartment together—and while some people might hem and haw that I'm only twenty and therefore too

young to get married and settle down—I know in my marrow that I want to spend the rest of my life with Oakley and see no reason to wait.

I'm glad he wants that, too.

"I got you something."

*Yeah, he did.*

Butterflies swarm my belly when he reaches inside his pocket...

And pulls out an envelope.

Puzzled, I give it a shake, hoping a ring falls out of it.

No such luck.

Then I realize. *It must be a poem.*

I quickly slide my thumb through the seal and unfold it.

I blink when I see two airline tickets to India.

Tenderness swells in my chest. "You're taking me to India?"

His deep voice is a gentle caress against my ear. "You said you've always wanted to go there."

My heart pounds against my ribs. It's not a proposal, but what he did is so thoughtful I don't have the heart to be mad at him. "This is amazing."

I try my hardest to ignore the flicker of disappointment churning in my gut.

It's not that I'm not happy with his gift, I totally am.

I was just expecting a ring and a promise of forever to be attached to it.

Oakley must sense something's wrong, because he says, "You're upset."

Given we've always kept it real with each other, I tell him the truth. "Not upset...just a little, you know...unfulfilled."

He raises a brow. "Unfulfilled?"

Frustrated, I stand up. "I guess I was expecting something a little more...*eternal.*"

His jaw sets and I can't tell if he's upset with me for acting like a brat or trying not to laugh at my expense. "Eternal?"

My exasperation reaches a peak and I huff out, "Dammit, Oakley. I thought you were going to propose."

Grinning, he shifts on the sand. "Then it's a good thing I have this, huh?"

My insides swoop when I see the ring in his hand.

"Oh, my God."

He slides the white gold Claddagh ring with a giant black gemstone onto my finger. "Will you—"

"Yes," I scream before he even gets the words out.

I clutch my chest as I look at my ring. It's absolutely stunning.

"I can't believe we're engaged." Excitement races over my skin. "This was so unexpected."

Laughing, Oakley pulls me in for a kiss. "The stone is called *the star of India*." He tips my chin. "But I can get you a diamond if you want something more traditional."

I shake my head. "Don't you dare."

I love my ring. It's perfect.

He nuzzles my lower lip with his top one. "I love you—"

"Hold that thought," I say, reaching for my phone.

"What are you doing?"

I type Wayne's name into the keyboard. "Texting your dad."

I warned the man that I was going to be his daughter-in-law one day.



# Extended Epilogue

“I can’t do it,” I scream as another contraction plows through me. “I’m exhausted.”

I thought I’d be in labor for eight hours at most...not twenty-freaking-four.

Oakley goes to wipe the sweat dotting my forehead, but I swat his hand away.

I’m not trying to be a bitch, but squeezing something the size of a watermelon out of something the size of a lemon is a lot harder than I thought it would be.

At this point I just want the doctor to light a fire in there and smoke the baby out.

Oakley kisses my temple. “What can I do?”

I glare at him. “Gee, I don’t know. How about get a time machine and stick your goddamn dick back in your pants?”

The doctor’s eyebrows shoot up and he chuckles before leaning over and whispering something into the nurse’s ear.

A smug grin creeps along Oakley’s lips. “If memory serves, you were the one begging me to take it *out* of my pants that night, baby girl.”

He’s right.

I’d come home from school tired and grumpy...but horny as hell.

Oakley lifted me onto the kitchen counter and started going down on me with that serpent tongue of his.

One thing led to another, and well...

Here we fucking are.

Given I still have another year of college left, getting knocked-up wasn’t part of the plan.

However, the second I found out I was pregnant...everything felt right.

Until now.

Because right now it hurts so much, it’s taking everything in me not to punch my doctor in his stupid fucking face because the epidural he said would help hasn’t one bit.

“Breathe,” Oakley urges as another contraction rips through me.

“I’m *breathing*,” I grit through my teeth.

“Just a little longer,” the doctor says. “We’re almost there.”

“We’ve been *almost there* for the past twenty-four hours and sixteen minutes, you damn liar.”

Just when I’m positive I can’t take another second of this, the door to my hospital room opens.

Cole holds up a giant bag of what looks like fast-food in front of his face as he strides over. “How’s everything going in here, fam?” He plops down in the empty chair next to Oakley and smiles. “I brought us some munchies while we wait for my nephew to greet us.”

Irritation crawls up my spine as I turn to Oakley. “I will chop your friend’s body up into little itty-bitty pieces and bury them in various parts of the world—places where they’ll never *ever* find him—if you don’t get him and his fucking food the hell out of here now.”

Nodding, Oakley slaps Cole’s back. “Cole, you gotta go, man. You’re making my wife homicidal.”

Cole snorts. “As opposed to any other ti—”

I fling my cup of ice chips at him. “Get out—”

I curse when another agonizing contraction comes.

Eyes wide, Cole quickly scurries out of the room.

“Okay, Bianca,” the doctor says. “I’m really gonna need you to push now.”

I grip the side of the bed. “I’ve *been* pushing.”

If I push any harder, I’ll spontaneously combust.

“I know, but you’re gonna have to push more.”

Defeat flows through me and I sag against the pillow.

“Oakley, I’m sorry, but I can’t do this. He’s just gonna have to stay inside me forever.”

Gripping my hand, he stands up. “Yes, you can.” He kisses my knuckles. “I know it hurts. But when it’s all over, you won’t remember the pain.”

I glare at him.

“Okay, fine,” he amends. “You’ll remember the pain, but it will all be worth it.” He drops his forehead to mine. “You’re the strongest person I know, baby girl. You got this.”



\* \* \*

Oakley was right.

Twenty-five hours of grueling labor was so worth it.

Every ounce of pain and sadness in my life was worth it for this incredible moment right here.

Because the second I laid eyes on my son for the first time...my heart exploded.

I stare down at his perfect little sleepy face. He's so gorgeous it takes my breath away.

I glance at Oakley who can't stop smiling. "He's so perfect."

"I know." The tips of his fingers press into the curve of my jaw. There's so much love in his eyes, my chest somehow feels both light and heavy at the same time. "Thank you."

Our lips meet in a feather-light kiss...just as the door opens.

Cole, Sawyer, Jace, Dylan, and Wayne barrel inside the room and circle around my bed.

"Oh, my God," Dylan sighs. "He's the cutest baby in the world."

"I can't tell which one of you he takes after more," Jace says.

"About damn time he showed up," this from Cole.

Wayne beams. "Can I hold my grandson?"

Sawyer's eyes become glassy and she reaches for a tissue. "I can't believe one of us has one of them."

After handing him over to Wayne, I rub her growing belly. "I can't wait to meet my niece and nephew."

Jace sucks in a breath. "I can't believe I'm an uncle." Pulling out his phone, he snaps a picture of his nephew. "By the way, Dad wanted me to tell you he'll be here soon. He's on a plane headed back from Australia so it's taking him longer than expected."

Smiling, Wayne looks down at his grandson and coos, "I'm your grandpa and I'm going to spoil the shit out of you, so you better get used to it." Pride illuminates his face as he hands him to Oakley. "I can't wait for your sister to meet him, Oak. He's beautiful."

"Of course he is," Cole declares. "He's half Covington."

"And half Zelenka," I point out because as far as I'm concerned, my husband is the hottest thing on the planet.

Oakley grins as he stares down at his son who's squeezing his finger while he sleeps. "He's gonna have all the ladies chasing after him. Isn't that right, little man."

“Over my dead body,” I mutter under my breath.

I make grabby hands for Oakley to give me our son back after another minute goes by. If he’s gone too long, I get separation anxiety.

The nurse assured me it was normal and it will pass soon, but I’m not so sure.

I just want to hold him in my arms and keep him safe forever.

“So,” Cole says. “Did you decide on a name yet?”

Before I can answer, everyone starts speaking at once.

“You should name him Jace after your favorite brother.”

Cole shoots Jace a dirty look. “You should name him Cole after your *good-looking* brother.”

Dylan gives me a rueful grin. “Dylan is a great boy’s name, too. Just saying.”

Sawyer nudges her in the ribs. “So is *Sawyer*.”

Oakley and I exchange a humorous glance.

“Okay,” Oakley declares, rubbing his hands together. “The bidding starts at fifty dollars.”

After pulling out his wallet, Jace slaps some money on the tray table. “I got a hundred for Jace, right here.”

Cole shoves some bills into Oakley’s hands. “I got *two hundred* for Cole.”

Wayne reaches inside his pocket. “Do you take credit?”

“Sorry, Pops. Cash only.” Fanning the money in his hand, Oakley looks around the room. “Any more takers?”

Dylan pulls some money out of her bra. “Yup. Four hundred for Dylan.”

“Well, I didn’t bring my checkbook with me.” Smiling smugly, Sawyer pats her stomach. “But we are having a girl *and* a boy. Perhaps we can work out an exchange.”

Jace glowers. “That’s not fair.”

“It’s called bartering, bro.” Reaching over, Cole high-fives his wife. “And that right there is just one reason I love you so much, Bible Thumper. You’re so fucking smart.”

Oakley’s shoveling the money into his wallet when a nurse waltzes in. “Hi, Bianca. I’m the lactation nurse. Do you think you’re ready to try breastfeeding yet?”

Jace makes a face. “And that’s my cue to leave.”

Cole shakes his head. “Not me. I’m not leaving until I know my nephew’s

name is Cole.”

I’m shifting to get into a more comfortable position when I notice the blue, green, orange, and purple butterflies scattered across the nurse’s scrubs.

My chest swells and I look over at Oakley who’s smiling.

There’s only one name that feels right.

“Liam,” we whisper at the same time.

**The End**

# Royal Hearts Academy

## Series Order:

Cruel Prince (Jace's Book)

Ruthless Knight (Cole's Book)

Wicked Princess (Bianca's Book)

[Broken Kingdom](#)



Join my newsletter and sign up for the latest news, updates on my books, and new releases:

<http://signup.ashleyjadeauthor.com/>

# About the Author

Want to be notified about my upcoming releases? <https://goo.gl/n5Azwy>

Ashley Jade craves tackling different genres and tropes within romance. Her first loves are New Adult Romance and Romantic Suspense, but she also writes everything in between including: contemporary romance, erotica, and dark romance.

Her characters are flawed and complex, and chances are you will hate them before you fall head over heels in love with them.

She's a die-hard lover of oxford commas, em dashes, music, coffee, and anything thought provoking...except for math.

Books make her heart beat faster and writing makes her soul come alive. She's always read books growing up and scribbled stories in her journal, and after having a strange dream one night; she decided to just go for it and publish her first series.

It was the best decision she ever made.

If she's not paying off student loan debt, working, or writing a novel—you can usually find her listening to music, hanging out with her readers online, and pondering the meaning of life.

Check out her social media pages for future novels.

She recently became hip and joined Twitter, so you can find her there, too.

She loves connecting with her readers—they make her world go round'.

~Happy Reading~



Feel free to email her with any questions /  
comments: [ashleyjadeauthor@gmail.com](mailto:ashleyjadeauthor@gmail.com)

**For more news about what I'm working on next: Follow me on my**

**Facebook**            **page:**            <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Ashley-Jade/788137781302982>

**Other Books Written By Ashley Jade**

[The Devil's Playground Duet \(Books 1 & 2\)](#)

[Complicated Parts - Series \(Books 1 & 2 Out Now\)](#)

[Complicated Hearts - Duet \(Books 1 & 2\)](#)

[Blame It on the Shame - Trilogy \(Parts 1-3\)](#)

[Blame It on the Pain - Standalone](#)



Thanks for Reading!  
Please follow me online for more.  
<3 Ashley Jade





