



*Rivera Brothers*  
BOOK TWO

*Heartbreak*  
**HIDEAWAY**

**A. K. STEEL**

# Heartbreak Hideaway

A Forced Proximity/Bodyguard Romance

A. K. Steel

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# About The Book

***HAZEL MARTINEZ* is a woman with one thing on her mind: revenge. Unfortunately for her, she has me as her personal bodyguard, and I'm not letting her out of my sight.**

She's fierce and untamed, a beauty wilder than the fire raging inside her. She's also a good ten years younger than me and still technically married to our enemy.

My world is a mix of bloody brawls and faceless threats, a world that hardened me and turned me into a heartless monster way too young. But her? She's something else, and damn it, I'm someone different around her.

I can't let my guard down; I shouldn't be having inappropriate thoughts about her. Her brother trusts me to protect her. But as soon as our paths crossed, Hazel had this way of fluttering her dark lashes and staring up at me with those damn baby blues that pulled me into her vortex, like the tempting trouble she is.

**I shouldn't trust her. She wants her freedom, and I know she would do anything to get it.**

But locked away from the rest of the world, our lives entwine, and I can't resist her. With every stolen moment, every forbidden touch, the lines blur. She becomes my new obsession; I can't get enough of her. Suddenly, it's not just about survival anymore. She becomes my shot at redemption, a way out of this dark mess I've always known, a glimpse of the kind of life I never thought I deserved—some happiness in the chaos.

I don't do love and all the mushy stuff. Never have, never will. They don't call me the Heartbreaker for nothing. When all this is over, I will walk away from her. I have to, this is just a job, isn't it?

**This time, though, I think it's Hazel who holds all the power to break me.**

# Chapter 1

## HAZEL

MY MOTHER ALWAYS SAID I liked bad boys. You know, the type of guys who are always up to some sort of trouble. But that is simply not true; it's them who like me. They always have.

I inhale deeply, trying to fill my lungs with air as best I can through the searing pain in my chest. My nostrils burn with the sharp odor of disinfectant. The distant sound of muffled voices fills my ears, and I try madly to place them, but it's no use. Words blend into sounds of machines slowly beeping in a rhythmic beat. I don't understand what I'm hearing because the fogginess of my brain takes over again. I could be dreaming, I can't tell. But the pain radiating through my body sure feels real.

Voices grow louder as they come closer, and panic ripples through my body, forcing me to cry out. I try to pry open my eyes so I can make them out. My lids are so heavy they feel like they're made of lead.

"She's waking up," I hear one of them say. A deep male voice that holds an edge of darkness and sends a fresh wave of panic over my limp body. I've heard a voice like that before. One of Liam's men possibly.

I whimper out a cry, digging my fingers into the surface below. It's cold and flat, soft. Fabric tangles in my fingers as I try to move away from the voices. The last thing I remember before blacking out is Kylo throwing Ruby-Rose through that glass sliding door that led to the outdoor patio. The thing shattered into a million tiny pieces. I ran to save her, to help her, but that's when Liam turned on me. He held me back, making me watch my best friend cry out in pain while his asshole brother laughed at her expense. He's a sadistic bastard. I tried to wrestle free to slip out of his meaty hands. He should have been weak, easy to get by with the amount of liquor he had consumed, but his rage fueled him, making him stronger than ever. His fist colliding with my face is the last thing I remember.

Pure terror wins over the sleepiness fog, forcing my eyes to blink open. I search the room madly, trying to work out where I am.

I feel a hand taking mine, pulling it away from the knot of material. It strokes me tenderly, and my body tenses, causing a fresh wave of pain to spasm through my muscles. My body hurts so severely. I've felt a lot of pain in my short life but nothing as overwhelming as this.

"Haze, it's me, Ben," comes a soft voice that sounds a hell of a lot like my brother. My little brother who I haven't seen in months. Is he here to save me from this living hell? How did he get past the guards?

I squint through my heavy lids, making out a blurry male figure. But as it comes into focus, I realize it's not my younger brother at all, but Jett Rivera. I suck in another sharp breath, trying to make sense of what I'm seeing. My mouth is dry and tastes of chemicals. I lick my lips; they're just as dry. "Water," I mutter, desperate.

A cup is held up to my mouth, and I take a sip. The figure moves ever so slightly, like he's swaying. He watches me. And I watch him back,

mesmerized. This is a dream. The ruggedly handsome face assesses me, concern etched on his features. Maybe he's come to save me like I always fantasized he would. Maybe I'm already dead. Liam really did it this time, went through on his promise to end my life. Either that or I'm daydreaming, because the man staring back at me is the type of man you dream about. Dirty, depraved fantasies that creep under your skin and stay with you for days, sometimes months. I should know, it's happened before.

Fucking gorgeous to look at, but he has a heart so cold he won't share it with anyone. It's why he's nicknamed the Heartbreaker.

Women are drawn to his enigmatic aura and captivating smile, only to find themselves swept up in the whirlwind of his adventurous spirit. Then they're dumped when he's had his fun. The press talks about him a lot. And why wouldn't they; he and his family sell newspapers. They're like celebrities around here.

And this wouldn't be the first time Jett Rivera has made an appearance in one of my fantasies. His dark eyes gazing right into my soul, asking me to share all my secrets with him and making promises I know he won't keep. That's what happens to a girl trapped in a loveless marriage—she starts to daydream. A lot.

I smile at him weakly, wondering why he's here with me. My heavy eyes flutter shut again, I'm too drowsy to keep them open. There is no guy in my life like the vision I just had. I'm stuck in a delusion, one of those crazy loops you have where you keep thinking you're going to wake up but instead you go right into another dream. This guy could fill my dreams every night on repeat. I smile to myself, letting my imagination take me away with him. I'm sure this is a better reality than whatever fucked-up truth I find myself in now.



*Jett is the epitome of rugged charm, and I smile up at him as he wraps his strong arms around me and draws my face toward his. Time stands still like it would in a movie, and our lips meet in a perfect kiss. I let his stubble scratch my face as I dig my fingers into his ripped back, wanting to be closer to him than I already am. He smells so damn tasty. His bare chest chiseled to perfection glistens in the light of the room.*

*“Hazel, you are pure perfection,” he compliments me in his deep voice, like he really believes the words.*

*I feel my cheeks heat. I have waited a lifetime to be noticed by him, but now, with his gaze lingering on my body, I feel truly seen. His body is insane, like he’s just stepped off the cover of Sports Illustrated’s MMA bad boy edition. Chiseled abs with intricate ink designs running up and over his chest and arms. My fingers skate over them, enjoying the way his skin feels so smooth yet so hard at the same time. His hair is wet, and he smells like sweat, like he’s fresh from a round in the octagon. I want to lick it off him. Lick it off him and tell him to do dirty things to me. But it’s his eyes, piercing hazel eyes, that have me mesmerized. I want to get lost in them forever.*

*“Hazel,” he calls, and I grip on to him. Begging him to stay with me and save me from my living hell.*

*“Hazel, it’s Ben, can you hear me?” The call comes again, but this time it’s my brother’s voice filling my ears, breaking me from my fantasy. He’s here with me; I feel his hand squeezing mine, but I’m too weak to squeeze his back.*

*I force my eyes open, and this time I can make him out. “Ben,” I cry, my voice gravelly and unrecognizable. It’s really him, my little brother. I search my surroundings, trying to place the location. But I don’t recognize any of it. It’s a blur of white walls and linoleum, making my head spin.*

He reaches down to hug me gently. “Hazel, I’m so glad you’re awake. You scared the shit out of me.” I scared the shit out of him!? I have no fucking clue where I am right now or why he’s here with me. The room around me moves, and I try to focus on my brother’s face. The kind, gentle smile I remember always seeing is long gone. His eyes are distant in a way I don’t like, his face is unshaven, and the bags under his eyes make him look older than his eighteen years. What’s happened to him? How long was I out of it?

“I’ll get a nurse,” I hear another voice call toward us, and I glance past Ben to see a very real Jett Rivera, in the flesh.

I suck in a labored breath. Oh my God, my heart races. Why is Jett in the same room as me? Sweat pours down my forehead, making me feel hot and clammy. I try to sit up, panic taking over, but I can’t. My body is hooked up to monitors, and my head spins, making me feel ill.

Before I know it, I puke over the side of the bed I’m lying in. I grip onto the safety rail as violent nausea rolls over me, my body shuddering. Tears fill my eyes instantly. I’m definitely awake now. There is so much pain it surrounds me and overwhelms my senses with a deep throb. “Ben,” I whisper cry, knowing I need help. What the hell is happening to me?

“Yeah, I’m getting the nurse,” Jett’s gruff voice comes from somewhere in the room, but I don’t move to look his way again.

My vision goes blurry and my body limp as Ben helps to lower me back to the bed, holding my trembling body. “What’s going on?” I cry. I have never felt so unwell before. My body aches all over. I close my eyes, trying to ease the constant pain... and see Liam again. This time he is right in front of me, his grin sinister and malicious. He’s pure fucking evil. That look in his eyes will haunt me forever.

My heart races, causing the monitor beside me to go nuts, piercing through

my skull that's now thumping like a jackhammer. I suck in a shaky breath, trying to control the nausea. I'm here with Ben, he has a hold of me, so I must be safe now, even if I feel close to death. It's okay, Hazel, you will never have to see him again. He might have beaten you, but you will get the last laugh, because by now he will be dead. I try to convince myself, hoping to God my plan worked and my husband is in fact in a morgue.

"It's okay, Haze, you're going to be alright." My brother tries to comfort me as uncontrollable tears scroll down my face. What the hell did Liam do to me this time? As the tears wrack my body, the pain throbs through me, and I pray to anyone who will listen to take away my agony.

"She's woken up, but she was sick, and now she's really distressed," I hear Ben's worried voice tell someone. But I can't think about him. I feel too weird. Too sick, in too much discomfort. I need someone to stop it all.

"It's alright, I can get someone in to clean up the mess. It might be best if you two wait in the hall until I calm her down," comes a female voice. She sounds kind, and I pray she is here to help me.

"No, I'm not leaving her like this," my brother demands forcefully, not even sounding like him. He's furious and commanding, a new sense of leadership in his tone.

"Dear, can you hear me?" comes a soothing motherly voice from my bedside.

I squint so I can see her. She's in blue scrubs, and I can only assume I'm in the hospital. Finally, something makes sense. "Yes," I answer her, but my voice is barely a whisper. "My head is killing me," I mutter, desperate for help to ease the agony. Surely, she can help me.

"Understandable, you have been through a lot. I'm going to top up your pain relief. The discomfort will ease soon," she assures me as she injects

something into the tube that is hooked up to my arm. I let her, grateful she's trying to help me.

“Thank you,” I whisper, letting my eyes fall shut again. I can't deal with anything other than sleep. This time when I see Jett again, his face calms me, and I drift back off to a better reality.

When I wake up again, my eyes open with less force. My hospital room is empty, and from the view of my window, I can see it's dark outside. It must be late, or early possibly. I push myself up in the bed, groaning as I do, my muscles stiff and aching. Sitting up a bit higher, I can make out my surroundings better. I'm in a lackluster hospital room, white walls, pale green linoleum floor. White cotton blanket over my middle. I'm dressed in a hospital gown. I glance down at my arm with the drip in it, shuddering. I hate needles. I'm glad I wasn't awake when that went in.

Through the ink on my arm, I can make out more dark bruises that go right around my wrist, probably where Liam held me. My body hurts but not as much as when I woke up last time. Now it's more of a dull ache that radiates from my skull down my sides.

I touch my head where it stings the most and realize I'm bandaged all around my head. My once-long hair is shaved off down one side. A tear slips down my cheek. He really fucking did it this time. He said he loved me, all the gifts, all the money he threw at me trying to get me to reciprocate. It was all bullshit. It was all just about controlling me so I would stay and be the good little wife he thought he was getting in the deal with my father. Love had nothing to do with it. And he proved that constantly by hitting me, his way of communicating when he didn't get what he wanted.

“Do you need a nurse?” I hear a male voice ask from just inside the doorway, making me jump in alarm. I thought I was alone. I glance over

toward the door and make out the large shadowy frame of Jett, one of my husband's enemies—and the man I've been dreaming about. Confusion overwhelms me; why is he here?

“No,” I mutter, pulling up the cotton blanket so my body is covered.

He closes the door and comes closer to me, his dark eyes assessing me. I watch him right back. He has a presence about him that is larger than life. He's so much bigger in real life than I thought he would be. “What are you doing in my room?” I ask, finding my words. I'm not sure how worried I should be. He was here with Ben earlier, and I can only hope that means he's not about to finish me off for my unfortunate marital status.

I've seen him fight in the octagon. He's a force to be reckoned with, a beast of a man, all muscle and brute force. Even here, casual in a pair of faded jeans and black T-shirt, I can see the swell of his biceps bulging through his shirt. I wouldn't stand a chance if he wanted to eliminate me.

He grabs a chair from under the window and drags it closer to my bed, sitting down facing me. His body looks almost giantlike in the normal-sized plastic hospital chair. His eyes don't leave mine for a second. “I'm making sure no one gets in your room that shouldn't,” he grumbles, as if irritated by my question.

Liam used to watch Jett's MMA fights whenever they were on. He and the other members of his gang would place enormous wagers. I thought it was a ridiculous waste of money, but I did enjoy watching, fantasizing. There was something about him, a mysteriousness that I wanted to know more about. Every hot-blooded female this side of LA did.

Jett Rivera is the epitome of rugged charm, possessing a striking blend of fierce athleticism and undeniable charisma. And he has the ladies lining up to be the lucky one to steal his attention.

I always wondered if he would have the same magnetic presence in real life. I guess I can stop wondering now. Tonight, there is no sign of his charm. He has a take-no-shit look about him, and from the bruising around his left eye, I can see he has been in a fight recently, but his hazel eyes have an unexpected kindness behind them. He's not here to cause me any harm, that much is obvious.

He can't be comfortable, but he relaxes back in the chair like he is settling in for the long haul. He turns the backward-facing faded black baseball cap around so it's shadowing his features. Maybe he didn't like me staring back at him, but I can't help myself; I never thought I would meet him in person. It's like having a celebrity in my room. One who looks like a mix between a god and the devil. And he has my curiosity piqued.

"Who else would get in here?" I swallow hard, wondering what his answer is supposed to mean. "Where is my brother?"

"He's asleep. The poor kid is worn out from worrying about you for the last two days," he tells me, like somehow my current situation is my fault. That I singlehandedly caused my brother's pain.

I glare at him, not sure I deserve his irritation. "Two days? How long was I asleep?" I wonder out loud. I have flashes of memories but most of them involve Jett himself, so I'm not sure how real they were. Or are. They sure felt real at the time, but now... I blush at the thought. This guy was here with my brother for two days, and I have been hallucinating about him, having sordid dreams about his insane body and the pleasure it provides. Must have been all the medication they were loading me up on messing with my brain. But man, it felt real and so heavenly in my dream.

"You have gone in and out of consciousness since your surgery yesterday," he answers my question. I stare at him, not sure what else to do. I have lost

two days of my life, and he's not really helping to fill in the blanks for me.

"Ruby-Rose, my friend, do you know if..." I don't know how to finish my question. My stomach churns at the thought of what happened to her. She has to be okay. She's my closest friend. My *only* friend, but she was all I ever needed. Loyal to the bone. And what happened to her is my fault. I will never forgive myself if she died because of me.

"Your friend is in the room next door; don't you worry about her. Leo is making sure she has the best treatment possible, just like he did with you."

I let out the breath I didn't know I was holding. Ruby's alive, thank God. "Leo?" I ask, wondering why his brother and the head of the organized crime syndicate in Palm Springs would be helping me and my friend. We are literally nobodies to the Riveras. Well, actually I'm worse than a nobody—I'm their enemy's wife. Why would they want to help us?

"Rivera?" He looks at me, just as perplexed.

Every time he answers one of my questions, it creates ten more in its place. "Why is Leo Rivera helping us?" I ask, hoping he will elaborate this time. I knew he meant Leo Rivera. I haven't been living under a rock, just locked up with my asshole husband.

"Ben works for my security company, and we look after our own." He says it like it's obvious, but there is no way all his staff get this type of treatment on the regular. He must have hundreds of people working for him. There is more he's not telling me.

"Last I heard he was working for the Kings' crew. Why would he have jumped ship to side with you guys?" I say, wondering what exactly is going on. "Who are you?" I ask, my voice shaky, and I'm not even sure why. The Riveras don't scare me. Until now, they have been the men my husband despised. But Jett's presence in my room is unnerving. Mostly because I

don't understand why my body is having this reaction to him, but it's like I already know him. Like there is history between us, even though I know there isn't.

He raises a cocky brow like he's surprised I don't already know. And by now, I certainly do. I bet there isn't a single person in the district who doesn't know who he is, and he knows it, but I want him to tell me. "Jett."

"And why is Jett Rivera in my hospital room?" I ask him, my tone more agitated. He and his short answers are really starting to piss me off. Can he not see I'm desperate for information? I have lost two days here. I'm fragile and tired and on the edge of losing my mind at any second, and he's not helping.

He lifts his chin, and I see his eyes in the light from the window for just a second. A flash of something I don't understand. A protectiveness, I think. It's the look I get from my brother. "You're under my watch until Liam King is dead, like his brother," he says matter-of-factly.

I blink back at him in shock. My heart is suddenly hammering in my chest so hard I can hear it in my ears. What did he just say? Kylo is dead. But Liam isn't? How did I mess it up? I sit up a little higher in my bed, breaking into a cold sweat as panic ripples through me. I wipe the sweat off my palms, running them along the cotton blanket frantically. I need to get out of this place. I'm desperate to know what is going on.

"Are you okay? You're not going to puke again, are you?" Jett asks, pushing his chair back out of the way. Some gentleman he is. I should have known the fantasy I had built up of him in my head was all bullshit. He's a real human male. They're never as good in real life as the fantasy would portray.

"No," I mutter, annoyed that is his one concern at a time like this. I just



found out my husband isn't dead; I'm most certainly not alright. I'm freaking out. "How did Kylo die?" My eyes bore into him, imploring him to give it to me straight.

He shrugs. Just shrugs. I glare back at him. Asshole. If I had any energy right now, I would be directing it at him. But I don't. This conversation has all but sucked out what little life I had left. I feel deflated and on the verge of tears, which is not an option in front of him.

"I want to see Ben," I demand, sick of his bullshit. I need my brother. He won't mess me around.

He picks up his cell phone and makes a call. "She's awake, asking for you," he tells the person on the other end before disconnecting the call. He obviously has an aversion to using words with everyone, so maybe I shouldn't take it personally.

I glance back at him, waiting for him to tell me what's going on.

"He's on his way, Sunshine," he says with a hint of annoyance toward me. Like he has something better he would prefer to be doing right now. *Sunshine*. There is nothing about me that feels sunny right now.

I move my gaze away from him and stare out the window as I wait for Ben. My mind is foggy and so confused. Is what I remember from the other night even what happened? I know what I had planned, but I can't quite remember exactly how the night went down, only snippets that don't seem to piece together.

Not five minutes later, Ben rushes in the door, making more noise than he probably should at this time of night, whatever time that is. "Haze, you're awake." He comes to my side, taking my hand in his and giving it a squeeze. I lace my fingers with his, needing the comfort from the only family member I have left.

“I’ll be out in the hall,” mutters Jett. I don’t even bother to look his way. The reality of him is a far cry from the fantasy man I have dreamed about. He wouldn’t have given me short answers; he would have held my hand and talked me through every little detail before asking me how he could help me get the revenge I want. But I guess that is just the reality of dreams—they’re not real. And the ones I had about him would have been drug-induced, so it makes even more sense that my brain thought he was some sort of hero. When clearly, he’s an asshole like every other man I have ever come across. Except for my sweet brother.

“Do you need more painkillers?” Ben asks, his voice laced with concern.

“No, I’m okay at the moment. I want answers. Jett said you’re working for him?” I ask him, worried what this means for him. I didn’t like him working for the Kings, but moving to their direct enemy is trouble for anyone. For my brother, it’s a death sentence. Liam will see him as a traitor.

“Yeah.” He scratches the back of his neck. He looks tired and like the weight of the world has been placed on his shoulders. What does being a part of Jett’s security team actually entail? I wonder. “It’s for the best. The Riveras are taking care of you. Leo is covering your hospital bills, and Jett is going to watch over you until they catch Liam. You’re safe now, okay? They won’t let anything happen to you. I promise. Nothing like this will ever happen to you again, Haze,” he assures me like this should all make sense. But I don’t even really know exactly how I got here.

“You did this for me?” I ask, panicked. “Liam will...’

“Don’t you worry about any of it, Sis. You’re getting the help you need, and that’s all that matters. The Riveras will look after me.”

“What happened to me, Ben, why did I need an operation?”

His pale blue eyes meet mine, and I can see the hurt he’s carrying. It’s hard

to imagine that just two years ago our biggest concern was what plans we had for the weekend. “You had a brain bleed, and the doctors operated to stop it. They’re confident you will make a full recovery, but you need to rest.” Ben sits in the chair Jett left vacant.

A brain bleed. That fucking asshole. How could he do this to me?! “What happened to Kylo?”

He looks at me, unsure. I give him the eyes, the ones that he knows how serious I am. I want to know what happened, whether he thinks I can deal with it or not. I don’t need to be protected from the brutality of this world. I’ve been living in it. He won’t surprise me, not after the things I have seen. “Leo took care of him.”

Leo. I should have known he would have gotten in on the action. Guess the Riveras are on even more of a power trip now. But I keep that thought to myself since my brother has decided to side with them. “And Liam?”

His head drops, and I know it’s not going to be an answer I want to hear. “No one has seen him since the night he did this to you. Their shipment of drugs got blown up. My guess is he’s lying low until he works out how to replace it. There is a lot going on you don’t know about, Haze, and right now it’s all too much for you. You need to rest and get better, and then I will tell you everything I know.” He squeezes my hand again, and I know he must have been scared for me; I see it in the worry lines in his forehead. He’s too young to have them, but the last few years haven’t been easy, and he’s had to take on a lot of responsibility. “Why don’t you get some sleep, I’ll stay with you while you do.” He tries to smile but his lips don’t even turn up at the sides.

I don’t like been told what to do. I offer a half-smile in return, as best I can, knowing my brother only wants what’s best for me. But right now, I want my

old fit, healthy body back so I can get out of this hospital and make Liam pay for what he did to me. Not just this time but for the last two years. And he will pay. It's now my life's mission to make sure of it.

# Chapter 2

## JETT

**TWO DAYS I HAVE** watched over Sleeping Beauty, as I have named her, since she has spent more time asleep than awake in the last four days. She's so frail, so delicate, and my blood boils again thinking about the monster she's married to and what he put her through. Men who hurt innocent women are the scum of the earth. The only thing that gives me some solace is knowing his days are numbered.

When she finally opened her eyes for the first time after her operation, she stared into mine like she knew me. It was the strangest feeling I have ever had, and for a fleeting second, I felt like I knew her too. I have been mesmerized by her ever since. I want to know every little thing there is to know about this girl and what makes her tick. Who is she really, and how did she end up in such a terrible situation in the first place? Her brother Ben has told me everything he knows, but it's not a lot to go off.

The worst part is, as I watch her lying there, struggling and in so much pain, I know this is my fault. If I had put a different man on her case, or fucking crosschecked her background when Ben started working for us,

I would have put two and two together and worked out who she was married to. I could have put a stop to the violence before Liam had a chance to put her in the ICU. It's why I haven't left her side. From the moment I saw her lying there, so helpless, I knew it was my job to make sure he didn't come back to finish the job he started.

Leo has made a promise to her brother that we will keep Hazel safe from Liam, and I intend to keep it this time. That means, until we find Liam, she is mine to protect. No one else will handle this job.

Ever since the chaos erupted with the Kings, I don't know who I can trust anymore. Over the past few years, I've meticulously curated my security team, ensuring that only the best of the best were hired and trained to work alongside my brothers and me. But cracks are starting to appear, and I need to determine their source before any more shit goes down—or before I trust another of them to do such an important job. If the wrong person got their hands on Hazel, she could be used as a bargaining tool to blackmail Liam. Or sent right back to him. Either way, she would be as good as dead.

I lean into the wall, hoping for some inner strength I don't have today. This isn't me. I have been the toughest kid around since I was fifteen and I learned how to fight. I don't let anything bother me. But I have to admit, I'm rattled seeing how badly he hurt her. And the lengths he and his brother went to trying to take out Leo. They have an extra psycho gene in the King blood; nothing gets in the way of them getting what they want. But we will. Leo, Kobe, and I will fight till they are all gone or absorbed into our organization. Liam won't live out the year, that much is for sure. As God is my witness, I will make him pay for what he did to Hazel. I'm going to destroy him bit by bit until he's begging me to put an

end to his misery. And even then, I won't, not until I'm satisfied he has suffered enough.

But right now, our team needs to regroup so we're strong enough to handle him when he shows his ugly face. I know what I have to do, but I can't seem to leave her side long enough to get it done.

Kobe strolls up the hallway toward me, handing me a to-go cup of hospital coffee. "The coffee cart is closed. This is the best you can get at this hour." He shrugs, sliding into one of the plastic chairs against the wall outside of her room. It creaks under his weight. These flimsy seats weren't designed for guys like us—six-four and packed with muscle.

I taste the liquid tar; it's watery and bitter as fuck, but it's caffeine, and at this point, I would have accepted just about anything if it's going to keep me awake. I collapse into the chair beside him.

"You need to go home and get a decent night's sleep. You've been here for days. I can take over tonight."

"I'll go home when they do." I point toward her door. "Besides, one of us needs to be available to run the clubs. With Leo laid up down the hall, we need you keeping watch over everything." The last week has seen our tightly run organization give into the chaos the Kings created. Kobe's best friend Brandon was in town visiting and has stepped up, helping him pick up the slack while Leo recovers, but he can't do it alone.

"I talked to the nurse earlier. She said they'll be stuck here for at least the next five days. You can't go all week without sleep. I'm saying that as your trainer as much as your brother. You've got one of the biggest fights of your career coming up, and you need to be in peak condition. You know what Zamora's like if you're not. You'll go down like you did last time. This isn't some fucking game. This is the title you have been



working toward for two years.” His voice holds an edge to it. He might be the fun light-hearted one of the three of us, but when it comes to his training schedule, he’s deadly serious.

The two of us have been working toward this fight since the last time Zamora took me out right at the beginning of my professional career. Back then I was scrappy, relying on my street-fighting abilities to get me by. I thought I had it in the bag, but he was more experienced and took me by surprise. I won’t let that shit happen again. I’m so close now I can practically taste the victory on the tip of my tongue.

I’m not as worried as my brother because I know this is my time, and I’m ready. “I’ll be fine. Next week, we’ll ramp up training to make up for it. This week, I’m staying here with the girls.” My heart flutters as I say it. I know how this sounds to him—ridiculous. I run the biggest security company this side of LA. I have a team of hundreds I could call upon at any time, and a simple security job like this should be a job for one of them. But I’m compelled to stay here and see this through, at least until Hazel is safely home.

By the look on his face, I can tell he’s not impressed, but he’s also not brave enough to contest me on it. “If you don’t trust anyone else on your security team, at least let me take shifts with you. I can manage the clubs around this place for a few days. Brandon can call me if he needs anything.”

I take another sip of the black shit I’m now living on. “When you come back in the morning to see Leo, bring me a smoothie.”

He raises an unimpressed brow. “I’ll take that as a no. What is it with you and this kid?”

I’m not sure if he’s talking about Ben or his sister. They are both still

young enough to be classified as kids to us. “They need our help,” I tell him, not wanting to get into it. Leo is already on my back about staying, I don’t need to cop it from Kobe as well. Anything to do with security is always my final say. They know that.

He looks me over, his eyes narrowing. “This wasn’t your fault, Jett, you couldn’t have known what was going to happen to the girls.” A nurse walks past us on her way to her station. His eyes follow her. “We didn’t even know she was married to a King,” he says softly, regaining his concentration.

“Exactly. I should have done a background check before we even sent one of our men to watch over her. This is all on me. If I had done my job properly in the first place, we would have known she was married. I’ve spent the last two days researching her family. Before Rafael Martinez, her father, traded her to the Kings, he was top of the narcotics department in Palm Desert Police Force. He was well respected in the community, with no prior criminal connections. What do you make of that?”

Kobe has a stupid smile on his face, and I realize he’s been making eyes at the nurse instead of paying attention to what I’m saying.

I click my fingers in front of his face. “Can you focus for a second? And think about something other than your dick,” I mutter, unimpressed that he is so easily distracted by a pretty smile. There is a time and a place for all that, like at our club, but Kobe just hasn’t quite worked it out yet.

“What? I was listening. The Martinez kids’ dad is a cop, or was until he got involved with the Kings. Hasn’t stopped a cop before. We both know half the force here is under our payroll.”

**“Yeah, but narcotics? To then force his daughter to marry the heir to a massive drug operation like the Kings are running. If he was in narcotics, this is the type of lowlife scum he puts away. How did the lines get blurred so badly?”**

**“Pay him a visit. I’m sure you can negotiate the answers you’re looking for right out of him.” He smirks sardonically, and I know what he’s saying—visit her dad and pull the information out of him the best way I know how, by inflicting pain. He deserves it for what he did to Hazel. We three brothers all have a little crazy in us, it’s the only way to survive this life, and I would take great pleasure sorting him out. But I can’t.**

**“That’s the problem. He’s been missing ever since he married her off to Liam. Just didn’t show up for work the next Monday.”**

**He looks baffled. “What did you find out about the mother?”**

**“Silvia Martinez is top of all the society pages, rubbing shoulders with all the elite even now. She’s carrying on like her husband isn’t a missing person. She’s from old money, a lot of it. Looks like their father is as well. Until two years ago, they were a well-to-do family living a relatively normal life. The kids attended private school and got decent grades. Ben was in the running for a football scholarship, as well as being at the top of all his classes. The kid is a whiz. And Hazel graduated with grades decent enough to do whatever she wanted with her life.”**

**“Odd. Makes me think Liam took care of him after the wedding. Had his cake and ate it too, if you know what I mean.”**

**Of course I fucking knew what he meant. It’s what happens when you work with guys like Liam—they fuck you over in the worst way possible. “I want to know what trouble Rafael got into with the Kings, all of it. There is more to this story. There has to be. Talk to your friend, Caleb.**

He might know something about it. Looks like it was only two years ago when it happened. That's when Hazel was forced to marry Liam."

"Do we know for sure it wasn't what she wanted? Maybe she wasn't forced like we thought. Maybe she ran off with him, daddy tried to get in the way, and Liam dealt with him."

"She was eighteen," I huff, disgusted by the idea but knowing it's still possible.

"Eighteen-year-olds fall in love and get married all the time." He shrugs like it's no big deal.

"Innocent private school girls married to men in their thirties who are a part of a gang? I'm going to say your theory is unlikely. Besides, Ben has already told us it was their dad who set the whole marriage up as some sort of trade for his gambling debts."

"I get the impression the Martinez kids weren't told a lot about what was going on, though. One minute it was cozy little lives, the next dad was gone, sister was married off, and Ben was joining the Kings to keep an eye on her."

"He probably knows more than he's telling us." Kobe raises a brow, and I know what he is implying. I thought the same thing myself, but I've spent enough time with the kid over the last few days to know he's not bullshitting me.

"I'm not sure he does. Hazel, though, she knows a lot more than she's saying. You can see it in her eyes."

"Damaged," Kobe agrees.

"Something like that." But it's more than that. Behind the pain there is an anger simmering. Her brother thinks she's some weak girl who needs protection. I think he's underestimating her.

**“Leo wants us to talk to Jason Rossi, Kylo’s old cellmate, the one telling him all of Tony Acevedo’s secrets. He might be the key to tracking down Liam.”**

**“Tee it up and let me know how it goes,” I tell him, agreeing it’s a good idea. At this point, we need all the help we can get. I want Liam tracked down before he finds us.**

**“I’ll see you in the morning. Try and get some sleep.” Kobe stops by the nurses’ station before he leaves. The flirty nurse giggles at something he says, and he looks back at me with a wink, probably heading off with her to a broom closet or something. Just his luck.**

**I drain the contents of my drink and throw it in the trash. Itching to check in on Hazel again, I push open the door to her room. Ben is dozing off in the chair beside her, and he stirs when he hears me. She’s fast asleep, has been most of the day. She just wakes up to glare at me and ask Ben about Ruby-Rose. She seems to care more about her friend than her own welfare. They must be close.**

**He quietly comes over to me. “She’s been asleep for a while, looking a lot more comfortable than yesterday,” he whispers.**

**“They probably have her pain meds right now.”**

**“I hope so. I can’t stand seeing her in pain.” He looks at me. “Thank you for helping her. You and your brother have been the best thing to happen to us in such a long time. I can’t tell you what it means to me.”**

**“You don’t have to.” I pat him on the back. “Go home, Ben. It’s late, and there is nothing else you can do for her now. Get a good night’s sleep so you can be here for her tomorrow when she wakes up.”**

**“What about you?”**

**“I’m fine,” I lie. I’m dead tired, but I won’t leave her here. “I’ll doze in**

the chair,” I reassure him.

“Well, alright, if you’re sure?” he says with a yawn.

“Go home, man,” I tell him with more authority in my voice.

He gives me a nod and disappears through the door.

Quietly, I move the seat a little closer to her, find a spare blanket and pillow, and get myself comfortable. As comfortable as I can be in a plastic hospital chair. It’s just like I did last night. The room is peaceful at this time of night, with just the rhythmic beat of her heart monitor. The light from the window shines on her face, illuminating it and making her look so angelic. Her pretty features, even though bruised, I can see how perfect she is. Then there’s that bandage around her head that reminds me just what she’s been through. It boils my blood. How could anyone, who had such a perfect creature as their own, hurt her so badly?

First her parents let her down, then the man she married. She has been through so much and deserves a hell of a lot better. And I’m going to help her out of this mess and make sure she gets a better life.

# Chapter 3

## HAZEL

A YOUNG NURSE RAPS gently at my door, and I shift my gaze in her direction. “Your husband is en route to pick you up,” she says with a smile, handing me the discharge papers.

A chill races down my spine. He’s been constantly calling me all morning, but I’ve ignored his calls. I hadn’t expected him to actually show up here, especially given the shit he’s in. Until today, he has been in hiding.

“Are you new here?” Jett’s voice bristles as he strides toward her, his body imposing. “He’s the one who put her in this state. Why would we let him take her home?”

She retreats slightly, clearly flustered. “I apologize, Mrs. King, Mr. Rivera. I didn’t realize,” she stammers, hastily exiting the room and out of Jett’s path.

“Stay with your sister. I’ll handle this,” Jett instructs Ben without even glancing my way. Bossy asshole. I’ve had about enough of him this week. I mean, I appreciate the protection when I’m feeling so vulnerable, but does he have to act like such a jerk all the time? Walking around the place with his



chest puffed out. He makes me feel even more frail than my injuries make me.

My phone buzzes again, this time with a message. I take a deep breath before I check it, knowing it's him.

Liam: I'm warning you, Hazel. If you don't take my call, there will be consequences.

My head throbs with a mixture of fear and frustration, not to mention the pain thumping through me constantly that the meds don't seem to cure. "I can't deal with him," I exclaim, passing my phone over to Ruby-Rose, who's been perched at the end of my bed for the last two hours, waiting with me for my discharge papers to arrive. She received hers earlier in the day but chose to stay until I was ready to leave.

She examines the message on my phone and shakes her head. "You don't have to, Haze. Jett will handle him, as soon as they can track him down, okay?"

Just as she finishes speaking, the phone vibrates in her hand with an incoming call, and she glances at me, her eyes wide. "Shit."

"Give it here," Ben intervenes, snatching the phone from her grasp. "Stop calling her, you piece of shit. After what you've done to her, she's not going to talk to you," he shouts into the phone, his voice shaky with rage.

"Put her on the line, little boy," Liam bellows from the other end, so loud I can hear it from where I'm sitting. "You've got thirty seconds, or my men and I are storming the hospital to retrieve her," he demands.

Ben shoots a defiant look my way, poised to respond, but before he can, I grab the phone from him. Liam isn't hurting anyone because of me.

"Go to hell, Liam. And you can cut out the fucking threats," I yell down the line, bitterness in my tone. The nerve of him.

“Ah, there’s my fiery girl. How I’ve missed your sweet voice.” I can hear his psychotic smirk through the phone. The thought makes me feel sick to the stomach. “Just be a good girl and allow me in so I can take you home.” His voice drips with a sickening familiarity, causing a shudder to run over me. Why didn’t my plan work? Then I never would have had to talk to him again.

“Not a chance in hell after what you did to me.” My voice, though quiet, carries a newfound strength a week of separation has given me. Also, knowing Jett is right outside my door helps. Despite him being a pain in my ass, I know he won’t let anything bad happen to me. His presence is my shield.

“I’m so sorry, baby. It was an accident. You have to understand that. None of this was my fault. I’d never intentionally hurt you. I love you,” he says, his voice softer.

“You’re full of shit, Liam. I’m not coming back, not now, not ever,” I yell back.

“Come to the window, beautiful. I have something to show you.”

Come to the window? What on earth? I glance at my brother; he shakes his head in silent warning. Yet, curiosity nags at me. I slip off the bed and approach the window. My room overlooks the parking lot, and there he stands, leaning against the shiny new silver Mercedes sports coupe. His smug satisfaction is unmistakable, as though he believes another expensive car could undo the mess he’s created. How dense does he think I am?

“Well, what do you think?”

“I think you’re delusional. Expensive gifts will never make up for what you and your brother did to me and Ruby. Our forced marriage is over. I’ve broken free, and there’s no way I’m ever coming back.” Each word drips with loathing, a venomous declaration meant to pierce his arrogance.

He locks eyes with me through the window, his features hardening into a chilling mask of malevolence. His glare is unhinged, a glimpse into his deranged psyche. “You will fucking do as you’re told. I own you. Your father entrusted you to my care, and you’ll remain under my control until the day you die.”

“You’re fucking crazy.” I sneer, disgust evident in my tone. I hate him with every fiber of my being.

He raises a gun, leveling it directly at me. Before I can react, Ben whisks me out of view. “Hang up the phone, Hazel,” he demands, his voice shaking.

“You guys clearly haven’t heard the news. I’m in charge now. King of the fucking Kings.” He laughs sardonically, and my heart sinks. I knew it was a possibility with his brother being dead, but I had hoped after their shipment was destroyed, he would have been in too much trouble with other gangs and the rest of the Kings for them to let him take over. He is the last surviving King, though, and heir to the throne, as he would put it. But this much power will go to his head, making him even more unbearable than he was before. “You have twenty-four hours to make your way home or I’ll track you down and drag you back myself. The second option won’t go so well for you.”

I throw my phone at the wall, watching as it smashes into pieces. My hands tremble with anger and trepidation. Ruby grabs hold of me, hugging me tightly to her body, trying to calm me. Shushing me like a child, she strokes my hair and tells me everything is going to be okay. But I know it’s not, and I need to get the hell out of this town before he has a chance to come for me.

I know with the new power going to his head, Liam will be on a trip to show the other members of his gang that he has control over everything, including his wife. He will also get word out to anyone on his payroll to bring me in. I’m screwed if I don’t move quickly.

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**JETT**

**I RUSH BACK INTO the room after hearing a loud crash. “What was that?” I demand, my voice sharp with worry. I’m on edge knowing the fucker Liam has resurfaced before we were able to track him down. All our attempts to try were futile. Even our contacts in the force had no idea where he had taken off to.**

**Ruby-Rose has a tight grip on Hazel, who looks distraught, while Ben stands by the window, his expression furious.**

**“It was Hazel’s phone. Liam scared the hell out of her,” Ruby-Rose explains sadly, still cradling her shaken friend. “He was out in the parking lot with a new car. He lost it when she refused to go home with him.”**

**“Why didn’t you come get me?” I growl furiously. If Liam is making a move, we should have been alerted immediately. Somehow, our lines of communication are breaking down. Kobe’s cop friend Caleb isn’t keeping up his end of the bargain, either that or someone else in our organization is working both sides. I pat my side, checking for my gun. “I’m going after him.”**

**“He’s gone. I saw him drive off,” Ben mumbles, his attention divided.**

**I shoot him an angry glare, a message I know he understands. He screwed up royally in my book. This was our chance, and he let it slip through our fingers.**

**“Ben,” I call him over, my voice cold and demanding. He needs to learn.**

He follows me out into the hall away from the girls. “I messed up,” he concedes, his head hanging low.

“You think?” I retort sharply. “What were you even thinking?”

“I... I wasn’t. I just wanted to get him to back off. I thought I could reason with him, make him understand that Hazel wasn’t going back to him.”

“You thought he would actually listen?” I interrupt.

“I don’t know. I just... I fucking hate this, Jett. I feel completely helpless. He acts like he owns her, and she puts up a strong front against him, but deep down, she knows that if he gets his hands on her again, it’s a death sentence.”

“We won’t let that happen.”

“But how can we stop it? Jett, he’s openly taken control of the Kings now. He’s swimming in power and wealth, and around here, that equates to doing whatever the hell you want. You know that as well as I do.” He’s shaken up, torn between doing what he knows is right in our organization and protecting his sister.

“He may think he’s invincible, but that shipment going up in flames hit him harder than he’ll admit. We hold the upper hand. Not him. Sure, he might pull some strings in the desert, but we’re not in the desert. This town bows down to the Riveras,” I say with pride. My brothers and I have worked hard to get where we are now and have earned the right to be so cocky. With that experience, I know exactly how a motherfucker like Liam King will be thinking. It gives us more of an advantage than Ben realizes. He’s new to this and still has a lot to learn.

“What am I supposed to do with her now that we’re out of options? I can’t take her home to Mom; she’s the one who allowed Liam to marry

her in the first place. And my rundown apartment is no safe haven for her. I want to believe I can protect her when he comes for her, but I don't know if I'm capable." His panicked words replay in my mind, and I know he's right. He won't be able to protect her in that shithole he's living in.

"Jett, I need a promise from you. I understand I can't pay you right now, but I will. I'll work any shift at the club or any security job you throw at me. Just assure me that you'll keep her safe from him."

I nod, and that's all the kid needs from me to know I have his back, and that means I will take care of his sister as well. "Have the girls pack her bag. There's a car waiting around the back of the hospital for us. We have to leave before the staff in this fucking place mess up again," I instruct him.

I had a plan in mind before this chaos unfolded. Convincing Ben to agree to it seemed uncertain, but now, it'll be easier. His desperation to protect Hazel is palpable, and that plays right into my hands. Like I told him, it's not the Kings who have the power in Palm Springs, it's the Riveras.

# Chapter 4

## HAZEL

STEPPING OUT OF THE hospital felt like a breath of fresh air, a sweet taste of freedom, but it didn't last long. Ben and Jett Rivera whisked me away to the lavish Rivera estate, and suddenly, the world shifted from hospital whites to opulent grandeur.

As I sit in the formal living room, surrounded by luxurious decor and the hushed conversations of the Riveras, I'm rendered speechless as Leo, Jett, and Ben discuss my life, like I'm a child who can't take care of herself, instead of a twenty-year-old woman. If I weren't still recovering from surgery, I would be very capable of taking on the likes of any of them.

My brother Ben is on one side of me, and my best friend Ruby-Rose is on the other side, gripping my hand so tight she is almost cutting off the circulation, but I don't care; it's comforting to know she's here with me. We have been to hell and back this week, both of us.

"It's all going to be okay, Hazel," she whispers, trying to assure me, but it's not. I can already tell I'm not going to like the results of this meeting with the Riveras today. Having this particular family watching over me while I was in



the hospital was one thing, but now, I'm out. I don't need their help. Or want it. I came here today because Ben says they need answers, anything that might help. They're after my husband's blood, and I get it, but I have already told Ben all I know. And it's not much from that night, my memory is so hazy. And what I know from my two years with him is mostly just whispers, snippets of conversations I overheard. Nothing that could really help these guys take him down.

"She'll stay here with us so I can keep an eye on her," Jett informs my brother in the cocky "*I rule the world*" tone he has.

I flick my angry gaze over to him, but he doesn't even give me the time of day. His eyes are fixed on my brother as Jett and his brother Leo stand over us like imposing skyscrapers, shadowing the dingy streets below. They see themselves as above us. Above everyone.

All week I've been aware of Jett's lingering presence in my hospital room. Like my shadow, he's hung a few feet away from me at all times. Or at least that's what it felt like. But since the night I woke up, I haven't uttered another word to him, nor him to me, and the silent arrangement has served me just fine while I tried to get my head on straight and recover from my injuries.

I'm so filled with shame at how he first saw me, lying in a hospital bed so badly beaten by the man who was supposed to love me. I was too embarrassed to communicate with him again. But *dictating* that I stay in his home with him is a step too far. I glare daggers in his direction, wishing I could inflict pain with my eyes. *How dare he*. Like hell I'll stay in this town, let alone this house, with him or any of them. I knew something fishy was going on back at the hospital. I overheard him and Ben talking in the hall while they thought I was busy with Ruby packing my bag. He promised Ben he would take care of me. I should have known that coming to the Rivera

estate was a mistake, a trick to get me here and keep me here. But I hadn't really been given a lot of choice. After Liam's call, I just got out of there with them, and they drove us straight here.

"No, I don't need to do that. I'll be fine. Ben is overreacting, he won't kill me," I say, trying to keep my rage under control. The tremble in my words gives me away, but it's not fear. It's anger or adrenaline, the need to run the hell as far away from this place as I can. After the phone call I received this morning, it's all I've wanted to do. Run and not look back, forget everything that happened to me, and start a new life somewhere else.

"You should stay here. If we know anything about the Kings, it's that they will follow through on their threats," says Leo's girlfriend, Piper.

I assess her; she's striking, with long, dark hair, and for a woman has a commanding power about her, one I like and wish I had more of myself. She sits quietly, composed, but I can tell she has an opinion on my situation. And I want to know what she knows about them. Why is she here with us, is she part of this boys' club of assholes trying to control me? Or can she help me?

"He hasn't threatened me," I tell Leo. This is the first time I have met him in person, but I know him by reputation. He's not to be messed with. The rest of the room is deadly silent, and I feel like if I don't stick up for myself, no one else will.

Leo's eyes fix on me, and he looks me over with a steely gaze that says he's going to do whatever the fuck he wants.

I hate men like him. Men like Liam. Dictators who think they can control me. I wasn't brought up to be controlled. I used to be free, able to do whatever I wanted, but now it feels like that was a lifetime ago. He holds my gaze, and a shiver runs over my flesh, leaving goosebumps in its wake.

Even with the injuries he's sporting, Leo pulls off the scary-as-fuck vibe. I

can see why people follow his demands. But I'm not one of his plebs, and I've never followed along with the rest of the tribe. I'm hardly going to start now just because a Rivera asshole demands it. I hold my chin up high, trying to show him I won't be manipulated.

Ben's gaze shifts to me, reaching for my other hand. "You ended up in the ICU," he murmurs gently. As if I could forget. His expression shows a weight of sorrow, and though I know he carries a sense of guilt, it's misplaced. This wasn't his fault.

"I'm not saying I'm going back to him, I just don't need to stay here with them. I'll go visit some relatives in Mexico for a little while, stay with Uncle Mateo. I can take care of myself," I tell the room, praying someone will listen to me. Mexico wasn't my plan until just now, but it sounds as good as anywhere to disappear to. My uncle would let me stay with him, I'm sure of it.

Ruby strokes my hair, bringing my attention back to her. She's soft and beautiful, and all I can see when I look at her are her terrible scars. They're my fault. "Haze, I know you can take care of yourself, but this is Liam. He was scary before he had any say. If he's in charge of the Kings now, he's powerful as well, and you know as well as I do, even when he wasn't, he would have done just about anything to get to you. I have never seen a man so obsessed." Her eyes are teary, and I feel even more guilty. I don't want to cause her any more pain. She has been trying to help me since I got stuck with him. She's suffered enough for a fight that's not hers. "If the Riveras want to help you, let them. It's better than being dead."

I love my friend, I do. I stare into her hopeful eyes knowing she's right, but I won't admit it to them. If I stay here, it will be so she can get away. Not to save myself.

“Jett?” Leo asks for his brother’s opinion.

“She’s staying here,” he demands like he is the boss of me now. I want to rip his eyes out. Why did I ever swoon over this guy? Who the hell does he think he is coming into my life and demanding I do as he says?

He still won’t even look at me, making my blood boil even more. It was one thing when I was ignoring him because I couldn’t deal with the awkward situation I was in, but for him to demand I stay here and not even consult me, makes me want to hurl the expensive-looking vase sitting on the coffee table in front of me across the room at him.

“Just until things settle down, Hazel, then you can go on with your life,” I hear Ben’s voice over my shoulder, trying quietly to convince me, but I don’t take my eyes off the cocky bastard who thinks he can control me.

“Jett, a word,” Leo summons him to the next room, and Jett follows like the good little soldier he is. Just like the Kings, there is an obvious pecking order here.

“You can’t make me stay here,” I tell Ben and Ruby, not caring that Leo’s girlfriend Piper is still in the room. “I don’t need some asshole looking over me. You saw him, Ruby, he’s infuriating.”

“We’re not asking you to be friends with him, just to stay here while you recover and until they take care of Liam. It won’t be long. I heard what Liam said to you this morning, Haze. His threat was real. Let the Riveras watch over you, then you can do anything you want with your life, you will be free once he is dealt with.”

My eyes well up, frustration taking over. “You don’t understand, there are things...” I try to get my words out but am interrupted by Leo’s commanding voice.

“We have decided it’s best Jett watches over Hazel, and the most secure

way he can do that is if she stays here,” Leo cuts me off. He and Jett have returned to the room and stand over us, commanding our respect whether we’re willing to give it or not. “You’re welcome to stay here as well, Ben, and you too, Ruby-Rose, if that would make Hazel feel more comfortable. Stay for as long as you need so we can track Liam down and make sure he can’t hurt you again.” Leo’s controlling voice instructs the room like the ringmaster he is. The asshole gene runs strong in this family, and I decide I like him about as much as his brother—not at all.

“So, I literally have no say in my own life,” I cry angrily, having to bite the inside of my cheek to stop the tears that are threatening. If I start now, I won’t be able to stop.

“I’m sorry, Hazel. I care about you too much to have something happen to you when I could have stopped it,” Ben tells me, and I see the determination in his eyes. He’s not going to back down on this. Even my own brother is against me right now. I’m trapped again.

“Your brother is right. But don’t worry, you will have your own privacy. You can stay in the back wing of the house. Piper and I are moving into our own place on Tuesday,” Leo says like it makes any difference. I will still be stuck in this town, too close to Liam for my liking, with my life dictated by a new set of motherfuckers with too much money and power.

I tune out the rest of their conversation. Not one of them will hear me out anyway. My brain is madly ticking over how I can get out of this situation instead. The problem is I’m so tired I’m still finding it hard to get through a normal day. In the hospital I slept most of the time, and right now, it’s all I want to do. Sleep until this nightmare ends.

The next thing I know Ben’s hand is on my shoulder. I have no idea how long they were talking for. “Haze, Jett is going to show us through to the

room you can stay in for this week, until we can have the back wing of the house.”

“Ruby, are you staying too?” I ask my friend desperately. Her face gives her away. I already know her answer. And I also know I have to let her go.

“I can’t, honey. I need to get home. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. I’ll be fine,” I tell her, knowing I’m going to be anything but. I’ll go insane here alone. Well, practically alone, since Ben has already proven he’s on their side.

“I can stay longer if you need me?” she offers.

“No, go. Call me later,” I tell her, knowing she needs to get away from this life just as much as I do. She wraps her arms around me in a tight hug, and I hold her, not wanting to let her go. But she has done enough for me. I’m on my own now.

“Ben, I don’t have all day,” the asshole tells my brother, still acting like I’m not even in the room. What is his fucking problem?

“We’re coming,” Ben tells him. “Come on, Hazel.” He directs me away from Ruby-Rose, and she gives me a little wave goodbye. I feel empty and even more exhausted than I already did. As much as I don’t want to stay here, the thought of locking myself away and sleeping makes the idea of being shown to my room more appealing.

We follow Jett away from the main living and kitchen area, up some stairs, and down a long corridor till we get right to the end. “This will be Ben’s room,” he says, passing a white door. Then he pushes open the last door. “And this will be your room, Sunshine,” he tells me smugly. “I will be just down the hall if I’m needed.”

What would I need him for? I glance into the room, wondering how I can escape when the time is right. There is a window on the far wall and what

looks like an adjoining ensuite that could potentially have a window as well, so that's two options. From the security just at the front gate I can tell this place is locked up and more secure than even the King estate. It's going to be tough to escape.

"The windows are alarmed, and the security system will be in place at night. The perimeters are patrolled. No one will get in—or *out*—of this place," he adds, his attention finally coming to me. It's like he can read my mind. He holds his gaze, and I glare back at him, not giving him the satisfaction of making me look away.

I'm not at all surprised. The house I lived in with Liam was much the same; it's how these guys operate when they have so many enemies. He turns away from me. "Dinner will be at six," he says, walking back down the hall.

I walk into the bedroom, taking it all in. It's a massive upgrade from the hospital room I have spent a week in. With soft-looking drapery on the windows and layers of lush bedspreads covering the upholstered bed, I could be happy staying here if I was the kind of girl who liked being trapped in a pretty cage watched over by thugs. But I'm no damsel in distress, and I don't need anyone to protect me. A good night's sleep, then I will be on my way.

Ben closes the door behind us, with just the two of us inside the room, his face unreadable. He's different around them, more serious. I'm not sure I like it.

"This is ludicrous. You of all people should know I can't stay here with them, Ben. How did you let this happen?" I cry in frustration as I stare at my brother, searching his face for answers, but he's got nothing. He might be two years younger than me, but he's normally the voice of reason, the only person in our family who makes sense. But him siding with the Rivera brothers has

thrown me. And even worse, him agreeing to having us stay in their mansion so Jett Rivera can watch over me.

A shiver runs down my spine at the thought, but not in a creepy way. Quite the opposite, actually. He's hot as hell, and that does things to me, even though I know it shouldn't. He's also old and bossy, and although I've only known him a week, he's a massive pain in my ass already. But something about him fascinates me in a way I wish it didn't.

"Hazel, you know this is for the best," Ben says sadly. He's already under the thumb of another criminal organization, and I feel partly responsible. His life could have been different if he weren't trying to get me out of the mess our stupid father landed me in. Another reason I know I have to fix this. My brother shouldn't have been dragged into this mess; he should have finished high school and got that football scholarship he was promised.

"I don't need a personal bodyguard. I'm finally free of Liam. I want to get the hell out of this town before he tracks me down again." I cross the room, taking his hands in mine. "Please, Ben, you have to help me." I'm reduced to begging, because for the second time in my short life, I'm trapped, caged like a bird, and all I want to do is fly away. So far away. Where none of the filthy animals of this town can find me.

"Hazel, last week I thought you were going to die." His voice cracks, but he stops the tears that threaten to fall. The condition he found me in would have been horrific, I'm sure. But I didn't die. He got me to the hospital on time, and I'm here to fight another day. He squeezes my hand. "I know you feel like you have gone from one bad situation to another, but it's just not true. These guys will look after us. I trust Jett and Leo. They are nothing like the Kings. We're safe here with them, and until they catch Liam, this is the best place for you. As soon as they do, you're free to live your life again."



I pull out of his grip and go to the nearby window of my new prison. I shouldn't complain, it's a fancy bedroom in one of the most expensive homesteads in Palm Springs, and under normal circumstances, I would be happy to be living it up in a place like this. But these are anything but normal circumstances.

Looking out over the yard and taking in the property, I see the men patrolling. Just in this section I can see three. It's even more secure than the house I was living in with Liam.

My head spins, and I take hold of the window frame before I can fall. I close my eyes, steadying myself. The surgeon said dizziness would come and go over the next few weeks, and I should spend most of my time resting. But I don't want to rest. I want to fight to get my life back. I want revenge for everything Liam took from me in the time I spent with him, and being stuck here under constant watch, I'm hardly going to be able to carry out my plan.

Ben's hands come to my shoulders. "Haze, you need to rest. We can talk about all this later." He leads me over to the queen-size bed in the center of the room and pulls back the comforter, motioning for me to hop in. His sad eyes reach mine, and the guilt eats at me. He just wants to keep me safe. And I am really tired. I sit on the side of the bed and the dizziness settles.

"I want him to pay," I whisper, sadness washing over me.

"He will. Leo and Jett will make sure of it."

"You don't understand, Ben. *I* want to make him pay," I say with more certainty in my voice. I see fear flash through his eyes, and I know I have said too much. He doesn't understand.

"Get some rest," he tells me like I'm a silly child.

I watch him walk over to the door, disappointed and feeling more alone than I ever have.

“I love you, Hazel,” I hear him whisper as he closes the door with a click.

I slip out of Ruby’s jeans she lent me because I didn’t have any clothes of my own to leave hospital with. I lay them on the end of the bed. Hugging her long sweater around my body firmly, I lie down and pull the comforter up. Shutting my eyes tight, I feel like an asshole and try to stop the tears now welling from escaping. Ben’s the only family I have, and I know he is doing all of this because he cares about me. I get it. I would do the same for him. It’s why instead of fighting for what I want right now, I will roll over and rest like he wants me to. But what he doesn’t understand is that I have spent two years plotting the way out of my living hell, and I was so close to finally being free.

The Riveras blowing up the Kings warehouse kinda messed all that up. They all see me as some weak little girl, and yes, my frame might be small, but I’m tough and full of fight. Well, normally anyway, and I will make Liam pay for everything he put me through. I’ll show them all just who I am.

# Chapter 5

## JETT

**SWEAT RUNS DOWN MY back, soaking my tank top, as I land my fist into the sparring pad Ben's holding for me.**

**"She's so angry." Ben says, his voice trembles with sadness for her.**

**Once Hazel was settled in her room, we headed for a training session with Kobe in our home gym. I have a month to prepare for my big title fight, and the last week watching over Hazel in the hospital has my schedule behind, but I couldn't bring myself to leave anyone else in charge of her. Especially when we don't know exactly who we can trust. I also felt compelled to stay as close to her as I could. It's why she's staying in my house now. I couldn't let her go home to her mother's. From what I have seen, Hazel hates her with a passion. When she turned up at the hospital to visit, Hazel was hysterical and told the nurse not to let her in. That doesn't sound like someone she wants to live with. Her mother was also involved in her being married off to Liam in the first place. For all I know, she would send her right back to him.**

**“She will get over it when she realizes it’s for the best,” I tell him, landing another quick hook.**

**She did look furious when I insisted she stay here, but I don’t give a shit about her feelings. It’s my job to keep her safe, and that is what I intend to do. And until we know Liam is dead or behind bars, she will be under my protection. I won’t let that monster get his hands on her again. I made that promise to her brother, and I intend to keep it. She will just have to learn to do as she’s told.**

**“She thinks she’s going to get revenge on Liam by herself. It’s scary how determined she is about it.”**

**I flinch at the thought. She has to know that’s not possible, but half of me is impressed she has the balls to want to try. “What exactly did he say to her this morning?” I ask, needing to know what we’re up against. The full truth, not the watered-down version he would tell me when Hazel is around.**

**“At first, he was trying to convince her it was an accident. That he loved her and she was safe with him. That he was going to take care of her, and she had a gift waiting for her when she was able to drive again.”**

**Kobe’s eyes are wide, not able to believe it. “You have to be fucking kidding me. He tried to buy her with an expensive gift?”**

**Ben shakes his head, disgusted at the thought. “She told him she didn’t believe a word coming out of his mouth, and then his mood changed. He said she had twenty-four hours to get checked out of the hospital and back to his home in Palm Desert or he was coming after her to drag her back. He started ranting about how she belonged to him and how our father entrusted him to look after her, some shit like that. That’s when she threw her phone across the room, smashing it.”**

**“Poor little darlin’. We need to mess this asshole up, Jett,” Kobe says with that gleam in his eyes that means trouble.**

**“I intend to. I’m waiting on the go-ahead from Leo, but he’s stalling.” I’d have been over there this morning right after she had contact from him if it were up to me, but Leo has a plan, and we have to trust him it’s for the best. “Your turn.” I hand Ben the gloves and take the sparring pad.**

**Ben straps the gloves on then takes a fighting stance in front of me. He lands a shot.**

**“Higher,” Kobe instructs him, working on his technique.**

**He’s a good student and has taken on board every move Kobe and I have shown him. He’s also becoming a huge asset to my team. He will go far if he keeps listening to what we teach him.**

**“If you keep up your training with us, by the time you’re Jett’s age, you could be a top fighter. Is that what you want?” Kobe asks him, egging him on to push harder, and he comes at me with more aggression.**

**“Yes.” He hits me again, harder this time, and I see it, the fire burning deep inside to be the best. You can’t win at this sport unless you have it, and this kid does in spades.**

**Kobe pats him on the back. “Two more minutes. I want to see what you have, don’t go easy on him, Ben,” he pushes him.**

**“I’m going to need you down at the club tonight,” I tell Ben, knowing it’s the last thing he’s going to want to do, but I’ve given him a grace period of a week to take care of his sister. Now I’m stuck on babysitting duties here, and she’s not ready to be dragged down to the club with me just yet. I’m going to need Ben down there keeping an eye on things.**

**“She will be safe here with me,” I assure him when I see his demeanor change.**

**His next hit is harder and lands right where it should, with more determination. “At this stage, it’s you I’m more worried about. My sister can be hostile when things don’t go her way.” He follows it up with another quick jab. He says it like he’s not worried, even though I know he is. He’s overly protective of her, and rightfully so, after what she’s been through.**

**“I’m sure I can handle her.” The past week while she has been recovering from brain surgery, she has been feisty and unmanageable toward every person who entered her room except for Ben and her friend Ruby-Rose. She was different with them, kind and loving. Shows me she can be a sweet girl when she wants to be, but she’s bitter with the world and doesn’t trust anyone. We have that in common. She’s not sure of me yet, and I see the disgust she holds toward me, but there is nothing she can throw at me I won’t be able to handle. In fact, I would invite the challenge. It might make being cooped up in the house with her a little more exciting.**

**“My parents couldn’t.” He huffs, an edge of disappointment in his tone. He thinks they should have tried harder with her.**

**“Is that why she was traded off to Liam?” I ask. I have waited for the whole story, but I think now is as good a time as any for him to tell us the full truth, all of it. I’ve done all the research I can, and there is still a huge chunk missing, like why did her father force her to marry a King? I’m not buying what I have been told so far. There is no evidence within the Kings’ men that Mr. Martinez owed them a cent. From what I could dig up, he never even entered their clubs on police business.**

Ben looks me over cautiously, then his gaze flicks to Kobe. Ben has learned he can't trust anyone either, and it's the one thing that affects his judgment with us. He also knows it's why his sister was attacked so badly. If he had been upfront with me in the first place, I would have known how bad the threat was on her. "She was forced to marry Liam because our father was a gambling piece of shit who racked up debts he couldn't afford to pay off. And like I said earlier, Liam had always been obsessed with her. They did a trade. My father's life for Hazel's." He slams his fists into the pad, a fresh wave of devastation taking over him, his strength pushing me back. He's one angry kid.

"You need to use that passion when you get in the ring next time," Kobe tells him, encouraging his violent streak. "Draw on your pain, it will see you winning."

"It's not passion." He hits the pads again. "It's fury." And again. "How could he do that to her? She was only eighteen. She used to be so kind, so happy. Our father destroyed her life, and we haven't seen him since." He rips the gloves off, throws them to the mat below, and drops to his knees, his head in his hands. "She won't talk about it, but I know what that piece of shit was doing to her from the moment he became her husband. Our father would have known who he was giving her to. That's why I was working for them. I was hoping to find her a way out."

"She's safe now, kid. You did good coming to us," Kobe tells him, trying to reassure him she's going to be okay. But the reality is, the damage has already been done; she won't ever be the same again.

I crack my neck, needing to relieve the tension this conversation is creating. Liam is a pig of a man, and after the condition Ben found her in, I'm not surprised to hear it wasn't the first time, but the thought



makes me sick to my stomach. She's a tiny helpless female, and he's not only a good fifteen years older than her but twice her size. He deserves everything he has coming to him. And I'm personally going to make sure he gets the painful slow death that will help both Ben and his sister be able to move on with their lives. I might have only known the kid for a short time, but I feel a sense of protectiveness over him and now his sister as well. There are too many innocents being hurt because of the Kings gang, and we need to put a stop to it. And her father. If I ever get my hands on him, he will meet the same fate.

"Why don't you go and get ready for the club, I'll take you with me when I leave," Kobe suggests.

Ben does as he's told, leaving the room, his head down, defeated.

"Keep a close eye on him this week," I suggest to Kobe as we head for the kitchen. Leo should be around, and we need to discuss what his plans are for tonight.

Leo's sitting at the kitchen counter with his laptop out. He doesn't bother to look up as we enter the kitchen. I wonder what he's doing; he's still supposed to be taking it easy after the accident. I knew it wouldn't be long before he wanted to take back the reins. Piper insisted he rest, and she seems to have more say over him than anyone ever has. I glance over his shoulder and see he's watching club surveillance. At this time of the afternoon there shouldn't be much to see, just staff getting ready for the busy night ahead.

"Can't help yourself, can you," I mutter on my way past.

"I'm taking back over all operations tonight. Brandon will go home tomorrow. Things need to go back to normal so our men can see we still have control," he snips, sounding more like the brother I grew up with.

I nod, agreeing with him. I'm not going to fight him on it. Once my brother has made his mind up about something, the decision is final. He's been that way since our father died. And Kobe and I are happy to play along because he has never led us astray. I also have no ambition to be in charge around here. My sole focus this year is winning my title. Leo's smart and meticulous in everything he does, and he's the reason we all live the lifestyle we have now. Billions of dollars to our name, following our dreams. It's all because of the sacrifices he made for us when he was younger, and we not only respect him for it but would follow him into a fiery death.

Searching the fridge then the butler's kitchen, I find all the ingredients I need for my daily green protein smoothie. Chucking it in the blender and whizzing it up, I watch as the green goop falls into a tall glass. Leo gives me a disgusted look. While he likes to punish his body with cigarettes and booze, I opt for a healthier lifestyle, only eating and drinking what will help my body be at its optimum for my fights.

Kobe takes a seat beside Leo at the counter with a glass of water, watching me with a coy look.

"What?" I ask, not able to stand it. If he has something to say, he can just come out with it. We don't beat around the bush. These two know the ins and outs of my life, and I know theirs.

"Why are the Martinez kids really staying with us?" he asks pointedly, like he knows I have an ulterior motive.

Leo looks up from the screen, meeting my eyes. He's intrigued by my answer as well. He stood by my decision earlier, but I know he's wondering what's going through my head. Hell, *I'm* questioning what's going through my head. Having Hazel here will surely be a massive

**fucking distraction that I really can't afford to have, but I couldn't just let her go back out into the world alone.**

**"It's the safest place for them until we get our hands on Liam." I don't know what this feeling of protectiveness is when it comes to her. It's overwhelming and all-consuming. Even now with her in the room up the hall, I'm itching to check on her, make sure she's sleeping peacefully.**

**"On that note, send a crew to scope out his place tonight," Leo says, bringing the subject back to work, where it should be. "See how close we can get. Piper is eager to get her hands on that book from her father's den. From what I saw, it could change our lives. The history in it goes back generations. Piper's dad was running this town for years, and it details every contact he had. It wasn't kept locked up in the safe in his den for nothing. This book is incredibly valuable to Piper and to our organization, and Detective Reader will only give it to us after we eliminate Liam the same way we did Kylo."**

**"Do you really think Liam will be stupid enough to let anyone within fifty miles of his place? He has half the west coast after his blood since we blew up his shipment. His house will be secure." Kobe sniggers.**

**Leo's glare is dark and sinister. He has a plan brewing behind those murky eyes. One he's not ready to share yet. "That's why we're going to take a look, work out what we're up against. We need to act fast. I want that book. This has to be a priority."**

**"I'm glad the book is the only thing you're worried about here, Leo," I mutter, annoyed he's forgotten what Liam did to Hazel and her friend. We need to end him to get the vengeance she deserves. Free her from the shackles of being married to such a barbarian. Not just for this damn**

book of Piper's father. I clench my fists then crack my knuckles, trying to ease the tension. I want to fuck Liam up desperately.

“We're trying to win a war here, Brother, or have you forgotten the full extent of what we're up against, after a cushy week in the hospital with your damsel in distress? This book is our answer to unlocking generations of underworld activity in our town and finally getting the control we need.”

Kobe eyes me suspiciously. “There is something more going on here.” He chuckles, thinking this is all some joke. “I knew there would be no way Jett would be personally watching over some girl he never met before. He wants to fuck her.”

I spin to face Kobe, furious at what he's insinuating. “She nearly fucking died a week ago, because of our momentous screw-up. This is about protecting one of our own, nothing more. She is Ben's sister, and now he's one of us. Besides, the girl hates me,” I add, remembering the death glare she gave me earlier when I told her she would have to stay here.

“That's not surprising. You're an asshole. Most girls do.” Kobe laughs again, nudging me.

“You're just jealous I get more attention than you,” I add. This is an ongoing argument between the two of us, has been since we were old enough to compete for pussy.

“You wish.”

What I don't tell my brothers is that from the moment I saw her helpless body lying there in that hospital room, all hooked up to cords and monitors, I knew I had to protect her. I don't even know why. I've never had that with a girl before. It was just a feeling that took over me

—until she opened her mouth, then I was having second thoughts. But that’s why she’s here. That’s why I have been a mess for a week. Protecting her and getting the revenge she deserves is all I can think about. “We need to get this sorted out for her.”

Leo assesses me like he’s reading my inner thoughts; he’s fucking smart enough, he probably has the power to. “We all have our own reasons for wanting Liam’s demise, as long as we work together.”

I nod. “I’ll make some calls and have a team put together for tonight,” I agree.

“Perfect.” He looks pleased I’m on board. “We need that book. From what I saw, there are a lot of things Piper’s father was up to we don’t know about. This alliance with the Kings, for one. It goes back decades and is far more complicated than any of us can understand without the finer details. There was something else in there as well. I didn’t want to talk to you both about it until I had a chance to speak with Brandon, because it involved his missing father. That letter in the front was written by Duncan Lewis to Antony Acevedo and Cory King. It looks like he might have been involved in the drug operation they were running out of the old factory.”

“Brandon’s dad was a part of their organization?” asks Kobe, more serious. Brandon has been his best friend since childhood, and he’s the one who helped us claim our place at the top. Information like this would be devastating to him. It paints a very different picture of his father, and if this is the case, then is he still out there somewhere? We always assumed he perished in the fire that killed our father, but maybe he didn’t.

“Looks like it, but we need that book to prove it. You see why it’s

imperative we get our hands on it? And you heard Detective Reader, Kobe, he wants us to take Liam down the same way we did Kylo.”

Everything Leo is saying makes sense. We get our hands on the book, and we get answers some of us have been waiting years for. But Leo’s not thinking straight. Siding with the cops is only going to lead to more trouble in the long run, I can feel it. “I think the car accident has done something to your head, Brother. Detective Reader isn’t going to give us shit. He just wants us to do his dirty work.”

“Watch yourself.” Leo glares at me. “This works in our favor as well. The last thing we need is another King wreaking havoc on our streets. We take care of Liam, then we tackle the detective and work out whatever he’s really up to. One way or another, we will get our hands on that book.”

“Don’t know why you’re so against this, Jett, you just might end up coming off looking like a hero to the girl you have locked in a tower.” Kobe’s eyes are alight with humor. I’d like to get back in the gym and knock his smirk off his face.

“I’m going to take a shower,” I huff. I need to get out of here before I do punch him.

“Jett, no fucking around. Don’t forget she’s Ben’s sister and she’s off limits,” I hear Leo mutter as I leave the room.

Fucking Leo. He’s clearly feeling more himself today, back in charge and dishing out orders again. I don’t even justify his last comment with an answer. Not only is Hazel married to our enemy, but she’s a victim of domestic violence, and I’m sure the last thing on her mind is fucking around with the man watching over her while she recovers. I also don’t have the time for complications, and Hazel would be a very big one for

**me. That's why I intend to stay the fuck away from her. We can live in the same house, co-exist until this is all over, then go back to our old lives. And that's what we're going to do.**

# Chapter 6



## HAZEL

A HEAVY KNOCK AT my bedroom door jolts me awake. I roll onto my back and stretch my arms over my head, wincing as the muscles tighten, reminding me of my injuries. I open my eyes, seeing it's still daylight. I was in such a deep sleep I half expected it to be the middle of the night. I run a hand over my face, trying to wake up. I'm a sweaty mess, and it takes a second for my brain to work out exactly where I am and what is going on.

"Dinner," comes Jett's grunt through my door, signaling exactly where I am. The Rivera mansion.

I groan to myself and pull the covers up higher. Why can't he just leave me alone? I don't respond. Maybe if I stay quiet, he will think I'm asleep and leave.

To my disappointment, I hear the door open. "You need to eat," he stresses from my doorway. His words are more of a demand than worry for me starving on his watch.

"I'm not hungry," I mutter before picking up my pillow and placing it over my head so I don't have to see him... and he doesn't have to see me. I can

only imagine how dreadful I look right now.

“I’m not bringing food up to you like Piper. It’s time you came out of this room,” the prick tells me like he’s my father. We have done this same dance at every mealtime over the last four days. I don’t want to leave the sanctuary of my room, and by now, you’d think he would have gotten the picture that I won’t do what he tells me to. Leo’s girlfriend Piper is at least decent enough to realize that this is all uncomfortable as hell, and she brings me something after the others have eaten so I can stay in here and wallow in my self-pity. But she moved out with Leo this morning, and the last meal I ate was breakfast.

I can feel him still glaring at me from the doorway, so I hug my pillow closer to my head, groan, and roll over in bed dramatically.

“Suit yourself,” he grumbles, and I hear him walk away. Thank God.

Reluctantly I sit up and glance over at the selection of bags Ruby-Rose brought over for me on Sunday before she left for LA. They are all still sitting neatly in a line by the wardrobe. My energy levels have been so low I haven’t bothered to shower or change for days. What’s the point when I have nowhere to go and nothing to do? Unlike my bestie who is moving forward with her life and has accepted her auntie’s very generous offer to go and pet sit at her apartment in LA for the next six months. I wish I was going with her. She invited me, but there was no way Ben would agree to it. I have been miserable ever since. I’ve even given up on plotting my escape.

I stare at the open door. I might not like the prick very much right now, but Jett could be right; it might be time to get out of this room, especially now that I don’t have anyone to bring me food. He’s the kind of stubborn asshole who would probably let me starve to death in here just to prove a point.

Shivering, I grab the sweater at the end of my bed, pulling it on as I slip out

of bed to close the door, annoyed that Jett left it open. I snatch up the first of the bags and empty the items onto my bed. It's filled with clothes from Artemis, a popular boutique here in Palm Springs. Everything is brand-new with the labels on, and the price tags tell me they're expensive. I know for a fact it's her latest collection, the edgy streetwear she designed after marrying her rockstar husband, Heath Riley. And it's literally to die for. I'm so in love with her stuff.

I know Ruby-Rose or Ben can't afford to buy me these. Maybe Piper has connections? The designs are simple and edgy, the kind of clothes I would pick out for myself. A pair of black wide-leg pants, stonewash jeans, and jean shorts, with soft printed T-shirts that have been faded so they look vintage, as well as some nicer tops in a ribbed knit fabric. And I know for sure Ruby-Rose was the one who selected them, so she must have gone shopping with one of them.

I take the second bag, emptying it out as well. This bag has soft lace panties and bras in white, black, and beige, the basics, except they're anything but. They are the finest Italian silk and lace, so soft to touch. My lady parts have never been treated to such luxury. There are also some silk head scarves, and I'm thankful to whoever picked this stuff out for me. My current hair style is a nightmare, and something to cover the dodgy growing-out shave and scar on the side of my head will be nice.

The third bag has super-soft cashmere sweaters, pajamas, workout wear, and a swimsuit, and the last bag has a pair of combat boots and a pair of kicks. It's literally a whole new wardrobe of beautiful items. I feel spoiled, and it gives me a little jolt of energy. It also makes me think of my mother. Twice a year at the change of season she would take me shopping in all the fanciest boutiques in town to pick out an entire new wardrobe. I wasn't that

excited, but she treated me like her little toy she could dress up and show off to her la-di-da friends. Kinda sickening when I think about it now. If she had taken the time to get to know me, she would have realized I didn't want to be her mini me. From a young age, I had my own ideas about what I wanted to look like, and it definitely wasn't her.

Scooping up the jeans, sweater, T-shirt, and some underwear, I head into the ensuite. It's time for a shower. I'm done with sitting around moping. I turn the water on to scorching and undress, stepping under the water and letting it bring life back into my achy muscles. The bruises covering my body are yellowing and starting to fade, but every one of them still hurts. Soon all I will be left with is the small scar on my face and head and the memory of what he did to me.

After the last time he hurt me, I promised my brother I was getting out of there, that I wouldn't let it happen again. And that was the plan. Ben said he had someone to watch over me and that the house he found for me was safe. That's when I came up with a plan of my own. Ben had no idea what we were up against, but I did, and I knew the only way out was if I killed Liam. I thought my plan was foolproof. I still can't work out what went wrong.

The shower caddy is filled with all the products I could possibly need. My stitches were removed days ago, and I was told I could shampoo my hair if I wanted to, but I have been avoiding it, not wanting to touch the scar. I squirt the cherry-blossom-scented shampoo into my hand and massage delicately into my hair, avoiding the area that is still sore. Then I follow with conditioner. Time disappears. I stay in the shower longer than I should, but now that I'm in here, I don't want to leave, it's so comforting. I feel safe in this little cubicle.

When I finally get out, I dress in my new clothes, enjoying the fresh crisp

scent of the new fabrics. I find a hair dryer in the ensuite cabinet and dry my hair then secure the silk scarf around my head so it covers the scar as best as it can. I'm not vain like my mother, but I also don't want to be seen looking like something death dragged in. Especially in front of Jett. He's used to beautiful girls parading themselves before him, vying for his attention, and he could have any one of them too.

I know these thoughts shouldn't even be entering my mind. What do I care what he thinks. I don't. I shouldn't. But I do.

The reflection staring back at me is one I don't recognize. This girl has lost her strength, she's pale and sickly, fragile. Broken. A tear slips down my cheek, and I swipe it away, staring directly into my eyes. I will not let Liam beat me. I am stronger than this. I will defeat him if it's the last thing I do, I tell myself, letting the words roll over me and empower me again.

As I leave the ensuite, I hold my head up high, feeling a little more ready to take on the world—or at least whatever I'm going to find in the main part of the Rivera house. Unfortunately, I know it won't be my brother at this time of day; he has been working every night since we got here, so I can only assume tonight will be the same, which means the only other people possible to run into are Jett or Kobe. But the ache in my stomach tells me the hunger won't let me wait any longer, so I'm going to have to pull up my big girl panties and brave it to go in search of sustenance.

On my way down the hall, I pass Ben's room and then Jett's; both their doors are closed. When I walk past the gym, it's open, and I pop my head in to see what the space is like. I'm not surprised that it's fully equipped. A treadmill, some sort of a weightlifting apparatus, and even what looks like a padded boxing ring. They really do have it all. A delicious smell is hanging

in the air, and instead of investigating the gym further, I head toward the kitchen in search of whatever it is.

The room is empty, so I go straight to the fridge, opening it. There on the center shelf is a plate covered with foil. I grab it, hoping it's my dinner from earlier. Suddenly I'm starving.

"Hungry after all?" comes a voice from behind me, making me jump and hit my head on the freezer door. "Fuck," I curse, grabbing the side of my head, trying to rub the throbbing away.

"Shit, sorry, I wasn't thinking. Are you okay?" he asks, actually sounding concerned for my welfare. It surprises me. When did he start caring?

"Yes." I wince, rubbing my head, before turning around to see Jett, his features pained for me. "It was the other side," I tell him, knowing he was worried he made my injuries worse. "I mean, it didn't help the lingering headache, but I'll live."

"Here, let me heat it up for you." He takes the plate from me before I can tell him where to go.

"Thanks, but I'm perfectly capable of doing it myself," I tell him, fighting for some independence. I'm not a complete invalid.

"I'm sure you are, but you don't know this kitchen, so why not let me help you, just this once?" He places the plate in the microwave and removes the foil top. "Are you always this difficult?" he asks, turning back to me.

I lean against the counter, folding one arm over the other. Even when he is trying to do something nice, he has to open his damn mouth and say something to piss me off. I'm not trying to be difficult. I just don't need him doing stuff for me. It's bad enough I'm being forced to stay here and be babysat by him.

His lips turn up at the side; he likes baiting me. "Take a seat, Sunshine."

That name makes me cringe, *Sunshine*. “What am I, five?” I roll my eyes, pulling out a seat at the kitchen island.

“It’s fitting,” he says with an edge of sarcasm.

I want to find something witty to say back, but I’ve got nothing. So, I just give him my best resting bitch face. It might just be because I’m starving, but the smell coming from the microwave is insanely good, and it will be worth whatever painful conversation I have to suffer through with Jett.

The timer goes off, and he takes my plate of food out and places it down in front of me. “Honey mustard chicken with fresh vegetables,” he tells me, a sense of satisfaction in his voice.

“Looks good. What, did you have your cook whip it up?”

“Do I not look capable of cooking a meal?” he snips, unimpressed.

My eyes roam leisurely over him, and he watches me. As soon as I start, I wish I didn’t, his body does things to me it shouldn’t. He’s the epitome of rugged charm, a blend of fierce athleticism and undeniable charisma, with piercing hazel eyes and a chiseled jawline covered in well-groomed stubble. He looks capable of a lot of things, most of them heavy lifting. His shirt is too tight around his arms, and the way his inked skin bulges shows off how impressive his body is.

“Nope,” I say, popping the first forkful in my mouth, trying not to show him what he does to me. “Oh my God,” I moan, while chewing the first mouthful. “This is delicious.”

“I’m a man of many hidden talents.” The way he says it with an unexpected heat in his eyes makes me think he’s talking about something else. Like he is trying to flirt with me. But he couldn’t be. It must be in my head. Guys like Jett don’t flirt, or I’m sure they do actually a lot, but not with girls like me.

They save their swagger for the pretty Barbie doll girls who hang on their every word.

“Hmm,” I say, returning my attention back to the meal in front of me. I’m not giving him anything in return. Even if he can whip up a tasty meal, he’s still on my shit list for forcing me to stay here.

He leans on the counter, his eyes firmly on me, making me feel self-conscious but also a little curious. I would give just about anything to know what he is thinking right now with that expression on his face.

“Are you going to watch me eat the whole thing? Don’t you have something better to do with your time?”

“Not since I’m stuck in this house babysitting you. And the last four days I’ve been sitting alone while you hide in your room, so I would say watching you eat is about as exciting as my life gets right now.”

I purse my lips, the fork resting on the bottom one. I lick it clean. “That’s an easy fix. I don’t need looking after, so you can run along and do whatever it is you big bad Rivera boys normally like to do on a Tuesday.” I smile sweetly.

He forces out a sarcastic-sounding laugh. “Not a chance, Sunshine. If I’m stuck here because of you, you’re stuck with me annoying you. I haven’t left the house in days, and I’m bored out of my mind. I need some entertainment.”

I have no idea why, but that comment makes me blush. “You want me to entertain you?” I squeak. I can only imagine what he’s used to with that club he runs, but I’m not dancing on the coffee table for him.

“Well, not entertain me,” he corrects himself, realizing what it sounded like. “But we’re both stuck here together. I did think we could get to know each other a little better.”



Know each other better? I swallow the spoonful of stir-fry, enjoying a little too well the warmth in his eyes. This is new. Could he really be so bored after four days that he has decided to be nice to me? Surely, he must have a ton of work still to do and a training regimen that keeps him busy. No, if I didn't know any better, this is a ploy to work me out, find out what I know about Liam. He wants to interrogate me, not become friends. "I hate to disappoint you, but I'm just here for the food, then I'm heading back to my room."

"You go back to that room, I'm following you in there," he says, his tone deadly serious.

I give him a look, like the fuck he will. That room is my safe space.

His face softens, and for the first time since I met him, I feel like this is the real Jett. The one he reserves for his friends and family. Not the badass he has to be in the public eye. "Come on, Hazel, I'm not the asshole you think I am. Come watch some TV with me tonight. You must be bored." He's practically begging me, with sad puppy dog eyes and all. I'm not sure what has shifted since the other day. Why is he being nice to me? Could he really be that desperate for someone to talk to?

I wasn't expecting him to be needy, but he's right, there is only so much sleeping I can do, and staring out the window plotting my escape can wait till tomorrow. "Alright. But I get to pick what we watch." I finish my last mouthful of dinner and hop up, taking my plate over to the sink to rinse it. "Where's the dishwasher?" I ask, looking around the fully appointed kitchen. I see everything but a dishwasher.

He comes up by my side and presses the drawer next to me, and it slides open, revealing a dishwasher.

"Ah. Thanks," I say, putting my plate in the half-empty rack. Turning back

to him, I'm suddenly not sure what I should be doing with my hands. He's right next to me in my personal space, so close I can smell his masculine scent. He's freshly showered, and there are hints of mint or something. Why do I feel so awkward around him? "When will Ben be home?" I whisper, my voice getting caught in my throat.

His eyes hold mine as they devour me. "Not till late." His brow raises, like he has done this dance a thousand times before, and I'm sure he has, but I am not that kind of girl. Not in real life, anyway, just in my fantasies with him.

"What about Kobe?" I whimper, hopeful someone else will be in the house tonight. I don't know why, but knowing it's just the two of us makes me feel strange, and I'm not sure if it's in a good or bad way.

"I'd say the same time, they're working together tonight at one of our clubs, Queen of Hearts." He leans his arm on the counter behind me, boxing me in. I can see him taking every little detail in, and his gaze settles back on mine with way too much heat.

"Oh, so it's just us all night." I blink back. What the hell is going on?

"Yep." His lips turn up at the corner like he likes the idea.

I swallow hard, and I'm not even sure why, but I think it's from the way he's looking at me. What on earth has gotten into him tonight? I guess a man like him is used to working at one of his many clubs until all hours. That probably gives him a lot of opportunity to meet girls and have a little fun on the side. From his heartbreaker reputation, I assume that's true, anyway, and being cooped up in this place must be messing with his head. Or his cock. Without thinking, I glance down to his crotch. I quickly correct myself and look back up to his face, but he's caught me.

"Don't worry, Sunshine, I won't try anything," he says before striding away, giving me space—and time to look at his ass. Man, he's so hot. Why

am I so attracted to him?

My stomach sinks, feeling the distance between us. I didn't want him to make a move, but the thought that a man like Jett Rivera might want me is a little empowering. Especially in my current state. "I should hope not. I'm a married woman," I whisper under my breath, annoyed that he would feel he even had to say he won't try anything. I don't really see myself as married to that asshole, but the truth is until death do us part. I'm technically still his wife, and for whatever stupid reason, I felt the need to make that obvious to Jett.

He stops dead in his tracks. Turning slowly, his body tense, his nostrils flaring, and I think he's going to tell me off for saying what I just did. But instead, his steely gaze meets mine, and he sucks in a deep breath. Anger radiates off every pore of his body, and I regret my words immediately. He doesn't say anything; instead, he spins back in the direction he was walking and storms into the sitting room.

What was that? I know he hates Liam, but that wasn't the first he'd heard about us being married, so I don't really understand the anger. I guess he takes his job very seriously and I just somehow insulted him. Maybe that's what I was trying to do. Make it clear that I don't belong here with him. I don't belong with Liam either, but Jett doesn't need to know how I feel about that.

# Chapter 7

## JETT

**TRYING TO GET THE** anger now coursing through my veins under control, I flick on the TV and hand Little Miss Sunshine the remote. She takes it from me cautiously, staring up at me with those big blue eyes that melt the crazy bubbling up inside.

Even though I've been desperate to steal a second alone with her since we decided she would stay here, I'm half regretting my decision to ask her to spend the night with me. Her comment has crawled under my skin, giving me the instant urge to kill. Why the fuck would she rub my nose in the fact that she's married? We both know what he did to her, and considering the circumstances, it would take a person with rocks in her head to even contemplate returning to him. But maybe it's a good thing, another reminder of why the inappropriate thoughts I was having about her in the kitchen are so wrong.

I need to focus on what Leo wants me to do, take off from what Piper was trying to do, getting to know Hazel so she will open up to us. We're all positive she has secrets about her life with Liam that could help us

take him down. But when she turned up wearing that cute little outfit tonight, she looked so adorable that my usual charm kicked in, and I was flirting with her before I even knew I was doing it.

She sits tentatively on the edge of the leather sofa, flicking through the channels until she lands on what she's after, and she smiles, delighted with her choice.

I glance at the TV. "*Bridgerton*? I wouldn't have pegged you for a hopeless romantic. Isn't that show all lovey dovey and shit?"

"I'm most definitely not all lovey dovey," she utters defensively, like I have just insulted her. "I just like the history of it." She folds her legs up cross-legged and gets more comfortable, leaning her head back.

"I don't know a lot about this show, but from the looks of it, I don't think it's very historically correct."

"Maybe, but look at those costumes, they're so beautiful," she gushes in awe.

And I realize I have made assumptions about this girl based on who she was forced to marry. I really know nothing about her at all. "They look like a lot of work, all those layers," I mutter, imagining how you would get the damn thing off.

"I suppose so." She glances at me, a brow raised. "Oh, you mean..." She blushes. Her attention goes back to the show to hide her discomfort. "Imagine being the one who got to design them, though, that would be my dream job."

"Costume designer?" I ask, intrigued and pleased she's opening up to me, even if I have to suffer through this monstrosity for her to do it.

She shrugs. "Anything in fashion really. When I was younger, I used to sketch down ideas. It's honestly the only thing I have ever wanted to do

with my life.”

“You’re young, you could still do whatever you wanted.”

“I doubt it.” She rolls her eyes, returning them back to her show. Does she have no confidence in her abilities, or has she just given up any hope of improving her life? She’s too young to be so defeated.

“I see you found your new clothes,” I tell her, wanting to say how nice she looks in them but reframing it, knowing I need to keep this relationship professional. Even though as soon as I saw her in them my cock came to life, telling me this is anything but professional. She’s adorable, and in her new trendy clothes, she looks even more so.

“Ah, yeah. They’re really cool. Ruby-Rose knows me well?” she says, with her voice rising at the end like it’s a question. She wants to know where they came from.

“She does,” I agree. She looks fucking edible tonight, and she’s just in a shirt and jeans. I can only imagine what she would look like in some of the cute skirts, or that bikini her friend picked out for her.

“Who paid for them? I know my brother and Ruby couldn’t have.” She does this thing where she flutters her lashes before her eyes narrow in on me, like she already knows the answer, but she is waiting for me to fess up. It’s annoyingly adorable.

“Does it matter? You needed something to wear, and we couldn’t really go back to your place to get your old clothes, now, could we?”

She pauses the TV, bringing her full attention to me. “Who was it, Jett?” she demands, her tone more serious. It’s amusing that she thinks she can demand anything from me.

I stare back at her, matching her intensity. I know she is going to make a fuss over something that isn’t a big deal, so I’m not admitting to

anything. She can believe whatever the hell she likes.

She shakes her head. “It was you, wasn’t it,” she says softly. “I will pay you back every last cent. As soon as I can.” She sounds sad about it, I guess because she doesn’t have a cent to her name. She could ask her wealthy mother for it, but from what I could see at the hospital their relationship is a little strained. I didn’t want to make her feel bad. I was trying to make her feel at home here, give her something nice, and Ben said she liked Amelia’s brand. I thought it might have been something to put a smile on her face.

“No, you won’t, they were a necessity,” I try to convince her. I don’t want her money or need it. I could afford to buy her anything she wanted, and for some reason, I want to. She’s come here with nothing, just a couple of T-shirts her friend lent her and a pair of old jeans. She deserves better. I’d give her the world if she let me, just so I could see her smile.

“Five-dollar T-shirts from Target are a necessity, designer clothes not so much.”

“It’s not a big deal, Hazel. I know the designer, so we got them at a decent price. I was hoping they might cheer you up a bit.”

She flicks her head toward me, and I think she’s about to rip me a new one for wanting to make her happy. “You know Amelia Harper?” she says instead, her eyes wide in surprise, and something that almost looks like a smile plays on her lips.

“She’s a friend of the family.” I shrug, reluctant to divulge my extensive knowledge about her. There was no need for Hazel to be aware of the meticulous research I did before she got here. I delved into every detail, relentlessly questioning Ben for any bit of information he could



provide. Each tidbit he shared only deepened my fascination with her, fueling my curiosity.

“Of course, she is. I suppose everyone becomes a friend of your family when your name is Rivera,” she snips, crossing her arms over her chest protectively. “I absolutely adore her designs. She’s utterly fierce. Did you know she built that brand and created all those designs while being a single mother to two little kids? It’s truly incredible, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, I did. I’m surprised you’re aware of all that,” I respond, taken aback by her extensive understanding of Amelia’s life.

“I’ve been her biggest fan from the very beginning. I know everything about her,” she says matter-of-factly, her tone laced with a sense of self-assurance.

I can’t help but smile at her. Her face is glowing in excitement, and she looks happy for the first time since I met her. Like this, she’s painfully beautiful, and part of me understands why Liam chose her over getting the debts owed to him by her father paid off. Knowing she was his for the rest of his life would have been worth every cent. It also makes me understand why he is placing such high demands on getting her back. If she were mine, I’d never let her go. I don’t even know what the fuck I’m thinking, but from the moment I laid eyes on her, that is the feeling I’ve had in my gut. That she is mine to protect, to care for, and to give the life she deserves. It’s why she is here in my home, a place I don’t let anyone who isn’t family even visit.

“What?” she says, and I realize I’ve been staring at her.

“You’re smiling. It’s nice to see.” My words stumble out clumsily after being caught by her.

“Thank you.” Her smile brightens, and she drops her head like she is

embarrassed by my attention.

“Hazel. This doesn’t have to be a prison for you. Maybe you could think of it as a holiday away from your life. You don’t have to stay in your room. Feel free to roam around the place, go for a swim in the pool or use the gym. This is your home while you’re staying with us. Make the most of it while you recover,” I say, trying to show her I’m not the asshole she thinks I am. I really do just want what’s best for her.

“I just can’t leave whenever I want to.” She shrugs, her expression tinged with a touch of sadness.

“You can. But you will have me by your side, and I would prefer you didn’t. I shouldn’t be telling you this, but Liam’s demands are getting more serious. He knows you’re here with us, and he is going postal about it. You’re safe within these walls, but out there, it’s harder to protect you. And he’s after you, he wants you back.”

Her eyes roam over my body like she is imagining me trying to protect her. “What are his demands?”

“He’s going to kill anyone who stands in his way of getting to you.” Basically me. But the part I’m not telling her is his last threat involved what he was going to do to her if she wasn’t returned immediately. That was two days ago, and I know men like him; he says he loves her, but it’s not love. It’s all about control, and he thinks of her as his possession. If he gets his hands on her, he will toy with her until he’s had his fun, then he will kill her for disobeying him.

“That sounds like him,” she says, her tone unaffected by the gravity of the situation.

“I’m surprised he’s still in the country, considering the number of people who must be after him.”

**“I believe you’ve underestimated the scale of his operation. Blowing up that factory may have halted one shipment, but the Kings’ operation is far more extensive. They have multiple warehouses scattered all over,” she explains, causing a chill to creep up the back of my neck.**

**If her words hold true, we’re in serious trouble. I haven’t been able to find any more information on their operation. It means they are smarter than I was giving them credit for. “We were relying on the information your brother provided,” I reply, hoping to defend our actions.**

**She raises an eyebrow. “Do you honestly think Ben had access to the kind of information I did? You overhear a lot of conversations you’re not supposed to when they think you’re nothing more than pretty arm candy.” She shrugs, as if it were a trivial matter. However, she knows it’s anything but. Any information she can provide would be invaluable in putting an end to Liam’s activities and ensuring he faces the consequences he deserves. Why is she holding back?**

**I sit up a little taller, needing more from her. She might be our key to bringing him down.**

**“What else haven’t you told us?” demands Leo, appearing in the sitting room doorway, surprising us both. His voice is deep and commanding. He hasn’t dropped by for a social visit. He’s here on business, and I already know he’s not going to like this situation.**

**Hazel gives him a look, her pretty smile from earlier gone and her resting bitch face firmly back in place. “I don’t have to tell you anything,” she utters defiantly.**

**Leo locks eyes with her, walking farther into the room and stopping in front of her. He stands over her, arms crossed. She glances at me then**

back to him. “We’re the ones keeping you alive, and that’s your attitude.”

She stands up, pushing past him. “You’re the ones holding me against my will,” she snips on her way to the door.

“You want to go back out there alone? Let your husband finish the job he started? Be my guest.” Leo glares at her, trying to push her to do as he wants, but I already know it’s not going to work on Hazel. She won’t be manipulated that easily. She’s too feisty. All he’s doing is forcing her to shut down again.

“Leo,” I chastise him. Is he kidding me? I was just getting somewhere with her. Why is he even here?

She looks to him angrily then back to me, and her eyes hold a challenge as she turns her focus on the door and stalks from the room with a huff.

“That was all a bit cozy,” he says, unimpressed, as he takes a seat on the leather recliner before handing me an envelope.

“Fuck, Leo, she’s probably packing her bags right now,” I say, ripping into the thing. Two photos fall out, both of Hazel wearing practically nothing, her gorgeous body on display, and I wonder if she even knew the creep was taking these. The words “*Property of the Kings*” is written across the photo in red marker. “*If she isn’t returned to me by 9am tomorrow she will have these words carved into her skin, while you watch.*” I break into a cold sweat, needing to go to her and make sure she’s not trying to leave. She won’t survive a day outside of this house. He probably has men waiting by the gate to scoop her up and drag her back to him.

“Let her go if she wants. We’re not offering her protection if she’s not willing to tell us what she knows,” he says, not bothered. But I know

that's not how he really feels. He's baiting me for some reason. Maybe so I do everything possible to get her to talk, to tell us what she knows about Liam.

"You really have a way with people don't you. Wasn't it you who wanted to make sure she got the best care possible? And you were the one who demanded I watch over her in the first place."

He eyes me like he is trying to read my mind. "That was before I knew how difficult she would be." Bullshit, he deals with difficult people every day. There is something more going on here.

"Haven't you ever heard that you catch more flies with honey than vinegar? She's not going to respond to your demands; you're just going to force her to shut down."

"And what's your plan, use your charm to find your way into her pants so she opens up to you? Tells you all her deep dark secrets?" His lips turn up at the sides, like the idea has just occurred to him and he likes it. This is Leo playing his mind-fuck games, thinking he knows everything about me when he doesn't.

"Fuck you," I say, standing to leave.

"She is exactly your type, young and damaged. I can see it in your eyes, you already want to save her. We all know how well that turned out for you last time. Let's not have history repeat itself."

"I don't have a type," I argue back, but I see his point. The last girl I tried to save fucked me over. And right now, I don't know if I can trust Hazel. She's too unpredictable. She has also spent two years with the Kings, and who knows what kind of manipulation they would have used on her. Truth be told, she could be here to end all three of us. The sweet

little assassin, just waiting for her time to strike. “We all make mistakes when we’re young, Leo.”

He nods, agreeing. “From what I heard of that conversation, it sounds like she is starting to trust you. Find out what she knows. We need to move in on the Kings soon, before they have a chance to re-establish themselves properly.” It’s the last thing I hear Leo say as I leave the room. I understand what he is trying to do, but sometimes my brother has no idea. I’m not sure how Piper puts up with him.

I go to my room, leaving the pictures of Hazel in the side table. I don’t ever want her to see them. Then I continue down the hall to her room. Knocking at her door, I wait.

“What,” she calls back, and it’s obvious she’s been crying. My fucking brother upset her.

“Can I come in?” I ask, trying to be polite and respectful. I need to get her back on my side.

“Do whatever you want. I know you Riveras will anyway.”

I push open her door to find her folding clothes into piles. She doesn’t look up.

“You’re not going anywhere,” I tell her.

“Your brother made it perfectly clear that I’m free to go if I choose.” She sniffles. I’m not sure why she’s so upset, she wants to leave. I thought she would be happy he told her to. But maybe there is a whole lot more going on that she hasn’t told me yet, and maybe her saying she wants to leave is all just an act. She knows she’s safe here, and she isn’t out there, so Leo telling her to go and fend for herself would be confronting when she knows how much danger she’s in.

“You’re not. If you leave, I will have to go after you and drag you back

here. So, let's save us both the trouble and you pack those clothes into the walk-in closet and make yourself comfortable here, because you're going to be here awhile."

She glances over toward me, unsure, her little nose red. Fuck, she's even more adorable when she cries. I'm so fucking screwed.

"Your brother would kill me if I let you leave," I add to make sure she knows I'm doing it for him and not anyone else, even though I might be.

"Like you're scared of my little brother." She rolls her eyes, going back to her folding. "Leo doesn't trust me."

"It's hard to trust anyone when you have been fucked over by people your whole life. We don't trust anyone until they prove themselves to us," I tell her honestly.

"We have that in common then."

"I'm sure we do." I scoop up a pile of her clothes and take them over to her closet and place them in one of the drawers. Then I go back for the next pile to prove my point, she is staying.

"I thought after Leo and Piper moved out, Ben and I were moving into the other side of the house?" she asks.

"Nah. I've decided I need to keep you close by. Just in case." In case of what exactly, I'm not sure, but the thought of her being on the other side of this massive house makes me feel uneasy. Truth is, if I had it my way, she would be in my bed so I could really keep a close eye on her at night. But since that's not possible, a couple of doors down the hall will have to do. For now. Even as I think it, I know how wrong it is. My brother is right, I want to be her savior, the man she depends upon to help her restart her life. And yeah, I want to fuck her. I'm desperate to, but it's not just that.

**“Oh.” Her cheeks flush with color like she can read my mind and the inappropriate thoughts I’m having about her.**

**Instead of acting on my impulses like I want to, I take the next pile; this one has a set of lacy lingerie on top. They’re exquisite, and I can’t help imagining what they would look like on her. She’s not looking my way, but her lips turn up at the sides, knowing what pile I have in my hands. She just set me up.**

**“Thank you,” she says softly, gratitude evident in her tone.**

**“For what?” I ask, unsure of the exact reason she’s thankful.**

**“For taking us in and trying to help us. I’m sorry if I seem ungrateful. It’s just that I’ve never had anyone give a damn about me and my brother before. It’s hard to accept, but I do appreciate your care,” she explains, her words laced with a touch of vulnerability.**

**“Not everyone has malicious intentions,” I assure her.**

**“From my experience, everyone wants something. So, if you’re not here with ulterior motives, what is it that you want?” she asks cautiously.**

**“The same thing as you. I want Liam dead,” I tell her with determination.**

**“Is that all? Or is there something else you want from me?” I curse internally as she looks at me, her lashes fluttering. It’s as if she’s a temptress, enticing me with the possibility of something more, I’m certain of it.**

**“Yes, that’s all, and the sooner the better,” I lie, knowing the longer we have together, the more dangerous this situation is going to get. I want her for so much more.**

**I knew when I saw her in the hospital, she was someone special. Energy buzzes between us that I can’t explain, and it’s here right now as well. If**



any other girl looked at me the way she does, I would haul her over my shoulder and off to bed. Fuck her out of my system then leave. But with Hazel, I can't act on my desires, and it's driving me crazy. She's Ben's sister, a married woman, and she's in my care. I have a responsibility to stay away from her. Having these feelings for her is wrong on so many levels, but her being unattainable only makes me want her even more.

Yes, we need Liam King fucking dealt with as soon as possible. For her safety as well as mine. We've only had one proper interaction, one night where she finally came out of her room and talked to me, and it's all I needed to confirm what I already knew. I have it bad for this girl. So fucking bad.

# Chapter 8

## HAZEL

FOR SUCH AN EXPANSIVE building, the finishings to this place make it feel quite homely. I run my hand along the flocked wallpaper, enjoying the silky texture.

Since I ventured out of my room, I've started exploring. I love the high ceilings with exposed beams and the sandstone fireplace in the sitting room the most. I could see myself snuggled up there on a cool winter's night with a hot cup of cocoa. The strangest part is I imagine I'm curled up there with Jett.

I dreamed about him again last night. I'm not sure if it's because he's pretty much the only human contact I've had in days and I have some form of Stockholm syndrome, or if it was the conversation we shared right before I went to bed. Either way, in my dream, I wasn't just handing him a pile of clothes with my sexy new lingerie on top as a bit of a tease. I was wearing them for him, giving him my body. I wanted him, and he was right there with me.

That dream has strangely put me in a happy mood, and I have come to the conclusion I should make the most of my stay here at Hotel Rivera. While I

bide my time plotting my revenge, I might as well enjoy the luxury of this place like Jett suggested. Because when I get out of here and go it alone, I'm leaving with just the shirt on my back and the best weapon I can find, and I already know how tough it's going to be.

I stop when I get to the end of the hallway. As I go to turn the corner into the living area and bump into my brother, he catches me with his hands on my shoulders to steady me and stop me from tumbling over. He might be two years younger than I am, but he towers over me. He has since he was thirteen and had his growth spurt. I, however, stopped at a tiny 5'3".

"Morning." I smile, happy to see him. He's been working so much this week, I feel like I haven't had a chance to catch up with him like I would have liked. "Do you have time to grab a coffee with me?" I ask, I have so many questions for him. The last couple of years have been tough for us both, and today, I finally feel up to delving into it with him.

He runs a hand through his shaggy hair. "Yeah, I would, but there's someone here to see you first, Haze."

"Who is it?" I murmur, worried. The only person I want to see is Ruby-Rose, and I know he would have just let her into my room, so whoever else it is, I already know I don't want to see them.

He gives me a guilty look, and I know the answer immediately. I shake my head. "She just wants to check on you," he says. "Make sure you're okay. She came to see you at the hospital last week, but she said the nurse looking after you wouldn't let her in."

"I wonder why. Maybe because I told them I didn't want to see her."

"Just hear her out. Please," he grumbles like he's heard it all before, because he has. I haven't been able to look my mother in the eye since she betrayed me. I'm not sure why Ben still finds a need to play happy families,

when this is clearly not going to be one of those ever again. No mother who cares lets her husband trade their daughter to a notorious gang member. She can play innocent all she wants to Ben, but I don't buy it. Not for a second.

I sigh heavily, knowing I won't win this fight. He's more persistent than me, and she has already pushed her way into the house. I motion for him to lead the way, an uneasy feeling taking over my pleasant mood. When we get to the living room, I find her sitting with Jett, crocodile tears rolling down her face, a mug of what looks like coffee in her hands. She would have snapped her fingers requesting service as soon as she walked in the door. It's what she's used to, after all. Only the best for my dear mother. I wonder how long she has been here talking to him, the thought is disconcerting. I don't want Jett to think I'm any reflection of her.

"Oh, Hazel," she calls in her demure way that tells the rest of the room she is better than us all. She delicately places her mug down on the coffee table in front of her, then stands, making a show of throwing her arms around my shoulders like I'm her long-lost daughter. I pat her back in a "there, there" way then push her off me, needing space. I don't have the energy to play pretend with her today. She might have given birth to me, but I think that's where the maternal instincts ended. From the minute I was old enough to smile, she saw me as some form of competition.

"What can I do for you?" I ask, my voice cold, wanting this over with as soon as possible. She is dressed to the nines, in a tailored skirt that stops just below the knee and a silk blouse, with a full face of make-up and her blonde hair in a French twist. She was always the best-dressed mother in her uppity circles. Just another way of her saying she's better than me.

She takes my hands, and my body stiffens. "I needed to see that you were okay." She looks me over. "I have been so worried about you, darling."

I wiggle out of her grip. *Darling*, her calling me that makes me feel sick. I narrow my eyes at her. There are so many things I want to say to her, but I can't, not here in front of Ben and Jett. I take a deep breath, my gaze shifting to Jett, knowing I need to control my anger in front of him. It's embarrassing enough she has turned up here. The last thing I need is her causing more of a scene in his house.

"As you can see, I'm fine. No need to worry about me." I smile through clenched teeth.

"Can we have a word in private?" she utters softly but with an urgency to her tone.

"Why don't you go out onto the patio," suggests Jett, and I offer him a tight smile. The last thing I want is to be left alone with her. At least with Jett and Ben around, she will have to behave herself.

"Perfect," she coos toward him.

I scrunch up my nose, knowing what she's trying to do. She thinks she can charm him; it's disturbing. It's probably why she's here. Since my dad took off, she's been living off Daddy's money. She probably heard how loaded these boys are and thought she could worm her way in.

Reluctantly, I take her through the living room and open the sliding door that leads to the outdoor area. It's stunningly beautiful and the view almost takes my breath away as I survey the opulent space. There is a table with chairs that seats at least ten, a long pool that runs the length of the house, and BBQ area laid out, with sandstone tiles and a perfectly manicured lawn. A tall concrete wall encloses the space, making it completely private. Also, difficult to escape.

"The Riveras are certainly doing well for themselves; security must pay well," my mother comments.

“Hmm,” I agree vaguely. Jett must have told her he owns a security company, not all the other shit he’s into. But she would have to know, everyone does. I find a seat and relax back, taking a deep breath of fresh air. It feels like it’s been weeks since I’ve been outside. The sun warms my skin, waking me up and making me feel alive again. This might just be my new favorite space in this house, but I have yet to explore the rest.

I can feel my mother’s eyes on me, and I glance back over to her, waiting for her to enlighten me on why she’s here.

“You look better than I thought you would after what Ben said happened. But, Hazel, would it kill you to wear a little make-up with all these good-looking men around? You really should try and put a little more pride into your appearance. You weren’t raised like such a Raggedy Ann.”

I glare at her. Is she kidding me? “Make-up is literally the last thing I care about right now. You know he damn near killed me, right?” I raise my voice. I knew it wouldn’t take long for her to get under my skin.

“Always with the dramatics.” She dismisses what Liam did to me with a wave of her hand, like it was nothing, and I’m not even surprised. That’s her way; turn a blind eye to the reality of the situation she put me in. It’s why I haven’t spoken to her since.

“You need to fix yourself up, darling. All of this is nothing a makeover won’t fix, then you can get yourself back home to your husband where you belong. You know Liam loves you. I’m sure all this was a silly misunderstanding.”

I stare back at her, too shocked for words. She wants to send me back to him. He nearly killed her only daughter, and she wants me to go right back there for him to do it again. What on earth could possibly be going through her mind.

“Don’t look at me like that. He came to see me yesterday and explained everything. He has a very special gift waiting for you.” She beams like a gift will make it all better.

She’s delusional. Has she been drinking wine already today? “How do you explain this away with a new car?” I remove my head scarf so she can see the wound.

She flinches, and for a second, I see a glimmer of compassion. “An accident. He said it was an awful accident. He loves you, darling, and he’s missing you like crazy, you’re his whole world. Please at least go and visit him and try to work things out.”

I gape at her, so lost in confusion. I tie the scarf back in place and let out an exhausted sigh. How could she think this is a good idea? Is she getting something out of this? Because it makes no sense for her to send me back to him, but she looks almost desperate.

“And once you two sort it all out, you should really drop by the house with Liam for dinner.” She smiles like the deal is done and I will just run on home to him.

“Drop by for dinner, right,” I mutter, feeling confused as hell.

She gives me a look, one that almost makes her look remorseful or guilty, which would imply she knows what she’s done to me is wrong. “I would so enjoy your company.”

“You want me to come to dinner with my gang-member husband. Wouldn’t that tarnish your reputation with the other upstanding members of society?”

“Oh no, far from it. Liam has made quite the reputation for himself as a legitimate businessman, you know. He’s worth more than any of the other husbands combined. See? It all worked out for you, darling. Your father’s mistake is your gain,” she tells me like I don’t already know all of these facts



about my husband. I know what he's worth. I also know how he not-so-legitimately got a hold of all his money.

Now her coming here today makes more sense—me leaving my husband looks bad. It affects her reputation down at the country club, like I'm some sort of failure in the eyes of her friends because I don't want to stay married. I'm better off going back to him and pretending he's not an evil motherfucker.

“Let me get this straight. You want me to go back to him just to save face. So you don't look like your daughter has had a failed marriage. Especially not to a billionaire.”

“Hazel. He's your husband. He's family. How could you just take off like this? He loves you. Now it's time you made things right. Don't be like your dad. Family is the most important thing.”

Her words are supposed to soften me, but they just build another layer on my armor. That man doesn't love me. He wants to own me, have me as one of his many possessions, and I won't be owned by anyone. I only stayed with him so long because I didn't have an out. I had no money of my own and no protection if I did get away from him. He would have tracked me down and killed me before I got to the next town. It's why I needed a plan—and I thought I had one. Kill him, steal whatever cash was lying around for me to run with, then get the fuck out of the state before anyone even knew it had happened. It would have worked too if his brother hadn't been released from jail early.

“*Family.*” I laugh wickedly. “You're my mother. How could you do this to me and think it's okay? He might not have killed me this time, but I can assure you if I go back to him, he will.” She is all sorts of delusional.

I push my chair back and turn away from her. I've heard all I can stand.

“Get back here, Hazel. I’m not done,” she raises her voice, a slight hint of desperation chiming through.

But as far as I’m concerned, she’s dead to me. I don’t owe her anything, and I’m not giving her a second longer of my time. I feel her right behind me. She reaches out and grabs my arm, pulling me back to her as her long nails dig into my skin. “This is bigger than you.”

“Let me go,” I seethe, really wanting to let her have it for the situation she put me in. I hate her.

She pulls my wrist harder, the look in her eyes pure evil. “Not until you hear me out,” she growls, sounding very unladylike and not at all how my mother likes to sound. I must have really gotten her worked up.

“I think you’re done,” comes Jett’s voice from the doorway, and I couldn’t be more grateful.

I pull out of her grip and my eyes meet his in a silent thank-you. I push past him, needing to get as far away from her as I can. “Time for you to leave,” I hear him tell her, his voice thick with irritation. I don’t know how he knew I needed him, but he was here right when I did.

I find Ben waiting for me in the kitchen. “What happened?” He grabs me and drags me into the massive pantry away from her.

“She’s lost her mind, she wants me to go back to him,” I cry. “I told you I couldn’t talk to her.”

He grabs me, holding me while I sob into his chest, my whole body trembling from the nasty altercation. “Ben, you have to promise me you won’t ever do anything she says. And stay the hell away from her. She’s not family. Family doesn’t hurt you the way she has me.”

“I’m sorry, Haze, I shouldn’t have pushed you to see her. She was begging me, and I thought maybe she wanted to help you, that’s how she made it out.

Like she was desperate to make things right. I was wrong.”

“She only cares about how she looks. You know that. This was all a ploy to get her image back on track.”

I hear the front door slam shut, and seconds later, Jett is standing in the walk-in pantry doorway with the two of us. “Are you alright?” he says softly.

“How much of that did you hear?” I whisper, embarrassed he heard any of it.

“All of it,” he says unashamedly. “She won’t be allowed on the property again.” The way he looks at me makes me want to curl up on his lap with his big strong arms wrapped around me, telling me he will protect me from them all. I don’t even know why. I have never wanted a man to protect me before, but with Jett it’s different. I think I actually trust him. There is something about his presence that makes me feel safe. He might be irritated by my annoying presence in his life, but that wouldn’t stop him from doing everything in his power to keep me safe.

“Thank you,” I say, grateful.

Ben looks between us with curiosity.

“Breakfast,” says Jett, grabbing a loaf of bread.

I head straight for the coffee machine, taking a mug and making myself a cappuccino with extra chocolate, just the way I like it. “Anyone else want one?” I offer, trying to sound cheerful, hoping the distraction will keep me from completely losing it over my mother. I can’t bear to dwell on what just happened. She’s gone now, and I won’t be seeing her again.

“We’ve already eaten. Been up since six, training, Sis. We don’t all have the luxury to sleep in all morning,” says my brother, but he’s distracted, flicking through his phone. His words sting, and I can’t help but feel a twinge of envy for the freedom he still has, untouched by the constraints I’m facing.

“I wasn’t really sleeping; I just don’t have anything else to do,” I say sadly, my voice betraying the frustration and disappointment I’m suffering through. It feels like I’m trapped, missing out on the best days of my life while confined within the suffocating walls of this house. The dreams I once held dear, of pursuing a creative and hands-on career like fashion or graphic design, now seem like distant memories, overshadowed by my unwanted marriage to Liam.

Ben looks up from his phone, sympathy in his eyes. “I’m sorry, Hazel. It won’t be forever,” he says with a tinge of compassion, understanding the burden I bear.

“Do you think maybe when you have time, you could teach me some of the moves you’re learning? I would like to know how to protect myself,” I ask. I long for a sense of empowerment amidst the chaos of my life, and it would be nice to spend some time with him.

Jett returns from the butler’s kitchen with a plate of toast, butter, and blueberry jam. “He’s still in training himself. I’ll teach you,” he says firmly. I can’t help but feel a flicker of gratitude for his willingness to help. But there is no way I can sign up for one-on-one sessions with Jett.

I look at him, my worry growing. The thought of spending time together in the gym, both of us drenched in sweat, makes me feel uneasy for so many reasons. The biggest one is me not being able to keep my hands off him when he’s that close to me. This thing between us is intoxicating enough; add in a little adrenaline and muscles on display and I’ll be a goner. “That’s okay, you’re doing enough for me,” I reply.

“No, you’re right, you should be able to protect yourself. We’ll start today. It will also help with your anger issues,” he says with determined resolve.

“I don’t have anger issues,” I snap, frustrated. Is he kidding me? I’m cool,

calm, and collected when I'm not locked up. Lies, I know, but how dare he call me out on it.

"I'd prefer Kobe train with her," Ben adds, and both of us turn our attention toward him. His eyes go between us like he thinks something's going on, and he doesn't like it.

"When you're at a rank where you can make decisions, I'll let you know," Jett tells him, his response sharp and authoritative. "And after letting that woman into our house today, you have just dropped one in my eyes," Jett chastises him.

"I know I messed up, Jett. I really thought she was here because she cared. She's our mother; she's supposed to give a damn about what happens to us," Ben says with defeat written all over his face. I can't help but feel a pang of sympathy for him. He was just trying to do the right thing. It's not his fault our mother is a colossal bitch.

"I know how hard you've tried to keep what's left of our family together, Ben, but some things just aren't meant to be. They destroyed it, not us. And now we have to rise above our upbringing so we can have better lives," I say to try and console him, my protective big-sister instincts kicking in. "I'm already so proud of you and the work you're doing with the Riveras; you can really make something of yourself here. No looking back, okay?"

"Okay," Ben agrees, but his response lacks conviction. It's clear that this burden weighs heavily on him, and he's struggling to find a way to cope. I wish I could go into it further with him, find out what's really going on in his head, but with big-ears Jett hanging around, I decide not to.

"And don't worry about me with him." I point to Jett. "I can handle him." I smile his way sweetly, hiding my true feelings about my new predicament.

Jett bites into a piece of toast, but his brow raises in fascination at my

comment.

“It’s him I’m worried about.” Ben laughs half-heartedly, trying to hide how he really feels. But I know he doesn’t want me getting too close to Jett, I can see it. He doesn’t fully trust him. Even when he tells me to.

“You should be.” I nudge his shoulder playfully.

Jett pops the last bit of toast into his mouth then rounds the counter. “Ben, we have that meeting with Leo and Kobe,” he says, waiting for my brother to stand so they can go off together, leaving me alone, stuck in my own head again.

Ben wanders off in the direction of the office where they have all their secret boys’ meetings.

“Be ready in the gym at two and we will see how well you can handle me,” Jett says with a wink, and there’s heat in his eyes that scares the shit out of me. The guy who was ignoring me and bossing me around was easy to hate, but this playful side of him is charismatic and dangerous. I already know I’m in trouble, because I like this version of him.

# Chapter 9

## JETT

**HAZEL PUSHES OPEN THE door to the gym, and I'm rewarded with a view of her in a pair of booty shorts and a baggy T-shirt. Her legs are long and toned for such a shorty. It doesn't matter that she's in workout gear, just the sight of her makes my body come to life. And this is why Kobe isn't training her. Her idea was valid, but the man-whore would have been all over her, and I can't have that. Not when she is all I can think about.**

**"Ah, are you ready for me?" she asks, uncertain, peering into the gym.**

**"Yeah. Let's start with a warmup." I collect a jump rope from our supplies cabinet and hold it out for her to take. "Five minutes," I tell her. She gives me a sassy look like she thinks I'm kidding. "It will get your heart rate up and warm up your muscles."**

**She takes the rope, still looking at me like I have just asked her to do something unbelievable. "Alright, but you have no idea how uncoordinated I am." She laughs.**



**“I’m sure you can manage a little skipping,” I respond, my tone more serious. She was the one who wanted to learn. If I’m the one teaching her, we’re doing it right.**

**She lines the rope up, ready to go, then looks back to me. “I can’t do it with you watching me. I’ll mess up and trip over my own feet.”**

**“While it would be a shame to miss you landing on your ass, I’m going to get the rest of the equipment ready while you warm up.”**

**I open our equipment cupboard, looking for gloves that will fit her tiny hands. I know we have some in here. Brandon had them for Cassandra when she was staying here. I find them at the back, the leather still perfectly intact. I doubt they have ever been used. I grab a set of pads as well and close the cupboard, catching sight of Hazel. Her foot gets tangled in the rope, forcing her to stumble forward, just catching herself before she falls flat on her face. I chuckle quietly to myself. Maybe she was right to worry about her proficiency.**

**“I can hear you. It’s not funny! I warned you I have no co-ordination.”**

**“Okay, maybe put the rope down then; you can follow me in doing some stretches. I take her through leg swings, arm circles, and torso twists to help with mobility and flexibility. The whole time I can’t stop the stupid smirk on my face after seeing her with that damn rope.**

**Her face is serious as she tries to concentrate on the way my body is moving. It makes her look even more adorable. I’m so fucking screwed. I shouldn’t have signed myself up for this.**

**“Now I’ll take you through some shadow boxing techniques.” I move slowly so she can keep up with the combinations and focus on the proper technique and footwork. It’s how I learned originally from my first trainer and how Kobe has been teaching Ben. If you can get the**

foundations right at the beginning, everything else falls into place. “Okay, now I’m going to teach you some basic striking techniques, starting with a jab-cross.”

“Okay,” she agrees, looking uncertain. I can’t tell if she is just anxious about trying something new or if it’s me making her so nervous today.

“You’re not going to learn all of this in one session, Hazel. It takes years to perfect these techniques. Just give them a go and you will get better every session we do together.”

She nods, still concentrating on my arms.

I show her what the jab-cross should look like, then move around behind her so I can take her body through the same action. She’s so tiny, my frame completely consumes her. It gives me ideas I shouldn’t be having. “Faster, like this,” I say, forcing her hand forward, trying to focus on what we’re here to do. I could drop her to the mat so easily and have her pinned beneath me. It would be fun, and I’m sure she would melt into me. I can see it in her eyes, she wants me.

“Okay.” She nods, letting me help her try it again.

“Better.”

She does it again alone. The shake of her hands eases as she gets more comfortable.

I take a pad and stand opposite her, preparing to take her jab. Her eyes meet mine. “Use more force. Find the anger I know is inside of you.”

She stares back at me, and I see the fire burning in there. She’s fueled by it, the hatred she has toward her husband. She slams into the pad with speed and accuracy, and I feel it.

“Perfect. Now let’s try a hook-uppercut.” I act it out for her, so she knows what I’m talking about.

The rest of the session is much of the same, me taking her through various moves that I will go into more detail with in the coming weeks. Despite her clumsiness, she's a good student and listens to every instruction diligently. "Tomorrow we can go over elbow and knee strikes," I tell her.

"Can't wait," she says sarcastically. "I'm not very good at this." She sighs heavily.

"That's why you practice. No one is good at anything the first time they attempt it. Do some stretches to cool down or you won't be able to move for our session tomorrow."

She stretches her arms over her head then touches her toes in some sort of a yoga move, working her way to sitting on the mat. She's surprisingly flexible. "When are we going to practice the wrestling moves?" She looks up at me, her lashes batting in the way they do when she's being a smartass. "You know, where your big sweaty body has me pinned to the ground and you teach me how to knee you in the balls to get out of it." She smiles broadly, thinking she's funny.

But she has no idea the real effect she's having on me. Her comment goes right to my dick, imagining her tiny frame pinned under mine. Her pretty eyes staring up at me, asking me to do things to her I know I shouldn't. Fuck, it's all I have been able to think about since she stepped foot in here this afternoon.

"We can work on grappling techniques when you have a hold of the basics. But just so you know, if I had you pinned down, you wouldn't want to get away from me." The words leave my mouth before I can stop them, and I don't turn back to see her reaction, busying myself with the equipment.

**“I’m serious, Jett. I need all the answers here. What if I don’t have a weapon and I’m cornered? What do I do then?” I hear the tremble in her voice; she’s serious. She’s thought this scenario over in her head more than once. I want to tell her she won’t ever have to worry about a situation like that, because I will always be there to protect her, but even I know she will leave my side one day, and she needs to know how to protect herself.**

**I come over to her, helping her up to standing. “Use any sharp object you can find and hit him right here.” I show her, demonstrating on her neck. I feel the goosebumps rise over her skin as I do. “Anything—the stiletto of a shoe, a pen, whatever is closest to you, okay?”**

**Her hand comes to mine, feeling where my hand is, then she moves to my throat. “Here?”**

**“Yes,” I agree. But the way she’s looking at me, it’s as if she has forgotten I’m showing her how to kill a man. She looks at me with a deep longing, like this crazy chemistry I’m feeling is taking over her as well.**

**She nods slowly as if understanding, but her eyes don’t drop from mine. Her tongue glides over her bottom lip, and I know I have to get out of here before I overstep the mark, because right now, it would be easy to pull her into me and kiss her fucking edible lips... trace the place her tongue just was.**

**I pull my hand back quickly. “Pack away the equipment. I’m going for a shower,” I tell her, leaving the room in a hurry. A motherfucking cold shower, so I can get my now-hard dick under control. Not only that but my hammering heart. What the fuck is it with this girl? I need to get out of this house and away from her before I follow through on my threats to pin her down—and go one step too far, fucking her for real.**

**Instead, I turn on the shower and strip off my clothes. Standing under the water, my mind drifts back to her. Her full lips, her tight little ass in those booty shorts; she's a temptress. I take my cock in my hand, stroking myself like a fucking madman in a desperate attempt to alleviate the tension she's created. I can't have her. She's out of fucking bounds. But I can picture how good it would be if I did.**

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HAZEL

I SWALLOW THE LUMP in my throat as I watch him stride from the room. Slumping back to the mat to continue stretching, I run my fingertips over the spot on my neck where Jett's hand just was. I'm hot, like overheating, scorching-hot, and it's not from the workout. It's from his touch on my skin, from how he looked with his shirt off. My intention with this training session was to learn everything I could from him about how to defend myself for when I finally get out of this place. I want to make sure I'm ready for Liam this time. But that hour of one-on-one with a shirtless Jett was so much more than I bargained for.

At first, I was insanely nervous just being so close to him, but I could see how seriously he was taking teaching me, so it helped to ease my anxiety. But that comment, *Just so you know, if I had you pinned down, you wouldn't want to get away from me.* Man, that lit my body up.

The more time I spend with him, the more I crave his attention, and when he makes it obvious he's having dirty thoughts about me as well, it makes it really hard not to push him and see what he might do. I wanted more than anything for him to kiss me just now. And for a second, I thought he just

might, but then he pulled away from me like he was disgusted by the idea, leaving me feeling silly for even thinking about it.

I know he is Ben's boss and kind-of friend, and he's supposed to be my bodyguard, but would it be all that bad if we did act on this obvious attraction? I can't see why it would. It's not like it's going to be anything more than a fling. He doesn't do relationships, and I have no interest in been locked down with someone else after my terrible marriage. It could just be the two of us exploring a mutual attraction. A sexy little romp to pass the long days in this place while we wait for Leo to get his shit together. No one else would need to know.

When I'm finished stretching, I pack all the equipment away like he asked me to, then close the door behind me. Maybe I should have asked Kobe to train me, like Ben suggested. I'm not sure I'm going to last another session like this with Jett. But then again, I wouldn't have wanted to miss out on the way it felt to have his hands on me either.

I head for the kitchen in search of something cold to drink and find a can of lemonade in the fridge. I crack it open and pour it into a tall glass, alongside some ice cubes, then walk out onto the patio area in search of the sun. Why hadn't I ventured out here earlier? It's such a peaceful spot. Relaxing onto the deck chair, I sip my lemonade before placing it on the table beside me. The sun is warm on my skin and feels so nice that I think I might just take off my T-shirt and enjoy it a little more. There is no one home except for Jett, and he's in his room, so I would say I'm safe to lie out in just my booty shorts and my sports bra.

To get myself comfortable, I roll onto my tummy and adjust the seat so it's lying down flat. I close my eyes sleepily and let the warmth roll over my skin. In summer when I was younger, I used to spend as much time as I could

lazing by the pool. I have always loved the sun. In winter, I'm like a cat going from room to room in search of warmth. We had a nice patio at my family home, but it had nothing on this one. Not that you could tell my mother that because in her opinion, everything we had was better than others'. She could argue for days about the fact.

"You better put on sunblock if you intend to stay out there for much longer," Jett's voice calls from the kitchen.

I squint in the direction of his voice and find him standing in the doorway, his hair still wet, fresh from his shower. "You got any?" I ask, hoping to stay out a bit longer. It feels too good having the warmth on my skin.

"Probably not, so maybe you should just come inside and cover up instead," he grumbles.

I give him a look like, why the hell would I do that? "Nah, it's too nice out here." I roll over onto my back instead, covering my eyes with my hand. I hear him grumble something under his breath, but I tune him out. *Go inside and cover up.* What, is he offended by seeing a bit of skin? He's the one who parades around here with his shirt off.

The next thing I know, I'm lifted off the day bed. He carries me toward the pool. "Don't you dare, Jett," I squeal.

"I warned you to put some clothes on," he cautions, yet his voice is filled with a playfulness I wasn't expecting.

"I like the sun. I won't stay out for long, I promise. Just enough time to get my tan back."

He swings me like he's going to throw me in the pool, and I squeal. "Jett!" I warn him.

The next thing I know, I'm flying through the air, heading toward the water. I land awkwardly with a splash that feels like it must have emptied the

pool and come up spluttering for air. “What the hell,” I yell at him.

He stands on the edge looking smug. “You looked hot, thought you might like to cool down.” He laughs, not able to hide his amusement.

“You’re a prick.” I splash water toward him, but I’m not really that bothered, it’s nice in here. I might have to go in search of my bikini so I can really make the most of this space. “Payback’s a bitch, Jett. And you know I hold grudges, so you better watch out,” I threaten him.

“Dry off before you come back in the house,” he says, leaving a towel on the lounge I was on, before walking back inside the house. What was that?

I stay in the water for a little bit, enjoying the freedom of being out of the house, even if it is only a couple of yards away and still attached with a wall all the way around stopping me from going any farther.

It’s nice to be outside. I couldn’t have done something like this at Liam’s house. There were always so many of his men around, and he was insanely jealous. I did try once, right at the beginning of our marriage, before I realized what I was up against. We had a gathering of some of his friends, and it was a scorching summer day. Everyone was in and out of the pool all day, so I didn’t think anything of it but to go for a swim. Apparently, there were more eyes on me than I had realized, and somehow it was my fault his so-called friends were pervs. Liam made sure I knew not to wear anything so revealing around them again. I cringe thinking of how crazy he must be going right now. If he gets his hands on me again, he will kill me, I’m sure of it. That’s why I have to make sure I get him first.

After I start to wrinkle up, I hop out of the pool and flop back down on the lounge to dry off. My bruises are fading to an icky yellow color. It makes me itch for more ink. In the past when he hurt me, I would wait for the bruises to fade then book in with Liam’s tattoo artist and have them inked over,



replacing the pain with something beautiful. It sounds silly, but to me it was a way of regaining a little control. These designs are my choosing. It also helped that I knew how much my mother hated them, and every last one I got over the past two years was also a silent dig at her. I wasn't the good little private school girl anymore, and that was her fault for letting my father trade me.

"You really are intent on getting sunburned out here, aren't you," Jett says, securing his faded black cap on my head and handing me a bottle of sunblock.

"Why are you so worried? I'm pretty sure your job doesn't extend to protecting me from the almighty sun."

"Maybe I just don't want you around the place whining about your blistered skin."

"Or maybe you just wanted an excuse to pick me up. Didn't get enough of me in the gym." I say the words before my brain has a chance to stop me. I want to know why he picked me up. It was a super flirty move if I ever saw one.

"Be very careful, Hazel, you're starting something you won't be able to finish," he warns, but his voice holds a challenge. Like he wants me to push him.

What he doesn't know is maybe that's what I want too. To start something with him. Something stupid, something completely out of character for me. Something I know has no chance of ever going anywhere. Maybe for once in my life I want to throw caution to the wind and do something I shouldn't. I mean, really, what is the worst that could happen? My life is a total train wreck anyway. Might as well have a little fun with the man I'm stuck with.

# Chapter 10

## HAZEL

“HONESTLY, YOU’RE DOING ME a favor,” Piper practically begs me. “Ever since my salon was burned to the ground, I’ve been bored out of my mind. I’m used to working all week, it keeps me busy. Now I have too much time to think. Let me get my color fix! And I’m sure you could do with a little makeover after what happened.”

She and Leo are visiting for a family lunch. The boys have some meeting at the moment, and she snuck up to my room to check on me. I find it strange we have struck up a friendship, her personality is so different to mine, but somehow, I have found solace in her, stuck in the house full of men.

I examine her, wondering if I should accept her generous offer. She’s a beautiful woman, her hair long and sleek, her face perfectly made up. Her clothes are stylish and tailored, even though it’s a Sunday. She has an air of confidence about her that gives me assurance she won’t screw my hair up any more than it already is from the surgery. But I don’t trust her motives for being here. I know Leo has it in for me, I can feel it, and she’s his girlfriend. Is she just here trying to be my friend so I will tell her something? I really

hope not, but history has taught me not to take anyone at face value. The ones you think are your friends are really just enemies waiting for the right time to screw you over.

“What colors can you do? I want something completely different. Like bright blue or pink,” I throw out there, thinking there is no way she will. It wouldn’t be in her realm with the type of uppity clientele she normally has.

But to my surprise, her lips turn up at the sides. “I can do anything you want.” She hands me a chart with lots of hair samples all lined up, like she’s already won me over.

I study the chart, wondering what I should do. I’m a mousy brunette at the moment; my hair has always been this color, just like my mother. She used to offer to get highlights or a fresh new color whenever she had her sandy blonde redone, but I didn’t want to be another cardboard cutout like the rest of the girls I attended school with. I liked the way my hair was naturally bleached by the sun in summer, giving it highlights. I liked being real in a sea of fake. But Piper’s right, I need a change. I don’t want to look like Liam’s wife anymore. I want a look more reflective of the real me. And even if she’s offering because Leo sent her, I can still get a new hairdo out of it. I don’t have to tell her anything I don’t want to.

“This one.” I point to the tint named Obsidian Green, an enigmatic green color with deep, nearly black appearance and hints of green shimmering through. It’s perfect. Dark and moody, just the way I’m feeling.

She nods, her eyes bright with excitement. “Excellent choice. Go get a chair and I’ll set up in the ensuite.”

When I get back to my bathroom, Piper is mixing up color in a little bowl. I put the chair down so I can watch in the mirror and take a seat. “I’m sorry

they destroyed your salon,” I tell her, knowing exactly who was to blame—my husband and his brother out for some sort of revenge against her family.

“We have both had our fair share of run-ins with the King brothers,” she says sadly, and I wonder what she is referring to. I know the King brothers couldn’t stand her, but I thought that was more of a family thing. Like they had unfinished business with her because of who her father was, and since she was the only surviving family member, she was their target.

“May I?” She motions to take off the head scarf I’m wearing to cover my shaved head. “I won’t dye over this part this time, but when I come back in a few weeks I can do it for you, when we know it’s all healed up properly.”

“Thanks.” I smile shyly.

She runs her hands through my hair like a comb. “How are you surviving here without me? Bet there is way too much testosterone.”

“That there is. But I’m okay, I guess. Jett’s not as much of an asshole as I originally thought, and Kobe’s not here much. I spend most of my time in my room alone.” I shrug.

“Plotting your revenge?” she says with a little too much enthusiasm in her voice. I look up at her, wondering if she can read my mind. “That’s what I would be doing if someone did this to me,” she adds, obviously reading my expression.

I look her over again. I’m sure she would be. She looks tough as nails. She would have to be to put up with Leo. No other woman would survive his death stare alone. And if the rumors are true about the Acevedo family, she would’ve grown up prepared to fight. She was born into this world and understands the ins and outs better than anyone. I’m jealous of her a little; I wish I had known what I was in for, but no one prepared me. I went from the sheltered life of a spoiled private school girl to married to a gang member

overnight. Talk about whiplash. But Liam made sure I was desensitized pretty damn quickly. I think he used to take pleasure in shocking me with the brutality of him and his men.

“What would you do? How would you get your revenge on someone like Liam, if it was you?” I ask her, wanting an honest answer.

She paints my hair with her little brush, concentrating on every stroke. “Probably make sure he was in his house then blow it up.” She smiles sardonically, and I know she’s not kidding, she’s thought about doing exactly that to someone. Is that what Leo plans on doing when the time is right?

It gives me even more respect for her. She’s totally badass. I wish I had her balls, but I’m not strong like Piper. Maybe it was my upbringing, or maybe I just don’t have it in me to fight the way she does.

“Hmm.” I think on it. I can’t imagine being able to pull off something like that. “Not my style.” Her eyes meet mine in the mirror, and I know she’s dying to know what my style is, but I don’t tell my secrets to just anyone, and other than her helping me out with meals on my first few days here, I don’t know her or trust her enough to let her in on my plan.

She shrugs like it’s my loss. “This color is going to suit you. Such a pretty face shouldn’t be hidden behind boring hair. A fresh color can change your life, and I feel like this is going to be the start of something exciting for you. You’re taking back a bit of your power.”

“Taking it back? I never had any power in the first place. I went from being controlled by my parents to being controlled by Liam.”

“I heard your father was pretty high up in the police force.”

“He was, but he took off after he married me to Liam. Guess being associated with a lowlife drug-selling gang isn’t the best look for a detective.” I roll my eyes. He’s a coward in my books, making me pay for his

fuck-up. Him screwing me over hurt more than my mother. I half expected her to do something to ruin my life, but with him, I never saw it coming. He was the one I was close to, Daddy's little girl. He adored me. Or so I thought.

"I can't imagine it would be easy. How did you end up married to him, anyway? I mean, I get the whole arranged-marriage thing, that's how I got married so young, but your family is worlds apart from mine."

Piper was forced into an arranged marriage? I can't see it. "I have no idea. No one told me what was going on. I thought I was going to a high school graduation party. The next thing I knew I was married to Liam and being shipped off to live with him."

"That's fucked up, Hazel," she mutters, taken aback.

I nod, agreeing with her. It might be, but it's also what happened, and there was nothing I could do about it. That's what I hate about my life the most, the loss of control.

She finds my eyes in the mirror. "Men don't have to rule your life."

I can't help but burst out laughing. Is she kidding me? "That's bullshit and you know it. The men around here rule all of our lives, whether we want to believe it or not. We go from one asshole to the next because they have all the control. I'm sure Leo is no different; in fact, I bet he's worse than most." I scoff. I have seen the way he operates around here, dishing out orders.

"Not at all. Leo sees me as his equal. We might have started off as enemies, but in the end, we both wanted the same thing. If you find the right man, he won't want to control you; he will respect you enough to stand by your side while you navigate your way through life—and whatever demons you're battling." She says the words like she believes them, like somehow, it's actually possible to find a man who respects you. She must be one of the lucky few. It almost gives me a little more respect for Leo.

It also makes me wonder if his brother would be the same toward the woman he chose to spend his life with. These men are loyal, I can see that in the way they want to take care of Ben, and to some extent me because I'm his sister.

Piper shook her head. "For a long time, I would have agreed with you and thought the Riveras were just like the rest. But they're not. They are all good men who came from tragic beginnings, and all they want to do is make this world a better place for all of us."

Our eyes lock in the mirror again, except this time it's me instigating it. I wish I could trust her enough to ask for her help. I know I can't execute my plan alone, but it's too risky with how close she is to Leo. "Either way, it's too late for me. Even if Liam is dealt with, then what? I have no career, I can't go home, and these guys will be done with me. I'll be out on the street, without a cent to my name or hope for the future."

"You're a smart girl, I can already tell that. Use your time here wisely." She hands me a magazine. "I'll be back in twenty minutes to wash it out. Have a think about what I said."

What she said. I'm not even really sure what she meant by it. I don't even look at the magazine, I just flick through it thinking how different these girls' lives must be from mine. I remember being a young girl and reading fashion magazines as my escape, thinking one day I would be designing the clothes the models were wearing. My parents used to encourage me to follow my dreams, and my father made promises of prestigious fashion schools and internships with wealthy friends of his that run fashion houses. Little did I know they were all just lies, and they had other plans for my future. It was the only thing I ever wanted to do. Now I want to carve out my own path... and I might just have an idea of how I can do it. Maybe.



Piper comes back in and attaches a showerhead hose to the tap. “You’ll be cooked now, so let’s rinse this out.” She washes the color away, massaging my scalp as she shampoos and conditions. It feels amazing, and I have to stop myself from groaning out loud. There is so much tension in my body.

“Did you ever wonder why your father did what he did to you? I thought your parents had money, like a lot of it,” she asks, sounding genuinely curious.

“Only every day since it happened. I tried to ask Liam once, but that was a mistake.” I cringe, remembering his reaction. He was furious that I had dared to ask what I was doing with him, like me being there with him was normal and I should be happy about it. As if I was the lucky one chosen specially for him.

“I can only imagine,” she says, looking horrified. “Well, what will it be? Will you be looking for another man to take over your life or do you have a plan to get everything you want yourself?” she asks like it’s not a huge life-changing question as she’s rinsing the conditioner out.

“I’m going to look into fashion design school. I want to work for Amelia Harper one day,” I tell her with a newfound confidence I didn’t know I had in me.

“There you go. You’re sounding more hopeful already. And I think fashion school sounds like a great idea for you, do something you can be passionate about.” She wraps a towel around my wet hair and leads me into my room. “Now let’s get you looking the part of the independent woman you are, to start you on that journey.”

“Why are you helping me again?” I smile toward her, feeling grateful, even if she is doing this for ulterior reasons. It’s nice to have another girl around. I’m missing Ruby like crazy.

“Just think of me as your fairy godmother.”

“A dark one?” I laugh. Piper is the furthest thing from a fairy godmother I can imagine.

“Something like that.” She shrugs, not taking my comment as an insult. The first day I met her I thought she was someone completely different to how she turned out. I’m glad she’s proven me wrong. Now that I think about it, they all kind of have. Except for Leo, but if Piper sees something in him, then maybe he has another side as well.

An hour later, my hair is blow-dried, cut, and styled. It hangs long and straight down my back with layers that frame my face. It’s so soft it feels like silk, and the color is gorgeous. Piper’s right, I feel like a completely new person. She’s also done my nails and make-up, teaching me as she goes how to apply it just so, to make the most of my oval-shaped face and high cheekbones. I look like I stepped straight out of that magazine she gave me. I’ve selected the pleated skirt and a cream camisole from my new collection. It’s a little dressy for lunch just at the house, but where else do I have to go to wear these beautiful clothes? I might as well wear them. And Piper looks the part, so why shouldn’t I?

Piper has already gone back out to meet the others. I told her I would be down in a minute, needing a second to compose myself. Nervous butterflies dance in my stomach. All I can think is, what will Jett think of my new look? Strange that I care. And even more strange that I want his response to be those damn come-fuck-me eyes he gives me.

I take one more glance in the mirror and then make my way down the hall and through the main part of the house to the patio. The sliding door is open, and the happy chatter of the brothers, Ben, and Piper travels through the house. I listen for a minute, but the conversation is nothing more than witty

banter between the brothers, mostly Kobe giving Jett shit. I wonder if that's what it was like in their house when they were growing up.

"Haze, wow," comments my brother when he sees me.

"Wow is right, she looks incredible." Kobe comes toward me, taking my hand, and he gives me a twirl.

I laugh at his over-the-top response.

"It's all Piper's doing. She used her magic wand and voila," I say, feeling my cheeks flush under all the attention. My eyes drift to Jett, and I can't help but notice the heat in his eyes. He doesn't look away either, he keeps them firmly on me. And it's that look, the one where I know he wants to eat me up. I wonder if it's as obvious to the others that he's attracted to me, as it is to me.

# Chapter 11

## JETT

**HOLLY SHIT. HAZEL WALKS** out to the patio, and it's as if time stands still. Piper has given her a hot makeover, and she looks incredible. Not like she didn't before, but like this, she looks older and less innocent. And sexy as hell. I was having trouble keeping my hands off her before. The girl's going to be impossible to resist now. Especially if she keeps fluttering her dark lashes and focusing her baby blues on me.

Leo nudges my arm. "You better stop ogling her before her brother notices," he says, his voice low so the others don't hear.

I glare back at him, then look over to Ben who is standing with Hazel. He hugs her into his chest, then his line of sight comes to me with a warning. He already knows I'm having indecent thoughts about his sister.

Piper hands her a glass of wine, and the three of them walk off down the back garden together. Piper's doing her best to form a friendship with Hazel because Leo doesn't trust I'm capable of getting the information we need.

**“Do we need to get someone else to watch over Hazel?” he asks, all sorts of inuendo in his voice.**

**“No. I have it under control,” I growl out, not liking where this conversation is going.**

**“I know you better than anyone, and I read people, it’s what I do.” He raises a brow, assessing me.**

**“So?”**

**“So, you’re fucking in love with the girl,” he snaps.**

**Kobe looks over his shoulder, nodding like he agrees with him.**

**“I’m not in love with her, it’s just a silly infatuation. She’s an attractive girl, that’s all it is.” I’m lying through my teeth and my brothers both know it. But I can’t stop. I can’t admit how obsessed I am with her. That when she is nearby, I do everything I can to get my hands on her, and when she’s not, I’m constantly thinking about her. My hand is fucking raw from overuse.**

**“You have plenty of attractive girls hovering around, Jett. This is nothing to do with the way the girl looks. It’s in the way the two of you look at each other. It’s written all over your faces.”**

**“Well, if you know me so well, you know I don’t do the mushy shit. So really, there is nothing here to concern yourselves with. I know how to control my urges. I’m not Kobe.”**

**“Hey! Oh yeah? Well, it’s lucky I wasn’t left in charge here. She would have been calling my name the first day.” He smirks cheekily, knowing he’s winding me up.**

**Leo narrows his eyes in his direction. “Watch your mouth, Kobe,” he warns.**

**He shrugs it off, flipping the steaks on the BBQ.**

**“You need a night off, some separation from this situation before you overstep the mark. You can do Kobe’s job tonight, take Ben down to Queen of Hearts. And Kobe will stay here with Hazel,” Leo suggests. “Go blow off some steam.”**

**“No chance in hell,” I growl.**

**He looks me over, his steely gaze all business. “What do you think will happen if you leave her side for the night?”**

**I stare back at him. He knows exactly what I think will happen.**

**“You have to let go of the past, Jett. It wasn’t your fault what happened to Ma. Her death was down to her bad choices. You going out for the night with your girlfriend isn’t the reason she ended up dead.”**

**My stomach twists, memories of that night flashing through my head. The last time I saw our mother alive. “We both know it is. If I was there, he wouldn’t have come over. He wouldn’t have given her the drugs that ended her. You and I both know what happened to her was on me.”**

**“She was involved with the wrong people. They wouldn’t have been stopped by a fifteen-year-old kid if they wanted her dead,” he says coldly.**

**He blames her for leaving us, but it wasn’t her fault. She had lost her husband, she was distraught, and the friends she turned to in her time of need weren’t the kind of people you want your vulnerable mother hanging around with. She had her own demons, had for as long as any of us could remember. If she could have fought them for us, she would have, she just wasn’t strong enough. That’s why I was supposed to be there with her. Watching over her to make sure she didn’t do anything stupid, but I let Elidee distract me. Lead me astray. I was thinking with my dick. Leo didn’t see everything that was going on. He was too busy**

working for Mr. Harper, out most nights to all hours, leaving me at home to take care of Kobe and Mom. My job was simple, keep them both safe, and I failed. That won't happen again.

"Everything is under control here," I tell him again, my voice low, but the threat of what will happen if he forces me to head into the club instead of staying by Hazel's side is clear. I glance over in her direction again, and she's watching, her eyes wide, assessing the situation going on with us. She offers a small shy smile. The three of them are walking back toward us, and we need to wrap this up.

"This job is going to take weeks, possibly months. You can't stay by her side every minute of that time, it's not possible," he says, getting frustrated with me.

"You have a fight in a couple of weeks, the weigh-in, what then?" Kobe adds, thinking about the only thing Kobe cares about, my career. And he's right.

"We'll work that out at the time. Right now, there's no need for me to leave the house."

"The food must be nearly ready, it smells amazing," Piper gushes, warning us they are in earshot.

"Won't be long. Hazel, why don't you give Jett a hand in the kitchen, getting the plates," says Kobe, looking over his shoulder in my direction. He thinks he's fucking funny, trying to make this harder for me than it already is.

I head into the butler's kitchen in search of the plates and cutlery, and I can feel Hazel right behind me. "So, you haven't said if you like my new look," she hints, her eyes bright and hopeful.

I turn around to give her a once-over. She's fucking edible and she



knows it. “You look the same to me,” I tell her like I’m not interested, even though my dick hardens uncomfortably in my pants.

She walks closer to me, her eyes not leaving mine for a second. She smells good enough to eat, and I get an image of her laid out over the stone kitchen counter, my head under that short skirt of hers, lapping her up. Fuck.

The makeover has given her some newfound confidence. “Oh really? Cause the eyes you were giving me when I walked outside were saying something different.”

I run a hand up her arm and into her hair, unable to stop myself from touching her. It’s soft as silk, and I get the urge to wrap it around my fist so I can pull her up to me. “What were they saying?”

“That you want to fuck me,” she whispers.

She’s not fucking wrong. I want to fuck her. It’s taking everything I have to hold myself back. My grip tightens in her hair, and I wrap it around my fist, forcing her to look up at me. I drop my face down to hers, my lips lightly brushing her ear, and I feel her suck in a breath. She wants me, and she expects me to give in to her temptation.

“Your eyes betray you, Sunshine,” I breathe, releasing my grip and walking away from her, taking the plates. “If you can bring the cutlery,” I add, before walking out of the pantry. I don’t look back, because if I do, I know for certain I would be throwing her over my shoulder and marching her up to my room.

# Chapter 12

# HAZEL

“HAZEL, HAZEL, WAKE UP.” I feel hands on my shoulders, gently rocking me, but my body is stiff, frozen. “You’re having a bad dream.” I hear Jett’s voice in the dark of my room, but I’m too scared to open my eyes.

I suck in a breath, feeling the sweat rolling down my forehead. I was right back there with Liam. It all felt so real. My heart hammers in my chest as I try to get my bearings. I rub my eyes, forcing them open. My face is wet from tears, and I realize I must have been crying. “Jett, what are you doing in my room?” I whisper through my fear.

“You screamed and scared the shit out of me. I thought someone got through our security.”

“I was having a nightmare,” I stutter, still trying to get my breathing under control.

He sits on the side of my bed, pulling me into him, allowing me to cry into his bare chest. And I do, I sob, letting it all escape me. All the pain and fear. All the hurt and betrayal. I let it all come out over his smooth inked skin. And

he lets me, slowly rubbing circles around my back, trying to comfort me. “Must have been a bad one,” he says after some time.

“It was a real one. One that happened,” I tell him honestly. I pull back from him, tucking my knees into my chest and hugging them tight.

“Do you get them a lot?” he asks, concern in his features. He might act like he doesn’t care half the time, but I can tell he really does. More than me just being a job.

In the hospital I had nightmares, and they always ended the same way—Liam finally going too far and killing me. “This is the first time since I came to stay here.”

He looks me over, assessing my face for signs of damage, but the scars I carry, he can’t see. No one can. “Hopefully it won’t happen again. I’ll let you get back to sleep.” He stands and starts toward the door.

My heart races out of control with the loss of his connection. I don’t want to be alone right now. Scrap that, I *can’t* be alone right now. I know what happened yesterday has made things a little awkward between us, him rejecting me and all, but right now, I don’t care. There is no one else in this house to comfort me tonight, and the truth is, even if there were, it’s him I want.

“Jett, wait.” He looks back at me. “Would you be able to stay for a little while? I’m kinda freaked out.”

He glances over at me, unsure, and I can see the internal battle he’s fighting. He always is around me. It was the same yesterday in the pantry. He was hot for me, that much was obvious from the bulge in his pants, but like always, he pretended he wasn’t and walked away.

“Please,” I beg, hearing the tremble in my voice. Seeing Liam’s face, even if it was a dream, has messed with my head. I’m not bullshitting him, I really

am freaked out.

He closes my door, the click echoing through the room. “Okay, but if I stay, I want you to tell me something.”

“What do you want to know?” I ask, watching him lie down beside me on my bed. He’s just in a pair of cotton boxer shorts, ones with blue stripes. When I imagined him on the other side of my wall sleeping at night, I always wondered what he would sleep in. Guess now I know.

He turns to me, his eyes looking into my soul. “Tell me what happened that night.”

He doesn’t have to say what night. I know the night he’s referring to. What I don’t understand is why he cares. “Why do you want to know?”

“I need to understand what I did wrong. I don’t mess up, Hazel. I take my job very seriously, and I had you being watched; I trusted the security guard I left in charge. How did you end up in the ICU?”

I press my lips together, not sure I’m ready to show Jett who I really am or what lengths I’m willing to go to get the one thing I want more than anything. “You blame yourself for what happened to me?” I ask instead, because it sure looks that way.

“You got hurt when I promised your brother I would protect you. I let you both down,” he says regrettably. I have never thought about it from his perspective before. I was so focused on what I wanted. I was only thinking about myself and how it affected me.

“No, you didn’t.” My eyes meet his. I need him to know that what happened to me was not in any way his fault. “This was my doing. That night just didn’t go the way it was supposed to.”

“How was it supposed to go?”

I have to tell him. I can’t let him go on thinking he did something wrong

and this is all his fault when it's not. "Ruby-Rose and I had it all planned out. She couldn't stand seeing the bruises on me anymore, and she was desperate to help get me out of my marriage." I turn to him. I need to see his face; he needs to understand I'm not a bad person, I was just in an impossible situation, and I didn't see any other way out. "I don't want you to think differently about me after I tell you this."

"Why don't you tell me whatever it is. I'm sure I already know all I need to about your character."

He doesn't, there is no way he could, not even from the research I know he's done. He's asked my brother for everything he could tell him, but he doesn't know the inner workings of my brain or how bad it got with Liam.

"Kylo wanted to have a party at the Acevedo house that night. He wanted to celebrate what he thought was going to be him taking over Palm Springs as well as the desert. He invited us; he had taken a liking to Ruby-Rose, and she was happy to play along because it was going to help me. I'm such a horrible friend, I should never have put her in the position I did. It's my fault she was hurt by him."

"I'm sure she knew what she was getting herself into."

"I don't think either of us really did. Not now when I think back, anyway. Liam had worked out we were being watched. He interrogated your guy until he told him what was going on, that's why he wasn't watching me anymore. At the time I wasn't worried, I saw it as my chance. Liam was talking shit, saying he was going to kill Ben for betraying him and placing a target on his back. I knew it was now or never. Someone had to stop him."

"So, the four of us went to the Acevedo place, and the boys started to drink. Liam fucking loved to drink, one after the other until he turned into a monster. But that night, it was going to work to my advantage. I got hold of a

large dose of Euphoria X, a lethal one. Then I mixed it into his drink and handed it to him myself. He didn't think anything of it. He should have had a heart attack not long after drinking the thing, and it would have looked like he overdosed on his own product. A simple solution to my problem. Ironic, I thought, to be killed by the drug he had created to harm others. But instead, he had only taken one small sip of the lethal liquid when Kylo got the call about his warehouse going up in flames and Ben being the one to rat them out to you guys. They lost their shit and turned right on us." A cold shiver runs over me. I can still see the anger in Liam's eyes as he blamed me for something I knew nothing about.

"You were going to kill him and make it look like he did it to himself. I'm impressed. I didn't think you had it in you."

"This isn't a joke, Jett. I nearly killed my husband because I despised him so much, I couldn't go another day in his house. Walking on eggshells, not knowing when I was going to end up on the wrong end of his temper. I was in a living hell. And then, when he started threatening my brother, that was it. I knew I had to end him."

"I know it's not a joke, Sunshine. I agree with your motives. And I can promise you that man will pay for everything he ever did to you."

"Yeah, I know he will. I'm going to make sure of it," I agree with him, determination in my voice.

Jett doesn't respond to my comment but instead takes my hand and laces his fingers with mine. I know Liam thinks I'm full of shit, that I couldn't get my revenge on him because I'm just some weak girl, and after training with Jett all week, I would have to agree he's right. But I don't care, I'm going to get my revenge if it's the last thing I do.

In the sweetest gesture ever, Jett holds my hand as we lie in the dark of my

room in the middle of the night. He's so unexpected, and it makes me want him more than I ever have before. A little fling to ease my hurt. A distraction for me while I'm staying here.

I take his hand and place it on my chest so he can feel what he's doing to me, how my body lights up when he's around. Why I really asked him to stay with me tonight. I know it's wrong, but I want him to take my pain away. I want him to fuck it away. I have only ever been with Liam, and if I die trying to get my revenge, I don't want to die having missed out on what should be something so special between two people who have such a crazy attraction to each other. I want Jett to show me what it should really be like. And I know he could.

“Your heart is still racing from your dream.”

“No. This is what you do to me,” I tell him more honestly than I should, but I'm sick of playing games with him. I know he's looking at me like he wants to fuck my brains out. He's just controlling himself because he thinks it's the right thing to do, but it's not. I need him. I need him to make me feel alive and heal all my past wounds.

He doesn't respond, but he doesn't move his hand either. We lie in silence, our breathing mirrored. I can tell he feels this electricity buzzing between us the same as I do. I want to roll over, climb up onto his lap and kiss him, but I stop myself, too scared of his rejection after yesterday. I practically threw myself at him, feeling a little more confident with my new look and the pep talk from Piper—but he walked away. I couldn't handle his rejection again.

“Time to go back to sleep, Sunshine. I have a big day planned for you tomorrow.”

Disappointment claws at my chest. He must know what I want. How can he still not act on it? No man has that much self-control. “I'll go to sleep, if you



stay with me.”

I think he is going to say he has to leave, that he should go back to his own bed, and he probably should. I’m sure if my brother came home and found him in my bed, he would be all sorts of bothered. “Close your eyes then,” he tells me instead, climbing under my covers with me and pulling my body toward him so his arms are wrapped around me tightly. I smile to myself, feeling safer than I ever have. I might not have gotten the happy ending I was hoping for tonight, but this is a close consolation prize. Jett Rivera’s half-naked body wrapped around me.

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“Hazel!” *Bang, bang, bang*, I hear coming from my door, and I wake with a startle.

Panic takes over when I realize that’s my brother’s voice and I fell asleep with Jett curled around me last night. But when I roll over, he’s already gone. On the pillow where he was sleeping beside me is a note and something else. I open the note.

*Keep this on you at all times, just in case you can’t find any sharp objects.*

I flick open the knife, testing it out. It has a gorgeous blue opaque handle and an inscription with *Sunshine* on it. Nice. He had it made just for me. The thought makes me smile. He really does care about me, and he was listening to my fears in the gym the other day. I wonder if he had it made right after that, because he wouldn’t have had time this morning.

“Hazel,” Ben calls again, sounding frustrated.

“What, Ben? It’s early,” I call back, wishing he would just go and let me wake up in peace. My bed still smells like Jett, and I want to enjoy it a little bit.

He bursts through the door, making me jump. “I know, I’m sorry, but I need to talk to you, and it can’t wait.”

I sit up in my bed, pulling the sheets up around me and also covering the note and the knife. “What could possibly be so urgent?”

He looks all disheveled, like he hasn’t slept a wink. “When I was working at Queen of Hearts last night, I saw Dad,” he blurts out.

I sit up a little straighter. “What the hell! What was he doing there?”

“I was out back guarding the door while some of the girls were leaving for the night, and he came out of nowhere. He was drunk off his nut or on something, rambling on about you and Mom. Honestly, I couldn’t understand much of what he was saying, but I felt like it was important. He kept saying, ‘tell your sister I’m sorry. I never wanted her to get hurt, but I didn’t have any control. I couldn’t keep her safe.’”

My heart races. He never wanted me to get hurt? What did he think would happen? “What on earth?” I look at him, puzzled. Dad was the one who handed me over. “Did you ask him where the hell he’s been all this time?”

“Of course I did, but I couldn’t get anything out of him that made sense. It was so strange. He was thin and grubby, in some sort of a mechanics uniform, a full beard covering his face. I barely recognized him.”

“Where is he now?”

“Leo came out to have a smoke and Dad took off up the road. Some of the other guards went to try and find him, but they couldn’t,” he says, disappointed. He wants answers and so do I.

I run a hand through my bird’s nest hair, struggling to straighten it out before throwing it into a messy bun. “Why would he come out of hiding now, to say he’s sorry?” I ask absent-mindedly, almost to myself.

Ben looks over the bed at both pillows then back to me, his bloodshot eyes

wide. “Did someone else sleep in here last night?” he snaps, his mood darkening instantly.

“No, why would you ask that?” I lie, hoping my guilty face won’t give me away.

“Because both sides are messed up.” He shoots up to standing. “Are you and Jett fucking?” he says, outraged, like he’s about to do something about it if we were.

“What? No,” I reply, not technically lying since we didn’t have sex. “Settle down, Ben, jeez. We’re not, okay. I’m just a restless sleeper. I was having bad dreams last night.”

“About Liam.”

I drop my head. “Yes.”

He puts his finger under my chin, bringing my eyes up to meet his. “We’re going to catch him, Sis. He’s as good as dead. Leo says were getting closer every day. Okay? You won’t have to be trapped in the hell of your memories for much longer, I promise.”

Them catching him won’t erase my memories, but I know he means well, so I don’t tell him as much. “I know. Ben, I’m not your responsibility, okay? I appreciate you looking out for me, but you don’t have to. I’ve got this. I can take care of myself. You’re my little brother, it’s supposed to be me looking after you, not the other way around.”

He gives me a look like he will do whatever the hell he wants, and I know he will. I’m not sure why I bother talking sometimes, but I don’t want him going to Jett and accusing him of anything. How would that conversation even go? Ben has no authority in this house, we’re both here as guests. And I’m pretty sure Jett wouldn’t take kindly to having some kid tell him to stay

away from his sister. “I have a session with the boys in the gym. Sorry for waking you. Maybe you should go back to sleep after your bad night.”

“Looks like you need some sleep yourself. Maybe skip your session and go back to bed. You can’t go to work at the club again tonight on no sleep, it’s dangerous.”

“I couldn’t sleep right now if I wanted to.” He huffs, sounding like he has a lot on his shoulders.

“Ben, are you okay?”

“Yep,” he says, looking anything but, then leaves my room.

I flop back to the bed and cover my face with my pillow. I don’t even know where to start to unpack all of that. It’s not even eight in the morning and my head is swirling with confusion and more questions than I’m ever going to get answers to.

# Chapter 13

## JETT

**“THE KID’S LATE. HE’S never late.”** I drop another punch into the pad Kobe’s holding. We’ve been warming up for ten minutes while we wait for Ben. I’m on edge after last night. I know I shouldn’t have stayed with Hazel, but how could I deny her the comfort when she was so wracked with panic after that dream? She needed me, and I couldn’t walk away from her, even though I knew I should have.

**“He had a late night. He and Leo didn’t get back until three.”**

**“Leo’s here?”**

**“Yeah, he’s been in his office. Don’t think he’s slept. I don’t know the full story, but they had a few visitors to the club last night.”**

**Leo shoves open the door, stalking right for us like he’s on a mission, his shirt from last night unbuttoned at the neck. He looks worn out.**

**“Speak of the Devil.”**

**“Detective Reader paid me a visit last night. He wants to know why the hell we haven’t taken care of Liam yet,”** Leo growls, like somehow it’s

my or Kobe's fault this situation is still fucking with our lives. If it were up to me, I would have already taken him out.

"Did you tell him to back off and let us do our damn job?" I snip, not in the mood for whatever power trip Leo is on today.

He gives me a look, as if he thinks I'm a moron. "He says we have one more week, or the offer of Antony's book is off the table."

"Shit." I hit the pad once, harder this time, then drop my gloves and come over to where Leo is.

"Piper wants us to move in now. Just blow the whole damn thing up."

"Lucky your girlfriend isn't calling the shots," Kobe jokes.

"We have a week, Jett. You've spent a ton of time with the girl. Has she told you anything that can help us? Piper has discovered more about her in a few small talks than you've ever let on. You're not doing her any favors by keeping secrets from us." My brother's eyes have lost their dark edge; he's not talking to me as our leader anymore but as my brother.

I shoot him a cold, hard stare. How dare he question my loyalty to Hazel and to our cause? I want this over just as much as he does. And he's right, we have spent a lot of time together, but until last night, she hasn't really opened up to me. She's learned to keep her secrets locked up tight. "Liam has a drinking problem, but I think his real weakness is Hazel. His obsession with her is next level. Could be his downfall." I can see the cogs turning in Leo's head, and I already know what he's going to say. "No way, Leo. If he gets his hands on her, she's as good as dead. You've seen the threats. I'm not risking her life for that damn book."

"She'd be willing to play along. You said she wants her revenge. This could be her chance to help us get it."

I snort derisively. “Using her as bait? Not happening. Come up with a different plan. Did you two get anything out of Jason Rossi?”

“He’s under the protection of the Kings. He won’t talk, and we can’t press him while he’s in the lockup.”

Suddenly, Ben bursts through the door, his face twisted in a scowl. The more he hangs out with us, the more he morphs into one of us. It’s almost satisfying to watch his transformation.

“What’s eating you this morning, kid?” asks Kobe, trying to lighten the mood.

“He had a run-in with his father last night,” Leo explains on Ben’s behalf.

I turn to him. “What? Does Hazel know?”

“Yeah, I was just in her room with her, Jett. She knows,” he says, his voice filled with bitterness. He looks like he’s itching for a fight, like he’s got something to say that’ll piss me off even more than his daddy issues.

I tense up, my patience wearing thin. “Got something to say, kid?” I retort, making it clear I’m not in the mood for his drama.

“Why the hell were you in my sister’s room last night? And why is she lying to me about it?” he seethes, looking like he’s about to take a shot at me.

Guilt tries to creep in, but I push it aside. I don’t have time for regrets. I knew what I was doing was wrong. I should have walked away once she calmed down, but I couldn’t. Her soft voice asking me to stay when I knew how tortured she is, how could I say no? She needed me, and I wanted to be the man there for her. I wanted a hell of a lot more than that, but I refrained. Her brother should be giving me a fucking medal,



not trying to pick a fight. “I was just trying to protect her, Ben. I never signed up to be her confidant.”

Kobe shoots me an *‘oh fuck, you’re in trouble’* glance, and the air grows heavy with tension.

I stare Ben down while I work out the best angle. For fuck’s sake, how the hell did he work it out?

He walks toward me, chest out, shoulders back, like he’s looking for a fight. “My sister never lies to me, Jett. What the hell is going on between you two? I want the damn truth. I’m working my ass off for you so you can protect her, not screw around.”

“Kid’s got balls,” I scoff, and Kobe snickers. Leo shoots him a look, but I couldn’t care less about their amusement.

I glare back at Ben. I took this kid off the streets and let him into my home. This little shit has no right to demand anything from me, but there’s something in his rage that stops me from lashing out at him and telling him so. He cares so much about Hazel, and I understand. She’s been through a lot, and he just wants to take care of her.

And he’s right to protect her from me. I’m not the right guy for her. I could give her what she wants, the two of us would have a fucking fun time together as well. I’m sure I would teach her everything her husband couldn’t, but it would just be that, a bit of fun to pass the time. I would move on once this was all over, and she would be left heartbroken like every other girl who came before her, because I don’t do the mushy shit. And I know a girl like her, one so broken, is looking for a savior, some guy to take away all her problems and make promises of love, the kind of shit I don’t even believe in. It’s why every time she comes on to me, I shut her down.

**“She had a fucking nightmare and was screaming the house down. I was there to check on her.”**

**“Why was her bed all messed up? You slept there with her, don’t bullshit me.”**

**I crack my knuckles, kid’s fucking pushing me this morning. “I did,” I admit through gritted teeth, feeling the burn of Leo’s glare in the back of my head. “She asked me to stay until she fell asleep. She wasn’t in a good way, and I didn’t want to leave her so damn upset.”**

**“You’re telling the truth,” he says, surprise in his voice. Did he expect me to lie to him as well? That’s not my style. But knowing his sister did means she thinks we did something wrong, and she doesn’t want him to know about it.**

**“I have nothing to hide.”**

**“You should have called me. I could have come to be with her.”**

**“If it happens again, I will. Save me the damn drama,” I snap, brushing off this conversation. I’m doing my best to contain my anger, but it’s boiling just below the surface. I go to walk away from him before I act on impulse, but he grabs my arm, stopping me.**

**“She’s falling for you. Don’t hurt her. She’s already had enough pain,” he says, his voice sharp with concern, before he releases me and walks away, head down.**

**Fuck. I know he’s right. I’m doing everything I can to stay away from her, but she makes it impossible.**

**“Are you training today?” Kobe calls after him.**

**“Let him cool off,” says Leo, turning his attention to me. “He’s right, you know. She’s looking at you like you’re the man of her dreams.”**

**“You think I don’t know that? Fuck,” I growl, running a hand through**

my hair in frustration, clenching my jaw to keep from lashing out at them. Part of me agrees. I've been cooped up in this house with her too damn much; it's starting to mess with my head. I shouldn't be having these feelings for her. She's so young and vulnerable, and it's pissing me off that my own brothers are questioning my motives, but I can't help it. Every time I look into her eyes, I see something that makes me want to silence all the noise and just go for it.

"Jett, it's okay if you can be that man for her. I'm not going to tell you what to do. I know better than anyone that when you find the right person, it's not clear cut. But with what Hazel is going through, you will need to be strong enough for the both of you. You start something up with her, it won't be some fling. She needs emotional support, and that's going to go on long after we have dealt with Liam."

"Leo's right. Don't sign yourself up for something you can't well and truly commit to just because you're horny," Kobe agrees with him, pissing me off even more. What the fuck would he know about it?

"That's not what this is." I growl, my frustration hitting a new high with my brothers. I check the time, knowing I have a meeting this morning. "I need to go."

"Back in the ring, Jett, we have work to do," Kobe calls, and what he's saying is true, we do. I have wasted too much time this past month already, but I can't, not today.

"You two just wasted my time with your lecture. I've got that meeting with Amelia Harper in half an hour, remember? To try and get Hazel's life back on track. Not just so I can sleep with her but because I actually give a shit about the girl. Don't want to keep her waiting."

"What about Detective Reader's threat?" Leo snips.

**I go to walk out the door then remember something. “Look into her mother. She’s a real piece of work, and I have a feeling she’s got more to do with all this than she’ll admit. I overheard her telling Hazel to go back to her husband. No mother in her right mind would recommend her daughter do that. I suspect she’s on the Kings’ payroll, not that I have been able to prove it, but maybe you can.”**

**“Send Amelia into my office to see me when you’re done. She might be able to help with our little problem.”**

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HAZEL

I CAN HARDLY BELIEVE my eyes when I see her. It’s none other than Amelia Harper, the fashion designer extraordinaire, standing in the front hall of the Rivera house. She’s here to meet with me.

“Hi,” I greet Amelia, my voice shaky. I could have killed Jett when he told me I had half an hour to get ready to meet my idol.

After my conversation with Piper the other day, I have been trying to work up the nerve to ask Jett about signing up for some online classes, but I never got around to actually doing it. So, when he came to my room this morning to say I had a meeting with her, I was confused to say the least. But I guess maybe Piper was helping me out the other day to get information, and that’s what she went back to them with. That’s all I can assume, anyway.

“So lovely to meet you, Hazel, Jett has told me so much about you. I was excited to meet someone as into the fashion industry as I am.”

“Honestly, I’m not even sure what to say. I’m a little starstruck.” I laugh awkwardly, her hand still in mine.

“I’ll leave you two to chat. Do you want something to drink, Amelia?” asks Jett, the charmer he is.

“Coffee, just a little milk if I can, thanks, Jett.” She looks at him with a warmth that makes me wonder how close a friend she is. Their families seem to be all sorts of connected, and I know Piper doesn’t like the Harper sisters much, but the Rivera boys seem to. I wonder what their history could be.

“Hazel?” Jett asks.

“No, thank you.” I smile toward him, but his face is stony cold with me today. Maybe he’s feeling awkward about last night. I don’t know, but I’m going to try and ignore it and enjoy this interaction with another human. Before it’s over and I’m back to hiding in my room.

We each take a seat in the formal sitting room, and Amelia smiles warmly. She’s a stunning woman, tall with a short blonde bob and piercing blue eyes. She wears a white power suit with a lavender blouse. I recognize it from her spring collection. “You’re wearing my rock collection,” she says, impressed.

“Yes, my girlfriend picked them out for me.”

She tilts her head to one side, assessing me. “What do you think of it compared to my earlier designs?”

“Honestly, I’ve seen your style change so much since you first started, every year is a little different, but this stuff was kinda out of character for you. More suited to a younger, trendier audience, and I kinda love that about it.”

“Do you think my other designs are outdated?” she asks, curiosity in her voice.

“Sorry, I hope I didn’t offend you. That’s not what I meant. My apologies.”

“It’s okay, Hazel. I’m not sensitive. I appreciate hearing others’ opinions.”

“They’re not outdated at all. I loved your bridal collection from two years

ago; it was stunning. Your previous designs have a classic, expensive look—you know, old-money kind of classy. But this, this is more relatable.”

She looks me over, and I wish I knew what she was thinking. “Since you have no work experience, I would like to get you into my studio, show you how it all runs and get you playing around with some designs to see if we can work together. But Jett tells me your situation is a little complicated at the moment.”

“Unfortunately, yes.” I sigh heavily, my heart aching for a different outcome.

Jett enters the room, setting a coffee down in front of Amelia. “Thanks,” she says, her smile warm and appreciative as she acknowledges him. “I have to say, the designs Jett sent through were impressive.”

I steal a glance at Jett, who stands in the doorway with his arms crossed, effortlessly commanding the room’s attention. That’s just him, imposing his presence wherever he goes. I shoot him a look, silently questioning, *What designs is she talking about?*

“I liked everything I saw,” she continues, her voice filled with enthusiasm. “If you could work on some more designs based on a specific brief I have in mind, I’ll explore ways to bring you into our team.”

“You would?” I ask, taken aback and pleasantly surprised. My heart races with excitement, the prospect of a new opportunity filling me with hope.

“Ever since the release of my latest collection, my company has been growing faster than I can manage with my current team,” she explains. “You’ll have to begin at the ground level, as part of a team of emerging designers, and work your way up. That’s the way I run my business—learning from those above you. If you grasp everything quickly, there’s definitely room for advancement.”

“When does all of this begin?” I ask, my excitement bubbling over.

“In two months,” she replies.

Two months, just two months! Oh my God, this is unbelievable. Panic starts to creep in. “What if...”

“We’ll figure everything out,” Jett interjects, his reassurance cutting through my uncertainty. He knew what I was thinking. What if I’m still stuck here. What if my hell isn’t over yet.

Amelia agrees with him, nodding her head, and I wonder how much Jett has told her and if this is some sort of pity job. But I know Amelia’s way of conducting business from my extensive research on her, and I don’t think she would just offer someone a job because she felt sorry for them. Her brand is too important to her. What designs did he show her? I rack my brain, trying to think of how he could have gotten access to my sketches. It’s been a couple of years since I even did any. The last ones would have been for a high school design project. Or scribbles I did in a sketchpad, and they are all back at my mom’s place.

“I can’t believe this. Thank you so much for this incredible opportunity,” I gush with gratitude.

“I’ll need to see more of your design skills first. Everything you need to know is in here,” she says, indicating a folder. “If you could email me the finished designs no later than Thursday three weeks from now, that’s when the other applicants have to submit their applications as well.”

“Yes, of course,” I assure her, feeling a rush of determination. I have no other commitments to occupy my time, after all. It’s not going to be a problem getting these done in time.

She stands, and I follow suit. As she extends her hand for another shake, my eyes well up with tears. “Thank you so much for this opportunity. You

have no idea what this means to me.”

“I think I do,” she replies, her gaze briefly flickering toward Jett. A silent message passes between them, leaving me with a sense that this opportunity holds more significance than meets the eye. He did this all for me. He’s so hot and cold with me, but he’s doing everything in his power to improve my life.

“Leo wanted a word before you leave, I’ll show you through to him,” he tells her, placing a hand on her back. They are so familiar with each other. A ping of jealousy hits me. Is she one of the many women he’s slept with and was left with a broken heart? She’s more his age than I am, and probably more his type—pretty, successful. She is, however, married. I wonder if that would stop a guy like Jett or if he would just take what he wanted and not care about the destruction he left in his wake. I really hope not. In the last twenty-four hours, he’s painted a different picture of himself. He’s caring and generous. And it makes my silly crush on him even more impossible to ignore.

“Lovely to meet you, Hazel. I look forward to seeing what you come up with,” Amelia says with a wave, and I realize I’ve been staring at the two of them.

“Thank you,” I mutter, watching them leave. What the hell is wrong with me? I shake my head, trying to dislodge the crazy thoughts that just entered my brain.

Slumping back down on the leather chair, I take the package she left and open it up, eager to make a start. There is a sketchpad and a design brief with a list of requirements.

I quickly skim through the details, and my excitement surges once more. The position is for the Artemis Summer Intake Program. They want me to



sketch designs for a summer collection with a rockstar edge, targeting women aged eighteen to twenty-five. *“The collection should radiate a rockstar vibe, catering to the rebellious and adventurous spirit of today’s young women. These designs should be versatile, relatable for everyday wear, while also allowing for sophisticated accessorizing to achieve an upper-class, luxurious appearance for our regular clientele.”* This is right up my alley.

There’s more about the color scheme and fabrics, but it’s the last part that makes my heart sink. They want all the designs created through InDesign and emailed to them. I don’t have access to the internet or a device with a pen for designing. How the hell am I going to pull this off?

This is my chance to change my life, the thing Piper was saying I needed to take back control of my own destiny. I don’t know if I’m what Amelia is looking for, but I will do everything I can to give it my best shot. And that might mean asking for another favor from Jett.

“What do you think, Sunshine? Is this something you’re interested in?” Jett leans casually against the doorframe, observing me closely. I can hardly contain my excitement and rush over to him, throwing my arms around his body in a heartfelt hug. He initially stiffens but then relaxes as I nuzzle closer, forcing him to accept my appreciation. No one has ever gone to such lengths for me before.

“Thank you so much for setting this up,” I whisper into his chest.

“It was nothing,” he replies, pulling back from the hug somewhat awkwardly.

I stare up at him. “It means a lot to me, and you know it.”

“Don’t mess it up. This is your second chance to have the life you want,” he cautions, offering me a half-smile. He may not admit it or let me thank him properly, but he clearly understands the significance of this opportunity to

me. It makes me fall just a little further for him. Into dangerous territory. Why does he have to be so kind to me?

“Can I ask a favor?”

“Depends on what it is?” he responds, curious.

“I need an iPad with pen to design with. I’ll pay you back for it later, but without it I can’t submit my designs the way Amelia wants me to.”

He walks into the kitchen and returns with a brand-new iPad and pen. “Is this what you need?” He smirks, raising an eyebrow. It’s clear he came prepared.

“Yes. Thank you.” I want to hug him again, but I hold back, sensing his discomfort around me today. “What designs did you send to Amelia?”

“Ben got them for me. He went to your parents’ house.”

“He went there?” I’m surprised.

“When your mom was out. Don’t worry, he didn’t have to see her.”

“Oh,” I say, relieved. I don’t want him anywhere near that awful woman. “It was really sweet of you to do this for me. This opportunity could change my life.”

“I know,” he says, staring at me with an intense look.

I smile up at him. I don’t want to push my luck, he’s already done so much for me today, but normally when I get good news, or any news really, I would call Ruby. And right now, I don’t have access to anything I can do that with. My phone was destroyed in the hospital, and I haven’t been able to replace it. I did ask Ben about it, but so far, he hasn’t come through with the goods.

“What is it?” Jett demands, breaking my trance.

I realize I’ve probably been staring at him for too long. “You don’t happen to have a phone in there for me as well, do you?” I ask playfully, fully aware

that I'm pushing my luck.

"Nope," he huffs, clearly annoyed by my request.

"Oh. I just wanted to call Ruby, tell her the news. I haven't been able to talk to her since she left for LA," I say, my disappointment evident. Surely he understands how isolating this situation is for me.

"You can call her from the study if you want to. No one is in there at the moment."

"You're going to trust me in the Rivera study?" I ask, surprised but grateful.

"We have video surveillance in most of the common rooms in this house," he replies sternly. "If you're silly enough to do anything you shouldn't, I will know about it, Hazel."

"Yeah. Of course." I laugh awkwardly. I hadn't thought about inside surveillance. What else can he see? I hope he doesn't have a camera in my room. I'd kill him if I found out he did.

As he turns to walk away, it's clear he's not his usual cocky self today. Something seems off, like he's a bit down or something. Or perhaps it's just me, and he's had enough of my presence lingering around his house.

"Jett," I call out when he reaches the end of the hall.

"Yes?" he responds, turning to face me.

"Are we okay? Did I do something to piss you off? It feels like we've gone back to day one," I admit, feeling awkward about bringing it up. It sounds silly when I say it out loud. He's my bodyguard, we don't really have a friendship, but his hot-and-cold demeanor leaves me feeling weird. After having his arms wrapped around me last night, I had hoped we'd be a little closer today, not back to awkward conversations where I feel like an inconvenient intruder in his life.

He sighs and fiddles with his baseball cap. “We’re fine, Hazel,” he mutters before leaving me with a sense of lingering uncertainty about our relationship.

Bullshit he’s fine. Last night I opened up to him. He stayed in my bed and comforted me; he was so sweet, and today he’s pulling away. Uncomfortable when I touch him, forcing distance between us. It hurts more than it should. I wish I understood him better. What happened between waking up in my bed and this meeting?

# Chapter 14

## HAZEL

AFTER MY MEETING WITH Amelia yesterday, I've spent this morning in my room, absorbed in the sketchpad Amelia left me. It's been a welcome distraction, providing me with a sense of purpose I haven't felt in a long time. It's a refreshing change from constantly dwelling on my thoughts of how to get revenge on Liam.

Or my irrational daydreams about Jett...

I don't understand why Jett is consuming my thoughts so much. Probably has something to do with the fact he feels the need to strut about the place with his shirt off all day long. Man, his body is ripped. I can't help but stare at him and imagine running my tongue along his abs, down his happy trail, all the way to his cock. I bet it's huge. I've seen the bulge through his pants, and it makes me want to know what he's like down there. How it would feel to be pinned under his weight and be owned by him. It makes me hot just thinking about it and takes up far too much of my day.

But now I've rediscovered my love of designing, venturing into my imagination and creating, and it's a safer place for my overactive imagination

to visit. I feel so at home with a pencil between my fingers. Amelia said she wants a younger edge to her new collection, and if I can create something that fits, I have myself a job. I almost can't believe she's giving me this opportunity, a nobody with no experience. But I guess she doesn't have to include my designs if she hates them, so maybe she's just humoring the girl she feels sorry for. Either way, I'm going to make the most of this opportunity. I always wanted to be a fashion designer, and this is my chance.

Sharing my excitement with Ruby made it all the more real, and she was so sweet, so over the moon for me. It was great to hear her friendly voice on the other end of the phone. I told her about this place and how different Jett is to what we both thought. About my makeover, and she told me about hers. Apparently, as soon as she got to LA, she chopped all her hair off in a short pixie cut. She's had her scars inked over just like I always do with mine. She's trying to heal. And the best part is she got a job. She sounded so happy. We talked for almost an hour before she was interrupted by a knock at the door. My heart aches to be free like her, starting my life, but for now, this opportunity is as good as I will get, so I have to give it my all and make the best of this situation.

The current design I'm working on is a short skirt in a jade-green silk. I've paired it with a print T-shirt and edgy black leather cuff. I'm going for jewel colors to add the bright bold color they're after. I like eclectic designs, different fabrics, ones that shouldn't go together, teamed up to makes something unique. I hold my completed design up, feeling proud of what I created. It's not perfect yet, but it's the first design in years, and it's a start. After lunch, I'll have another attempt, on the iPad this time.

My stomach rumbles, signaling I need a break. I have been hiding in my room all morning and haven't ventured out to the kitchen. Last night was

uncomfortable enough to stop me from trying, but I don't think my empty stomach will let me wait much longer. Leo stayed around for dinner, he and Jett talking in code for most of it, something about a book. Jett was distant and even more moody than normal. He cancelled our session in the gym, and he wouldn't even make eye contact with me. Is he so uncomfortable that he slept in my bed last night that he can't even look at me today? Or was it the hug I gave him after he surprised me with Amelia Harper? I couldn't see the harm in it, but clearly, he could. After the meal, I'd had enough of feeling isolated by the two of them, so I left them to whatever business it was they needed to sort out.

I make a quick sandwich, shoving a piece of cheese in my mouth as I do. Salad, cheese, and wholegrain bread with plenty of mayo. I grab an apple as well, just in case I'm stuck in my room for the rest of the afternoon.

The noise coming from the gym on my way back down the hall makes me curious. The boys' presence there doesn't surprise me; they typically work out every morning, but today's session seems longer than normal. Intrigued, I pause by the gym door to eavesdrop. Inside, Kobe leads the trio, barking instructions, while Ben and Jett diligently carry out some sort of drill.

I can see how much Ben's confidence grows with each training session. It makes me feel so grateful that he has someone like Kobe to teach him the intricacies of combat, skills necessary for the path he's chosen. I wonder if this life is really what he wants to do and not some sacrifice he's made for me. God knows our father didn't teach him anything worthwhile before he took off. His first line of defense was to throw money at the situation so he didn't have to face the consequences.

Jett's guidance in our sessions has also had a big impact on me. Although I'll never have Ben's aspirations of becoming a fighter, my newfound self-



assurance in self-defense has been invaluable. I missed our session yesterday, but he brushed me off, saying I should focus on my design work.

The three of them don't even notice me, and I watch them for longer than I should, staring mostly at Jett. He's just in a pair of training shorts, sweat dripping over his ripped chest and abdomen. He's gorgeous like this and in his element, that much is for sure. He's focused and fierce with determination. I wonder if I will be allowed to watch his next fight; I would love to see him in action.

Glancing across the hall, I notice Jett's bedroom door slightly ajar, different from its usual closed state. My curiosity piqued, I veer toward his room, pausing to peer through the narrow crack. I want to know everything about him. It feels like he knows so much about me, from all the research he did and talking to my brother, but really, I know so little about him. He doesn't open up easily. In our training sessions, I ask him questions, curious to know more, but he only gives me short answers that go nowhere.

His room remains blanketed in darkness, with drawn curtains and no source of light to discover its hidden secrets, either. Reluctantly, I return to my room, leaving the sandwich and fruit beside my iPad on the bed.

Just as I'm about to settle back onto the bed, something holds me back. Curiosity consumes me. I want to see inside his room. You can tell an awful lot about a person from the room they sleep in. He did his research on me. Now I need to do a little snooping of my own, and this moment seems as good as any; the boys will be occupied for a while longer at least. Silently, I tread down the hall, cautiously nudging open Jett's door and leaving it slightly ajar, mimicking its previous state.

His room is massive. I mean, I thought mine was big, but this room is double the size, with a king bed in the center, a mahogany four-poster. The

color scheme is total opposite to mine as well. Where mine is light and airy, all his furnishings and coverings are dark, in shades of olive green and charcoal. I run a hand along the velvety fabric of the comforter.

On the far side of the room is an ensuite, just as opulent as mine, with a huge circle bathtub and double shower. It's built for two people, and why am I not surprised since Jett's such a ladies' man. He's the kind of guy who would have a new girl to bring home from his club every night. I guess having me around the house is cramping his style. He's probably getting pretty damn frustrated by now—and that thought makes me laugh to myself. That's what he gets for keeping me locked up here. If I have to suffer, so does he.

His walk-in closet is just as enormous, and as I run my hand along the crisp black button-ups all lined up, it occurs to me I've never seen him in any of these clothes. Around here he just wears his sweats, if he even bothers to chuck on a shirt. Not saying I'm complaining about the lack of clothing, he's so fucking hot, but him in one of these suits would be next level.

Everything is organized and neatly packed away. He doesn't strike me as a clean freak, but as I think back over the last few weeks of watching him prepare meals, I do remember noticing how he likes to pack things away as he gets them out. I pick up a shirt and inhale his masculine scent. Even after being washed, it's still there, now mixed with the smell of fresh laundry powder. Man, he smells so good. What the hell kind of cologne does he use? I should have checked that out in the bathroom, taken a bottle back to my room to spray on my pillow. Might help me sleep better at night.

Back in the main part of his room, I open his bedside table, looking for dirt on him. People always hide the best stuff in here. Inside is an envelope with

his name handwritten on it. My heart starts to race. It's Liam's writing, I would recognize it anywhere. What's he hiding in here?

"What do you think you're doing?" Jett's deep voice startles me, and I involuntarily drop the envelope I was holding, my heart racing even faster. Oh, shit.

"Umm..." I stammer, turning around to face his furious eyes. Words fail to escape my mouth, leaving me unable to explain why I'm in his room snooping through his shit. What was I doing here?

He advances toward me, causing me to back up until I'm cornered against the wall. His towering figure makes me feel small, but despite his obvious anger, I'm not scared of him. I know he won't hurt me. Not with his fists, anyway. "What are you doing in my room, Hazel?" he demands, his voice low and commanding.

I glance toward the door, contemplating making a run for it, just to avoid answering his question. But before I can act, he reaches my face, forcing me to meet his intense gaze. His breathing is labored from his workout, his body glistening with sweat. "I don't know," I whimper, unable to tell him what's really going through my head. How do you say, "*I've got the hots for you, so I wanted to check out your room*"? I would sound like a silly teenager, and I know that's how he already sees me. My cheeks flush with heat under his scrutiny. "You left the door open," I add weakly, as if it could somehow justify my actions.

"And that gives you a written invitation to snoop around my room, going through my drawers?" he roars, his anger seeping through his words.

"No, I just..." I trail off, unable to maintain eye contact. The intensity is overwhelming. Disappointing people is something I hate, and right now, I know he's disappointed.

He continues to hold my face, waiting for me to respond, but I remain silent. Finally, he releases his grip, collects the envelope, and storms away.

“Jett, wait!” I call out, desperately hoping to salvage the situation. “I’m sorry,” I utter, but it’s too late—he’s already out the door. I chase after him, grabbing his arm. “Please, stop. Hear me out, please,” I beg, not wanting there to be unpleasantness between us. We have kinda become friends, and I like his company. Most days it’s the only companionship I get. I don’t want to push him away with a silly moment of curiosity.

“Speak,” he says, his tone strained.

I sigh, knowing I need to be honest if I’ll have any hope of him not shutting me out. “I was checking out your room because I’m fascinated by you. I have been since I woke up in the hospital, and it was your face that greeted me. I... I...” I struggle to articulate my emotions, so instead, I rise on my tiptoes and press my lips against his, hoping I can show him how I feel. For an instant, it feels as if he’s reciprocating the kiss, but then he pulls away, disappointment in his eyes.

“This can’t happen, Hazel. I promised your brother I would protect you.” His eyes are cold and distant, and I know he’s serious.

I stare at him, my heart racing and disbelief washing over me. I can’t fathom that he’s turning me down again. “But you feel this too. I know you do,” I plead, desperation seeping into my voice. I’ve never thrown myself at a man like this before. I search his face, desperately seeking the answer I need—the one that tells me he wants me too—but his features remain hardened, devoid of the warmth he had two days earlier.

“It doesn’t matter what I feel. I have a job to do. I can’t take advantage of you,” he states firmly, all business.

“But you’re not. I want this,” I insist, my voice tinged with frustration. This

is Ben's doing, I'm sure of it.

"You're a child. You don't know what you want. Whatever this is between us, it can't happen." His gaze pierces through me, his coldness overwhelming. I feel foolish, more out of place than ever before. The past few weeks, I clung to the belief that there was something more than protection between us. I can't believe how wrong I was. "Don't let me catch you in my room again," he warns before striding away toward the gym.

I storm back to my room, slamming the door as loudly as I can in frustration. He thinks of me as a child. I'm fucking twenty, for God's sake. Sure, I may be somewhat inexperienced when it comes to the opposite sex, but I can recognize the longing in his eyes. There's something deeper between us than sheer protection. This is more than just a job for him; he's full of shit.

Angry tears prickle at my eyes. I take a deep breath, trying to calm myself down, my frustration and disappointment mingling with a newfound determination. No, I won't let his rejection define me. If he wants to treat me like a child, then I'll show him that I'm capable of making my own decisions.

With a renewed sense of self, I wipe away the lingering tears of hurt and defiance.

Fucking Jett, what is my obsession with him? He's been hot and cold from the moment I met him. I should have known better than to throw myself at him. I should have just stayed the hell away from him, hidden out in my room where it was safe. Except I'm not really safe anywhere. Somewhere out there is a man who is consumed with tracking me down, and I have a feeling that whatever was in that envelope in Jett's room is something to do with this situation. It was a message from Liam, I'm sure of it.

What is Jett hiding from me? That should have been my question to him. I

should have thrown the situation back in his face, made him fess up what he knows, instead of being honest and showing him how stupid I am.

# Chapter 15

## JETT

**I EAT ANOTHER MOUTHFUL of my bland roasted chicken and vegetables, counting down the hours until I can eat something with flavor again.**

**Hazel swans into the kitchen, an air of bitchy confidence about her. She grabs the plate of food I prepared for her and goes to walk away with it.**

**“What is your problem?” I finally snap, my patience frayed and unable to bear another minute of her snippy demeanor toward me. I’m trying to cut weight in preparation for my fight in two days, and on top of that, we now have a fucking time limit on taking Liam out.**

**Leo has his plan firmly in place, but I don’t like it because it involves inviting Liam to meet us here to do a trade. Hazel for an agreement that he will keep his dirty drugs out of our town. We don’t plan on ever giving her up, it’s going to be an ambush well before he makes it to the mansion. We just needed a time and place where we knew we could take him out. But even the thought makes me feel uneasy, using her as bait. I**



didn't think Liam would agree to it, but according to our sources on the streets, he's desperate.

Sunday after the fight, he's coming to collect her. Hazel and I have two days left together, because once we eliminate him, she will be free to go, and I will never see her again. It's for the best, I know it is, but that doesn't make it hurt any less. Especially after that kiss.

"My problem... are you kidding me!? I'm trapped in this damn house with you all day long," she retorts, throwing me her most venomous resting bitch face. "And you're a prick who's hiding stuff from me." She places her meal down on the table. "I just lost my appetite."

With her brother she has been sweet and happy, but toward me, she's a mega bitch and has been like this since I found her in my room yesterday and she kissed me. She's been giving me the silent treatment. She took her dinner back to her room last night, and we both ate alone. Every time I thought about her and that kiss, I was tempted to go knock on her door and finish what she started. But my head knows that's the stupidest idea I've ever had. After yesterday, I don't even know who she really is. Is the girl I was getting to know just some act to get into our place and destroy us from the inside? I don't want to believe it, it's why I haven't told Leo about her snooping, but it's got me questioning everything I know about her.

I shove my chair back, and it scrapes on the tile floor. I was wondering how long it would take her to bring up the envelope. I stride toward her. "You're safe in this house with me. You should be grateful," I reply, my voice laced with frustration.

She backs away from me, bumping into the cabinet behind her. I glare at her, trying to hold myself back from completely losing control. I'm

torn between my responsibility to protect her and my need to dominate her, show her what being a brat around me gets her. Being fucked senseless for her smart mouth and eye rolls, that's what she would get if I could act on my baser needs like I know she wants me to.

Her eyes blaze with an intensity that matches the simmering tension between us. "Well, I am a child, so I guess being a brat is fitting," she mutters, the hurt seeping through her rebellious facade. It cuts me deeper than I care to admit.

I figured she might throw my own words back in my face, but seeing the pain in her eyes makes me feel like a real piece of shit. I never wanted to hurt her. My intention was to make her understand that what she was feeling couldn't lead to anything good. We can't be anything more than what we are, and giving in to this desire would only unleash a world of trouble. Now, it's like we're back at square one. Her hatred for me is tangible, and our trust is hanging by a thread.

"You shouldn't have thrown yourself at me to hide what you were really up to," I manage to say, my voice strained. I can't hide the way I feel about her anymore. Being this close to her makes me crazy. I'm itching to throw her over my shoulder and drag her back to my room, show her what really goes on in there if she is so curious. I know I sound like a dick for saying it, but it's the truth, right? She kissed me to hide what she was really doing, snooping for information, like she told me she used to do with Liam. She used her beauty and my attraction to her to try and manipulate me.

"Are you kidding me, Jett? After all the time we've spent together, you still don't trust me," she whispers like she's close to tears. "I was being honest with you yesterday. And yes, I know how guilty I looked. It was a

stupid thing to do, but you're so closed off, it's hard to know the real you. Maybe I just wanted some insight. Now I have no idea why." She shakes her head, as if ashamed of herself for ever trying.

She's right, I don't really trust her, but I don't trust anyone and for good reason—you start trusting, you end up dead. "For all I know, you're looking for information for Liam, and once you've found what you want, you'll abandon us, leaving nothing but wreckage in your wake," I confess, my voice trembling with a blend of fear and longing. The idea of her betrayal, of losing the fragile bond we've somehow made, gnaws at my soul. She's under my skin, and I can't stand to think she might really be a traitor.

"You're unbelievable. If that's truly what you think, then we have a far greater problem than trust," she snaps, shoving me in an attempt to get away.

I box her in, resting my hand on the counter so she has nowhere to go. I'm not done with this chat. "Then tell me, please... why were you in my room?" I implore, my voice cracking with desperation. Fuck. Why am I so crazy about her?

"Do you really want me to say?" she asks, her voice softening, a flicker of vulnerability breaking through her defenses.

"Yes," I demand.

She stares me down, her eyes locked with mine, a silent plea for understanding. I can see her struggling, attempting to wriggle free from the clutches of this confrontation. But this time, I refuse to let her slip away so easily. I shouldn't have walked away from her yesterday. Today, I'm not leaving until she tells me exactly what she was doing. "Your door was open, and I was curious. Despite spending so much time together in

this house, I know nothing real about you. I just wanted to know something.”

I feel like we’re going in circles and getting nowhere fast. She should be scared of me. If she was hiding something or sneaking around for Liam she would be. I would be able to smell the fear on her. But she’s not.

“Why?” I inquire, my voice laced with a mix of frustration and genuine curiosity. Is she just as fascinated with me as I am with her?

She blinks, momentarily taken aback that I’m not taking her word for any of it. “You know what? Don’t trust me. At this point, I don’t care anymore. What does it matter? I’m done with this bullshit. You’re the one hiding stuff from me. I know that envelope had Liam’s handwriting on it,” she yells, shoving me so hard it surprises me, and I let her slip by. She storms off in a fit of anger. The sound of the glass sliding door opening, leading to the rain-drenched courtyard, reaches my ears. Undeterred by the pouring rain, she rushes out into the yard.

For fuck’s sake. I run a hand through my hair. This girl is a nightmare. Quickly I follow her, knowing full well that if she truly believes she can scale the ten-foot perimeter and outsmart the guards, she’s even more delusional than she looks right now.

Once outside, I find her standing in the middle of the yard, her clothes already soaked through from the torrential downpour. “Hazel, for fuck’s sake, get back in here,” I call out to her, my voice tinged with urgency, but she ignores me. If she’s attempting to prove she’s not a child, she has a strange way of going about it. Right now, she looks just like a tantrum-throwing toddler who didn’t get their own way.

Regardless, I go after her. I can’t help myself. It doesn’t matter how frustrated I am with her, I still need to know she’s okay. And clearly,

she's not. When I gently turn her around, tears are streaming down her face. "I can't do this anymore, Jett. I've gone from one prison to another, with no control over my life. I never asked for any of this. I was forced into marrying that monster, and now I'm trapped here with you. I want my life back," she confesses, her voice filled with a raw mix of desperation and anguish. It hits me in the chest; I care too much about her to see her so upset.

Her sad, lost eyes soften the annoyance I harbored toward her just minutes ago. She's so fragile, so lost, and it pierces through the walls I've built around my heart. I can't help but feel like an asshole for keeping her confined here. In an attempt to comfort her, I take her hands in mine, craving the connection between us. Why can't she see all I want is to help her? It's been my only desire since the very moment I laid eyes on her lying in that hospital bed.

"I know this is incredibly difficult for you, but we're so close now. Just a few more days, and then you can get back your life, I promise," I assure her, even though deep down, that's not what I truly want. The truth is, I never want to let her go. Allowing her freedom once this ordeal is over will be the most unbearable pain I'll ever face, but she's not mine to keep, no matter how desperately I want her to be.

She drops her head, defeated, and gazes down at her drenched clothes. "I don't have a life to return to. Maybe I should have just let him kill me." She sucks in a shuddering breath, her own words causing her pain. "What do I have left to live for?" she cries.

Her words pierce through me, cutting deep into my soul. The thought of her not surviving the nightmare her husband subjected her to sends my mind spiraling. I gently cup her face in my shaky hands, wiping away

the tears that stain her cheeks with my thumbs. She's too young to be consumed by bitterness; she still has so much to live for. I need her to realize her worth, to understand how incredibly special she is. Even with mascara streaks running down her cheeks and her hair plastered against her face from the rain, she's the most beautiful girl I've ever met.

The hunger to have her is overpowering. Leaning in, I press my lips against hers. For a moment, she seems frozen, unsure how to respond, but when I wrap her in my arms, pulling her trembling body closer to mine, she softens into my embrace and kisses me back passionately.

This is what I wanted to do yesterday when her lips met mine. I fucking craved her sweet lips, needed her to know I was right there with her, to show how I feel about her, even though I know how wrong this is. I'm not the right man for her. It's selfish of me, trying to fill a need she has aroused in me, but I can't walk away from her.

She pulls away slightly, attempting to catch her breath. "What are you doing? You said it yourself, we can't do this."

"We can't," I agree, a tinge of remorse lacing my words. I know I'm an asshole for starting something we can't finish, but I couldn't help myself either.

She stares up at me, her eyes searching for answers. "But you just kissed me," she whispers.

"I know." I draw her back into my embrace, claiming another kiss, this time showing her exactly how hot we could be together. I don't have an explanation for her or for myself. All I know is that I want her like fucking crazy.

Our kiss becomes fervent, filled with desperation, as she grips my shirt, and I glide my hands down her back, resting on her waist. The rain pelts

down violently, prompting me to lift her into my arms, her legs instinctively wrapping around me. I carry her toward the shelter of the patio, our kiss unbroken as I press her against the wall. With a sense of urgency, I help her remove her drenched sweater, revealing a sheer white tank top. Her pale blue lacy bra peeks through, accentuating her hardened nipples.

She's a fucking temptress. How the hell do I walk away from her now?

"You're freezing. I need to get you inside and warm you up before you catch a cold," I utter, my voice echoing with a hint of my father's words. It's exactly what he used to say to me and Kobe when we played outside in the rain. Memories of my father, though faint, resurface in my mind, serving as a stark reminder that there's more at stake here than my undeniable lust for this girl. This is about the war my brothers and I have been fighting since the day our father was murdered. It's a battle that encompasses far more than my personal desires to fuck this pretty girl out of my mind. And I know I have to stop.

"Not yet. Can't we just stay like this for a little longer?" she pleads in a soft voice, and I find myself unable to deny her this passing moment. I know it can't happen again.

So, instead, I close my eyes, pressing my forehead against hers, and inhale the intoxicating scent that is uniquely hers. She knows it too. We both understand that as soon as we step back inside the house, we have to forget what happened here tonight. Because I'm just the man hired to protect her, because she's married to our enemy, and because succumbing to our feelings would only invite greater danger upon her and my family. It's perilous and would be careless of me to be so selfish. Yet, I will never forget the perfection of her lips on mine.

**“This doesn’t have to be wrong, Jett, if we both want it,” she says softly, her eyes searching mine, seeking answers that I am incapable of giving her. “I don’t care about our age difference or that you’re my bodyguard, or about Ben. None of that matters. All I care about is the way I feel about you. From the first moment our eyes met, there was something unspoken between us. And now, I know you feel it too. One kiss doesn’t have to mark the end. Take me upstairs, spend the night with me.”**

**I can’t resist her plea, I can’t deny us both what we want. I pull her closer, my longing driving the urgency of our next kiss. I crave to have her in my bed, to possess her completely. Before I can stop myself, my lips are back on hers, tongues battling. She presses her body into mine, rocking her hips, desperate for something more. I unbuckle her jeans and fly then slip my hand inside her panties. Her pussy’s on fire in contrast to the rest of her body. She’s soaking wet and not just from the rain. I slip my fingers through her folds, rubbing back and forth over her, exploring every part of her.**

**She moans into my mouth, biting into my lip softly. “Take me up to bed,” she begs.**

**I sink a finger into her warmth as her head drops back. She’s been dying for me to touch her for days, and now she’s in heaven. I pull my hand out of her and lick my fingers clean. She watches me with wide eyes and a hiss. “You taste fucking to die for,” I tell her, shoving my hand back between her legs, pushing two fingers inside of her this time, my thumb finding her clit and circling. I need her stretched and ready to go.**

**The abrupt slam of the front door shatters the moment, forcing me to pull my hand free.**



**“Who could that be?” she mutters, looking worried. Kobe and Ben were both at Queen of Hearts, and Leo was at home tonight with Piper.**

**“Jett, where the fuck are you?” I hear Kobe’s voice echo through the house; he sounds shaken.**

**“Fuck,” I mutter, guiding her back to her feet. She quickly zips up her pants. “Go have a shower and warm up while I deal with this,” I tell her, my voice filled with urgency, before taking off in search of Kobe.**

**“Okay,” her voice carries softly to my ears, and I’m reassured that she’ll follow my instructions.**

**As I step inside, the reason behind Kobe’s panicked call becomes painfully obvious. “The doctor is on his way,” Ben says, towering over our head of security, Rob, who clutches his arm, blood seeping through his fingers.**

**“What the fuck happened?” I demand, needing answers.**

**“We reached the club, and there was an ambush. Five of the Kings’ men were lying in wait. Four of them are now dead, and we’re holding the last one at the club for interrogation with Leo. Rob caught a stray bullet,” Ben explains.**

**“I’m fine, it’s just a scrape,” Rob interjects, attempting to downplay the severity of his injury, but I can see by the graying of his face that he’s anything but.**

**“Get him a drink for the pain,” I call to Ben.**

**Out of the corner of my eye, I catch a glimpse of Hazel slipping back inside. Ben notices her as well, his gaze shifting toward his sister. “Haze, what were you doing outside in the rain?” he questions, a trace of concern coloring his words.**

**“I got caught out there. I’m just going for a shower. I hope**

everything's okay with your friend," Hazel responds, her voice tinged with worry and a genuine wish for the injured man's well-being.

"He'll be fine," Ben reassures her. But it's the way he looks back at me that I don't like. He might be a kid, but he's smart enough to know something was going on outside between the two of us. And after his reaction the other day, I know this isn't going to go down well. But we have bigger problems tonight.

"Whiskey," I yell toward him, trying to keep the focus on Rob.

Kobe drops his head closer. "Ben was on the phone with his mom when we got attacked. I think you're right about her. She's involved with the Kings somehow. He told me after she called that she asked him to walk away, so they could talk in private," Kobe tells me, his voice hushed.

My eyes widen. She's dodgy as fuck. "She knew what was about to happen?"

"Could be a coincidence."

"We both know there are no coincidences in this line of work. She was trying to protect her son while shit went down. How did she know?"

"I'll pay her a visit tomorrow before your weigh-in."

Ben returns with a tumbler of whiskey for Rob, helping him drink it down. He winces in pain.

The doorbell goes off, and Kobe makes a run for the front door, letting in Doctor Cooper. He's been here before and knows the drill. He made it onto our payroll after he needed some help a couple of years back. He's a good man, one we know we can trust, and has come in handy.

He drops down to look over Rob's wound, pushing his glasses lower down his nose so he can inspect the bullet hole more closely. "What happened here?"

**“Kings,” Kobe tells him.**

**Doctor Cooper nods in understanding. He has his own grudge against the gang. He pulls out a syringe of something. “Leave us.” He waves us off, needing space to work his magic on Rob’s arm.**

**The three of us walk into the kitchen.**

**“Will Rob be okay?” Ben asks, his face pale. He hasn’t seen the types of injuries Kobe and I have. This is nothing.**

**“After the doc does his thing, he’ll be good as new, nothing to worry about, kid.” Kobe pats him on the back.**

**“I’m going to check on Hazel,” Ben says, wandering down the hall, looking lost.**

**“Keep an eye on him. Tonight would have scared the shit out of him,” I tell Kobe. As I clear the plates, I realize Hazel never got to eat her meal. I place it in the fridge, hoping she might come back for it later.**

**“You would have been proud, Jett. He took out two of the guys himself. If it wasn’t for Ben, tonight might have gone very differently.”**

**“Make sure he’s rewarded for his hard work,” I tell Kobe, and I know he’s thinking the same as me, back to the first time we had to kill a man to survive. It stays with you. “Do you know if Leo was able to convince Amelia to get in contact with her dad?”**

**“Yeah, she said she would help in any way she could, but he’s not getting back to her. We have to assume we’re on our own with this one.”**

**Kobe eyes me suspiciously, his gaze filled with unspoken questions. “Why are you all wet?” he probes, his tone betraying his curiosity.**

**“Long story,” I offer cryptically.**

**“Yeah, I bet it is. Hope you know what you’re doing with her,” he says, sounding skeptical.**

I take a deep breath, my mind racing with a whirlwind of thoughts and emotions the moment we just had has created. I thought I had it under control, that I could stay away from her and not give in to temptation, but tonight got out of hand so quickly. I don't want to stay away from her anymore.

"I'm protecting her," I state firmly, not giving anything away. I will protect her. I have to. "No matter the cost," I add more for myself. As much as I'm fucking desperate to, I know I can't take her to bed and finish what we started.

Kobe studies me for a moment, his gaze searching for the truth in my words. Finally, a hint of understanding flickers across his face. Not that he has ever been in a situation like this before himself.

"Fine," he concedes, his voice filled with brotherly concern. "We can't afford any distractions," he tells me, like I don't already know what we're up against. I know just as well as he does, the next two days are crucial. First, I win my title, then we eliminate Liam and shut down the King operations for good.

I nod, acknowledging the weight of his words. I know what I have to do. I need to fucking man up and keep my desire for her under control. I can't slip up again. What happened tonight was a one-off, a moment of weakness that won't be repeated. She is mine to protect until I get her life back, and that's all.

# Chapter 16

## HAZEL

WHAT'S GOING ON TONIGHT? Kobe and Jett are all dressed up. Jett has on one of those suits I was checking out in his wardrobe. From the looks of it, they are ready to head out. However, Ben remains seated on the sofa, mindlessly flipping through channels, as if he intends to stay in. I'm taken aback since there hasn't been any mention of a change in plans.

Jett has been deliberately avoiding me all day, and I can only assume it's because of what nearly happened between the two of us last night. We haven't discussed it at all. After I finished my shower, I went in search of him, but he was in the den with Kobe and their injured friend, so I decided to give them their space. I had hoped Jett would come and find me once they were done, but he never did. I heard him retire to bed well after midnight. Even though part of me longed to slip into his room and continue what we started, I resisted. Instead, I lay awake, reliving the sensation of his hands on me, his lips pressed against mine. It was intoxicating, making me feel more alive than ever.

I flop down on the couch beside Ben. "Where are they going?"

“Jett has his weigh-in,” he replies, distracted. He’s been moping around the place all day. I should ask him about it, find out what’s wrong, but I have my own shit going on.

“Oh.” I feel like I should have known about that, but I wrack my brain and realize Jett never once mentioned to me how close his fight was. For it to be time for his weigh-in, surely this important fight he’s been training for is this week sometime.

“Don’t worry, Sis. They’re leaving you in my capable hands. Jett also hired some extra ground guards to ensure your safety. He was really anxious about it.”

I glance over at Jett, and he gives me a guilt-ridden look. I can’t tell if it’s because of what happened last night or because he’s ignored me all day and now regrets it. Regardless, he can take that guilt and shove it up his ass. Who’s the one acting like a child now? He can’t even have a simple conversation with me and explain what’s going through his thick skull.

“We’ll be back in a couple of hours, Ben, but I’m sure you have everything under control,” Jett says, emphasizing the “you” part.

So, it seems we’ve come full circle. I’m reduced to being an object in need of protection once again, instead of a person he communicates with. My heart sinks. His disregard for me stings more than it should. I’m smarter than this. I should have known last night he was just all wound up because it’s been so long since he’s been out of this place. He didn’t really want me, he just wanted to fuck someone, and I was the one around.

“Nothing to worry about here, boss,” Ben responds, all business.

I don’t even bother acknowledging Jett with another glance. Screw him. Screw this bullshit. Every day we take one step forward and five back, and I’m done. I’ve been confined to this house for far too long, losing sight of my

focus while allowing my attraction to him to cloud my judgment. I've forgotten what I truly want: revenge for everything Liam put me through. I won't wait any longer to have it. And since this is the first night Jett has ventured out of the house since my arrival, what better time to make my escape.

I wait until I hear the door click shut, then turn to my brother. "I think I'll head up to bed early. I'm really tired," I tell him with a yawn.

"Okay, see you in the morning," he replies, sounding exhausted himself, and he probably is. He has been working long hours from early morning to every night since we got here. "Haze, are you okay?" he asks as I make it to the door.

"I'm fine," I huff, anything but. I'm hurt, more than I thought I could feel after only a few weeks getting to know someone. I think I feel silly because it's not like me to show my true feelings to anyone. But with him, I opened up, I told him things I haven't shared with even Ruby. And I told him how much I wanted him.

"You seem upset, and last night when we got home early, it felt like we walked in on something between you and Jett. Is there something going on there?" His eyes search mine, looking for answers.

Fuck. Of course, Ben noticed. It was pretty obvious with both of us drenched. "Nope, he's just a jackass. We had a fight, and I ran into the rain to escape him. The usual shit when you're forced to live with a Neanderthal. Nothing for you to worry about," I dismiss his question.

"Okay," he replies, eyeing me suspiciously as if he knows I'm lying. And I'm sure he does; my brother has always been able to read me well, but this isn't a conversation I want to have with him. *Oops, sorry I caught feelings for*



*your boss, the one you left in charge of protecting me. Yeah, him, and he totally crushed me.* That'd go down really well.

I take his hand. "Thank you for taking such good care of me, Ben. I want you to know how much I appreciate you," I say, my voice trembling with emotion. I'm fully aware that what I'm about to do will devastate him. I can only hope he'll eventually understand why it's necessary and one day forgive me for it.

He stands up and envelops me in a tight embrace. "You're my sister, and I want you to have the life you deserve, free from the shit our father got you into. And once all of this is over, you will."

"I hope so." I smile at him, really hoping he's right, because if not, it means I'm dead. I failed while fighting for my revenge.

"You might even land a job out of all of this, working for Amelia Harper," he suggests, hopeful.

I nod. "That would be a dream come true." And it really would be. I also hope I'm not about to screw up that opportunity, but I can't stay here another night wondering what could be. I need to make it happen.

"This won't be in vain, Haze. Our lives are improving. Just hold on a little longer." He squeezes my hand, his kind gesture causing guilt to ripple through me. I know I'm a terrible sister, he deserves so much better. If I make it back here alive, I'll make it up to him, but he and Jett can't keep just saying it won't be much longer. I don't believe them anymore.

"Thanks, Ben." I kiss his cheek. "Good night," I say, feeling as though I should add "see you tomorrow," but I'm uncertain if that will be the case.

"Good night," he responds, sinking back into his seat and getting comfortable.

On my way back to my room, I pause at the top of the stairs and disable the

alarm for my wing of the house. I've been observing Jett's habits for weeks and have memorized his security code. When he said he couldn't trust me, he was right, but not for the reasons he believed. I would never betray him by relaying information to Liam. I'll just use the information to help myself.

A smirk forms on my lips as I revel in the success of phase one of my plan. Jett sees me as a foolish child, incapable of anything beyond being a nuisance to him. Well, it's time to show him and the others just how capable I truly am.

Once I'm safely behind the closed bedroom door, I retrieve the kit I've meticulously assembled since my arrival here. I swiftly change into a pair of jeans and a sweater, then carefully tuck the gun I managed to steal into the back of my waistband and my knife into my pocket. Opening the bathroom window, I realize it's closer to the roof compared to the one in the bedroom, providing me with the best chance of descending undetected by any guards.

As I slip out of the bathroom window and onto the roof, a rush of adrenaline surges through my veins. The night air is cool against my skin, and the silence of the surroundings amplifies the pounding of my heart. Carefully, I crawl along the rooftop, mindful of any creaking or loose shingles that could give me away.

My mind races, trying to list what I need to do in order to calm the anxiety. Moving stealthily, I navigate my way down the side of the house, gripping onto drainpipes and ledges for support. Every step is deliberate, every breath calculated. I can't afford to make a single mistake. The darkness is my ally, masking my presence as I get closer to the ground.

Once my feet touch the earth, I take a moment to compose myself. The weight of the gun against my back reminds me of the task at hand. There is no turning back now. I'm committed to seeing this through to the end. Liam

will pay for the torment he inflicted upon me, and I will make sure he's never able to hurt anyone again.

I search for the security team, spotting two men at the side gate and a third a bit farther up. I slip into the shadows, blending into the night as I make my way to the fence, feeling my way along. From what I could see from my bedroom window, this section of the perimeter is only hedging, so it should be easy enough for me to slip through. But as I feel along, I realize I was wrong. There is a wire mesh fence intertwined in the hedge. I feel my way down to the bottom. There's a small gap.

Using all the determination and strength I can muster, I bend the wire up, giving me just enough room to slide under. I roll onto my side, feeling the scratch of the exposed wire barbs breaking the skin of my neck, but I don't let it deter me. I wiggle a little farther over and find myself on the other side of the fence.

Freedom at last! Pride washes over me, knowing I got myself this far. I'm not the dumb girl they all think I am. I can finish the rest of my plan with ease. And as I run across the road and out of sight of the men walking the perimeter, I start working on my plan to get into Liam's place.

I spent two years there, I know it well. All I have to do is sneak in through the back of the house. At night, it's the weakest side because it backs on to a neighboring farm property that houses pigs. It's not well lit, and the guards don't bother with it because it's almost impossible to get past the noisy animals, but Ruby and I worked out a small corner of the fence that doesn't quite meet with the pig pen on the other side. That's where I will go through; lucky for me, I'm small enough. And once inside the estate, I'm going straight for his den. I will arrive after eight when I know he'll be on the tipsy side and more manageable. Then I'll shoot him right between the eyes.

Once the gun goes off, the guards will come running, but that's the beauty of my plan. His den has a bolt lock on the door and access through a secret wall to the back yard for my escape.

My approach this time will be different. I won't take any chances, relying on the hope that he'll consume the poison I left for him. No, this time, I won't leave until I witness his final breath, ensuring he knows it was me who brought about his demise.

# Chapter 17

## JETT

**“ARE YOU NERVOUS?” KOBE asks while we wait for my name to be called by the officials. “I’m fucking shitting myself. What if you don’t make weigh-in?” he adds.**

**I quirk an eyebrow at Kobe and wonder where the cool, calm, collected guy I grew up with is tonight. This isn’t him; he doesn’t get anxious about anything. “What do I have to be nervous about? We have been preparing for this for years,” I tell him to assure him everything is going to be sweet.**

**But the truth is, my head’s not in it tonight. All I can think about is getting home to make sure everything is under control with Hazel. I left Ben in charge, and after his help defending the ambush last night, he proved he is a worthy member of our team. And I know no one else will watch over his sister like he would. Still, there is a niggling feeling that something’s not right. It was the look in her eyes when she saw me all dressed up. She was hurt I hadn’t told her what was going on.**

**“You’ve got this.” Kobe pats me on the back, trying to sound more confident than I know he feels. This has been our journey, his and mine, ever since he was getting bullied at school and I had to step in and take care of him. We weren’t the biggest kids, but we were the toughest, and it didn’t take long for us to build up a reputation. Before we knew it, kids were paying us to fight their bullies. That’s how we originally got into all of this, fighting on the streets trying to protect those who couldn’t protect themselves. It wasn’t until Brandon, Kobe’s best friend, backed me with the cash to follow my dreams that I was finally able to step up to fight professionally.**

**I take a deep breath, trying to find my Zen. Hazel is just fine. This isn’t like the night with Mom. I have extra security watching over her. She’s safe. Pissed at me, that’s for sure, but safely tucked up in bed.**

**My nickname, the Heartbreaker, is called, and I take the podium for my weigh-in. The energy in the room is palpable. My fight is the main event and the match-up everyone is here to see. Last time I came up against Zamora, I lasted three rounds, tapping out in the third from his deadly chokehold. This time he won’t get so lucky.**

**The crowd of fans and media are out of control. Flashes go off, blinding me, but I know the drill. Tune it all out and focus on me and only me. If I let Zamora get to me, I’m fucked. I take off my shirt and pants and stand on the scale. The announcer reads out my weight, 186 pounds, and I give a little nod to Kobe. We’re good to go. Next up is Zamora, and he steps up and weighs in, coming in at the same as me. We’re evenly matched in every way.**

**He steps off the scales and comes toward me, getting up in my face as we eye each other. More flashes go off as the media try and capture the**

intense moment. I should be loving this, stirring up my opponent, like I normally would. This psychological shit is what I live for, but I hate to admit it, my heart's not in it. I'm too distracted by Hazel and by what will happen after the fight tomorrow.

Zamora leans in, shaking my hand, and I let him. Kobe glares at me like I have lost my mind. I never shake an opponent's hand. Fuck.

He gives me a devilish smile filled with malice. "You've already lost," he says, mimicking choking me, before walking away with a sarcastic chuckle.

And he's fucking right. If I don't get my head in the fight and off Hazel in the next twenty-four hours, it will be a repeat of what happened last time, and I will lose. This sport is all about mindset.

On the way back to the changeroom, I absentmindedly sign items of clothing shoved in my direction and take selfies with fans, but it's all a blur. Noise and faces, I can't focus on any of it. All I can see is the disappointed look on Hazel's face when she heard we were going out. I know I should have talked to her about last night, but after what happened between us, I decided for the both of us it was better if I kept my distance, went back to doing my job. It's for the best, she'll see.

Kobe grabs my arm, shoving me around the corner out of view. "What's wrong?" His eyes search mine, looking for answers.

I run a hand through my hair, tugging at the ends. I can't fuck this up, we have worked too hard for too long for me to throw it all away now.

Kobe shoves me up against the wall, staring me down, his eyes more intense than I have ever seen them. "What the fuck is going on in your head, Jett?"

"It's her, Hazel. This situation. She's in my head. She's the only thing I



can think about, and it's driving me insane. I'm going to lose this fucking bout because I can't focus," I admit, the words nearly choking me on the way out. How is this happening to me, right when I'm so close to finally achieving my goals?

He releases me and pats my chest. "Right. Well, we need to fix that. You need food. Then we'll stop in at the club on the way home. You've spent too much time locked up with her, that's all. Your brain is all messed up from depriving yourself of all the things you love so much. A T-bone then a quick fuck with one of your regulars, and you'll be good to go for tomorrow. The girls haven't stopped asking after you. They're going to go nuts when we get there."

I stare back at my brother, knowing he is deadly serious. He thinks fucking some chick from the club will stop whatever Hazel has started. He's so wrong, I can't think of anything worse right now. She's the only girl I want. I can still taste her juices on my tongue. Fucking her with my fingers was a tease, one I can't stop picturing. Her soaking-wet trembling body clinging to me. Fuck, I want more of that.

"Hell, I could do with the same, something to ease the tension. Perfect idea," he commends himself, patting me on the back to get me going.

I drop my head. "Kobe." I want to tell him he's fucking crazy, that he has no idea, but maybe he's the one who is making sense right now and it's me who has lost my mind. "Not tonight. I need to go home and focus. I can do this, I just need to get back to our place." Tomorrow she's coming with us, so I know she's okay. She can sit in the front row with Ben so I can keep an eye on her. If I know she's out of harm's way, then I can win the fight.

"I could arrange for someone to drop in at home for you, if that would

work better?” he suggests, cheeky grin on his face.

“Sex can’t fix this,” I grumble. Kobe doesn’t get it, how could he? He’s never had more than a one-night stand with a girl, never let anyone get close enough to him. He loves all women, but he has a rule: only once. The idea of being attracted to one person for the rest of his life is sickening to him, and I used to be the same. After what Elidee did to me, I wasn’t interested in any sort of commitment. The three of us brothers were all the same. I thought it must have been a flaw in our DNA, we just didn’t have that desire to find our other half. But when I look at Leo and Piper, I see it. She complements him, softens him in a good way, she makes him a better man. And it makes me wonder what it would be like.

“That’s where you’re wrong, Brother. Sex fixes everything. Has one feisty girl really broken the Heartbreaker?”

The Heartbreaker, I used to enjoy the way that name made me feel. The tabloids started it, for my ability to leave opponents gasping for air and nursing broken ribs in the octagon, but also for the trail of hearts I supposedly left broken outside of it. It gave me an edge, but now it feels like in one month I have outgrown it. Kobe is probably right, I’m more tense than I should be, and a night at the club would normally fix that, except the only person I want to screw is Hazel, and that’s not going to happen.

Two hours later I’m home, staring at the empty plate in front of me. I’m a fucking mess, even worse than I was back at the weigh-in. I’ve eaten, hoping Kobe was right about the deprivation thing and I was just deliriously hungry after fasting to make weight. But it’s done nothing. I still feel empty, like I’m craving something. Her. Hazel, I fucking need her like crazy.

I pack my plate away and wander down the hallway, stopping in front of her door. I'm tempted to shove it open, tell her she was having one of those nightmares again just so I can sleep with her body tangled around mine. Or I could just sneak in and check on her, make sure she's tucked up safely in bed. I could watch her sleeping like I did while she was in the hospital. That could satisfy this hunger.

I go to open the door but stop with my hand on the doorknob, my heart racing. I pull my hand away as if the door burned me. I'm being a selfish ass again. I can't do this to her, it's not fair. I can't do this to myself. I'm stronger than this. My mind is a fucking vice, I have control over it, and I don't need Hazel. Not to smell her hair or watch her sleep. It's fucking creepy.

I storm back to my room and close the door. What I need is a half-decent night's sleep and to block her from my mind completely. That's the only way I'm going to get through this fight tomorrow—pretend she doesn't exist. She's nothing to me, just the girl I'm watching over. And in two more days, she won't even be that. All this will be over.

# Chapter 18

## JETT

**“HOW DID IT GO? Are you fighting tonight?” Ben asks, looking up from his bowl of cereal. The night off has done him good. He’s looking a lot healthier today.**

**“Sure am.” I smile with a little more confidence than I felt last night. “Did you and Hazel have a fun night?” I ask, searching the fridge for a carton of eggs. I’ve been eating less over the last few days, trying to make weight, and now I need to restock so I have the energy to fight.**

**“She said she was in a bad mood and went to bed early. Did something happen yesterday?” His penetrating gaze bores right through me, making me feel even more guilty, as if he already knows.**

**I meet his eyes, struggling with my conscience. I was supposed to protect his sister, not fool around with her when his back was turned. “No,” I say, not technically lying, since nothing happened yesterday.**

**He finishes up his cereal and puts the bowl in the sink. “I’ll go and check on her. She should be down, searching for food by now, and I want to make sure she’s okay. She really wasn’t herself last night,” he says, his**

tone tinged with concern. “I was too tired to pay much attention to it last night. You weren’t kidding when you said this job is taxing.”

“Kid, I know I give you a hard time, but you’re an asset to our team. The way you handled the ambush the other night shows how far you’ve come already. I’m proud of you, and what you’re doing for your sister is commendable.” I pat him on the back. “Got you front-row tickets for tonight, you and Hazel.”

“Really? Nice, thanks, man.” He looks at me, worried. “Is it safe for her to be out in public?”

“Our security company is running the event. The place will be secure, but I want you to stay by her side the entire time,” I tell him.

“I can do that,” he says, a spark of determination in his eyes. It’s a rare moment of genuine happiness from him. He enjoys the sport as much as I do.

“It’ll be you out there fighting before you know it.”

“Hope so,” he replies, disappearing down the hallway in search of his sister.

I find a pan for the eggs and turn on the stove. While I wait for it to heat up, I make my morning smoothie. Suddenly, I hear Ben screech my name. His voice echoes down the hall, causing me to turn and wonder what the hell is going on.

I flick off the heat and run toward him, finding him standing in the doorway, no color in his face. “She’s gone,” he whispers, his voice filled with disbelief. “Liam’s got her.”

Refusing to believe him, I push past him into her room. Her bed is neatly made, the room immaculate. I hurry to check the bathroom, and

fear surges through me like a tidal wave. It's fucking empty, but the window is open wide.

“Fuck!” I shout into the emptiness, a mixture of anger and panic coursing through my veins. “Liam didn't get in, she got out.” How the hell did she manage to slip away without anyone noticing? The one fucking night I'm not here. “Where's Kobe?” I demand, needing help. Not knowing where she is makes me feel like I'm about to lose control completely.

“He's helping Piper and Leo set up her new salon. Jett, what does this mean? Where is she?”

I should never have left the house without her. I should have checked on her last night when I got home. This is all my fault. “How the fuck did she escape?” I dash down the hall to check the alarm system. Our section of the house has been disarmed. That sneaky little... “Try calling your mom, see if she knows anything. And talk to the guards and have them search the property, just in case she's still here. Hazel can't have gotten far on her own. I'll go find the boys. If you hear anything, let me know.”

“I knew she was acting strange last night. I should have suspected she was up to something and paid closer attention,” Ben says angrily. “Fuck!” he yells into her room. “How could she do this?”

The poor kid is blaming himself. “You couldn't have known she would leave. Stop beating yourself up about it. She did this, not you.”

“You have no idea, Jett. When Hazel is determined about something, there's no stopping her. She's probably hotwired a car and is on her way to Mexico. Or LA to see Ruby-Rose.”

“Or she's heading straight into enemy territory, looking for a fight,” I add, my voice filled with concern. I've learned enough about her to know

it's the only thing she really wants. And if she was desperate to escape this place the first chance she got, that's where she's off to.

His eyes widen, and I can see the realization dawning on him. "For fuck's sake, she is, isn't she? We took too long with our plan. She's going after him herself. She's going to get herself killed."

I grab him by the arms, trying to shake him out of his panic. If we both let our closeness to her get in the way of doing our job, we're screwed. "Not if I have anything to do about it. But we need to act fast. She's already hours ahead of us."

He looks up at me and nods. "You're right," he says, pulling out of my grip with a look of renewed determination on his face.

As I drive, time flies by in a blur. My car won't move fast enough to get me to the salon. Liam's threats haunt me. Hazel has no idea; I should have warned her of the danger, then she might have thought twice about taking off. If he gets to her first, I'll never see her again. Pain radiates through my chest at the thought.

When I finally screech into the parking lot where Leo, Kobe, and Piper stand, I fling the window open. "Hazel took off," I growl, anger searing through me. I can't believe how recklessly she's acted.

"What? How do you know?" Kobe asks, his voice filled with concern.

"She's not at the house. Ben is freaking out," I quickly explain, impatient with his questions. Time is of the essence.

I get out of the car so Kobe can take the driver's seat; I'm in no condition to drive. Leo hops into the passenger side, and I take the back seat. "We need to pick up the kid then head straight to the King estate. That's where she'll be heading."

Kobe speeds out of the parking lot, driving like a maniac. "Why would



she go back there after what he did?” he wonders aloud.

“She’s tired of waiting for us,” Leo says, giving me a knowing look. He understands just how determined she can be.

“She thinks she can kill him herself,” I tell them. I’m not keeping her secrets anymore, not when she put herself in this much danger. “She told me that night when she had the nightmare, she always intended to kill him. The night we blew up the shipment, she was supposed to go through with it, but the boys got the call about what we did, and it put an end to her plans. She’s going there to kill him.”

“Are you fucking kidding? I knew she was feisty, but this is some next-level shit. Ha, she’s your perfect match, Jett. Just as messed up in the head to think she can take on a dude twice her size and win. I really fucking hope we find her before he does.” He might be driving, but I see the look he gives me in the rear-view mirror. He knows something I don’t.

“Spill, Kobe. What the fuck do you know?” I growl. I don’t have time for shitty little looks right now. I need all the information laid out for me so I know how to fix this mess.

“We didn’t want to mess with your head before the fight. I knew how twisted up you already were about this girl, but Liam knows what’s going on between you and Hazel. He’s out for your blood and hers,” he admits, looking guilty. He doesn’t keep information from me without good reason.

“Are you kidding me? How?” I demand.

“We don’t know, but he sent over video footage of you manhandling his wife in the rain the other night. What the hell were you thinking?”

Leo chastises me with his big-brotherly, bossy tone that I thought I'd outgrown years ago.

I rip off my baseball cap and run a frustrated hand through my hair. It's infuriating to think that someone might have captured that moment. "For him to have footage, our place must be bugged," I snap, irritation seeping into my voice.

"Or there's someone on our security team who's working both sides," Kobe suggests, his words hanging heavily in the air.

I had hoped we'd weeded out all the double-crossing motherfuckers after what happened last time.

Kobe screams into our driveway where Ben's waiting for us, and he jumps in, wasting no time. "Any luck?" I ask, hoping his mother was some help, as much as I despise her for the way she treated Hazel.

"She knows something but not about where Hazel is. She says Hazel's probably just being a good girl on her way home to her husband." He shakes his head, looking out the window. "I'm still in shock."

"What the fuck is wrong with your mom?" asks Kobe.

"I wish I knew," he mutters.

"Ben, are you sure it was your dad who had the connection to the Kings and not your mom?" asks Leo, taking the words out of my mouth.

He looks toward me. "Honestly, I don't know anything anymore. She always claimed she had nothing to do with it, but after what she said to Hazel the other week, and now this, I'm not so sure I can trust my mother at all. Something is definitely up."

I close my eyes, feeling the thumping of a headache building. I need to fucking hit something; the tension in my body has hit next level. "If your mom is involved with them, this fucking means we have just let the Kings

know Hazel isn't in our care anymore." Two sets of eyes meet with mine from the front, my brothers understanding my fear. She's in real danger here. If he gets his hands on her before we do, I'll never see her again. None of us will.

Forty long arduous, gut-wrenching minutes later we pull up at a spot not far from Liam's property. This is the last place any of us want to be, especially with how loose our plan is, but I can't let her go back in there. Kobe has already declared my forfeit for tonight. There's no way I'll make it to my fight in time. It feels like a devastating blow after all the training and sacrifice I've put in. It's hard to believe how selfish Hazel is. She knew how crucial this fight was to me, and she left anyway. "We stop her before she gets inside. You clear?" I say to them both, praying to whoever will listen that she's not already dead.

"And if she's already inside?" asks Kobe, checking his gun.

"She won't be. She'll be waiting for him to be drunk first. She'll be here watching and waiting for the right time to strike." She's smart; there is a whole lot more going on in her pretty little head than she lets anyone else know, but from the little she has told me about her relationship with Liam, she worked him out. She knows his strengths and weaknesses, and she knows exactly how she wants this all to play out.

The four of us hop out of the car quietly, going the last bit on foot, our guns drawn. We're not taking any chances this close to enemy territory. This place is patrolled from every direction with guards. My guess is she won't try to get in there till nightfall when she thinks he's intoxicated enough that she has the upper hand. So now we search in four different

**directions around the building, and we pray that one of the Kings doesn't find her before we do.**

# Chapter 19

## HAZEL

I'M HAULED BACK SUDDENLY into a brick wall of a man. A hand smothers my mouth, stealing my breath instantly. Panic floods me. I've been caught when I was so damn close. My surroundings blur as the thug pulls me behind a building.

His breath is on my ear. "Don't make a sound, Sunshine, or they'll hear you," whispers a deep familiar voice, sending a wave of goosebumps over my skin. He found me before I could sneak in and finish the job.

A silent whimper leaves my lips. Jett is a better option than one of Liam's men, but I was so close, about to sneak through the fence. I could've done it tonight, I know I could. This should be over for all of us.

I push against him, trying to free myself, desperate to finish what I've started. If I can get out of his grip, I can slip through the gap, but his fingers dig into my flesh and hold tight. He spins me around so his dark eyes are locked with mine. Anger radiates off him. He's scary like this, his eyes holding a silent promise not to mess with him. "Don't," is all he says, his voice hushed so the closest guard won't hear him.

He pulls me with him, moving quickly through the neighbor's yard. I stop struggling against Jett's hold on me. What's the point? He's so much bigger and stronger than I am, and I know I have no chance of escaping him now that he's worked out where I am. I should have known he would. He's relentless.

We stop when we get to a black Jeep with dark tinted windows. Without warning, the door swings open, and he shoves me in the back seat next to my brother. It happens so fast my head is spinning.

"Hazel! Thank God you're okay," Ben says, pulling me into him.

"I'm fine," I whisper, pulling the gun from the waistband of my jeans so I can lean back into the car seat. Disappointment settles inside of me. I understand his concern, but it's unwarranted.

"Hey, that's mine," Kobe snarls, grabbing the gun from my lap and passing it to Leo. "How the hell did you get it?"

Leo makes a sound that resembles a junk yard dog.

I swallow hard, looking between the two of them. They're scary as fuck when they're angry, and right now they are fuming, with all their irritation directed at me.

I don't have time to answer Kobe before Jett squeezes in beside me, trapping me between him and my brother. I feel like a stray dog caught and caged again by the local dog catcher. All of a sudden, my chest tightens, and I can't catch my breath. It's like the air is sucked out of the car it's so full of testosterone-fueled assholes. I close my eyes to stop the spinning and block them all out, trying to concentrate on my breathing.

"Fucking drive," Jett roars to Kobe who's in the driver seat still gaping at me. He takes off, spraying dust up behind us as he does.

"You scared the shit out of me disappearing like that, Haze," Ben murmurs,

his voice hushed. He's disappointed in me; I can feel it coming off him like a heavy fog that has settled around him, casting a shadow over his usual demeanor.

"How could you do this to me?" I whisper cry, the frustration taking over. None of them know what it would have meant to me to finally end Liam's life. I needed this. It's been my only purpose for two years. This might have been my last chance, and they just stole it from me. Again.

"Do what! Make sure you didn't get killed?" Kobe interjects from the front as he speeds up the highway, driving like a madman. I don't know him all that well, even though I have shared a house with him for weeks, but what I do know of him is that he's always the fun one having a joke, keeping the mood light and playful. But even he has a darker edge to him tonight.

I glare at him. I hate him, I hate all of them, anyone with the name Rivera. The rest of the car is deathly quiet. Even Jett sits staring stoically at the seat in front of him. But this is their doing.

I'm shaking, the aftermath of the adrenaline coursing through my body, along with the loss of control. I need out of this car and away from all of them. I bury my head in my hands, trying to get my breathing under control, but it's no use. Nothing will make this feeling go away, not while I have no control over my life.

I turn to my brother. "You knew why I was there. Why couldn't you just let me do it?"

He shakes his head like he's disappointed in me and has no words left to say.

Something inside of me snaps. I'm so done with this bullshit. "Or would that have bruised all your egos too much, that a silly little girl finished the job



you lot haven't been able to do," I seethe, not caring what their reaction will be.

These fucking controlling assholes have just fucked up my life again. They have had enough time to finish him off. It's what they all want, isn't it? To eliminate Liam and destroy his organization, and they have the manpower and authority to make it happen. What's stopping them? Why are they all just sitting around waiting for him to get his shit together and come and get us, because he will. I'm sure he's biding his time at the moment because of the shipment that got destroyed, but as soon as he's got it sorted out, we're all screwed. Me included because I'm with them.

"For God's sake, Hazel, stop acting like a child," Ben chastises me, a dark anger simmering in his eyes. I've never seen him so furious with me. His words cut right through me, making me feel meaningless.

I'm not acting like a child. They make me feel like one, babying me the way they are. I was trying to take control of my life. But I can see he's one of them now. Part of this organization. They all band together, and what I want is no longer important to him. I can't even stand to look at him.

I glance at Jett. He hasn't moved a muscle since he forced me into the vehicle. The vein in his neck looks like it's about to pop. His breathing is harsh, and he looks and sounds like a raging bull about to explode through the gate, ready to take on the fight of his life. What the hell is his problem? He got everything his way, after all. I'm back here with him, trapped.

Kobe makes a turn down a blackened street, and we pull into what looks like an open airport hangar. My eyes shoot over to Ben as my heart races out of control. "What's going on?" I demand, panicked.

"You have to trust Jett, Hazel, this is for the best," he responds, his voice flat, uncaring even. He's had enough of me.

I bite the inside of my cheek to stop the tears that threaten, turning my attention to Jett. “What is, where are you taking me?” I cry. I had assumed they would take me back to their place and I could lock myself away from them all in my room. But this looks like an airport. Jett doesn’t answer me. Doesn’t even acknowledge me. The prick just keeps looking forward like I don’t exist.

Ben puts his hand on my leg, bringing my attention back to him. “Somewhere you will be safe while we sort out some minor issues here.”

“Issues?” What issues are they talking about.

Kobe parks the car, and he and Leo hop out, striding across the tarmac like they own it—they probably do. There is a shadowy figure, and they stop once they get to him, but I can’t see who it is. It’s dark out now, and they are shrouded in shadow. Leo motions toward the car.

“I’ll be back in a second,” Ben says in response, and I watch as he gets out of the car and off to another one. He walks around the back to the trunk, taking out luggage and walking it over to the other boys standing by a plane. That better not be my stuff in there, I’m not going anywhere.

“What the hell’s going on, Jett?” I ask him, more desperate. Surely, he has a heart in there somewhere, and he will understand how distressing this is not to know what’s going on. It’s my life they are playing with!

But he gives me nothing. He’s completely giving me the cold shoulder.

My anxiety hits a peak, and I feel like I’m about to have a panic attack. I need out of this car before I do. I shuffle over to the side Ben got out and go to open the door. Jett’s hand lands on my shoulder. “Don’t,” he snaps.

Again, *don’t*, that is all he has said to me since he picked me up. My eyes flick back to him, my breathing ragged. “What are you so angry about? You just ruined my day, not the other way around,” I mutter. I’ve had about

enough of this childish behavior. Who does the whole silent-treatment thing after ten years of age?

“Are you kidding me?” he seethes. His glare is icy, even for him, and bores right through me. I’ve never seen him so mad. “You knew what today was, how important it was to me, and you chose to fuck it all up for your own selfish reasons.”

*What today was.* It clicks. His fight. My heart sinks. “You didn’t have to come after me,” I mutter, not sure what else to say. He should have gone to his fight, not worried about me. I’m not his problem. I had the situation under control. He should have got on with his life and left me to mine.

He grabs me, his hands coming to my shoulders and forcing me to look at him. “You have no idea what he would have done to you if you didn’t succeed tonight. If he got his hands on you again. You think what he put you through last time was bad. I can assure you this would have been far worse.” His anger is overtaken with what looks like fear.

I can feel the slight tremble of his hands as he says the words. He’s more than angry with me, he’s scared. He was petrified Liam would get a hold of me tonight.

What does he know that I don’t? I don’t get time to ask him because the door is opened. Jett drops my arms awkwardly, and Ben appears again. Peering down to look at the two of us, he searches my face then Jett’s, looking wounded. I can see he knows there is something more between us, and he hates it. He also has no say here, and even though he wants to speak up, he has to keep his opinion to himself.

“They’re ready for you two to board,” he says like a robot. Maybe that’s who he has to be to betray his sister like he is. They have made him one of

their soldiers, and he has to play his part and fall in line, whether he wants to or not.

“Us? Where are we going?” I cry out in frustration.

Neither of them answers me. Jett opens his door and motions for me to follow him out.

I cross my arms over my chest. “I’m not going anywhere until one of you tells me where that plane is going.” I look at Ben, waiting for an answer, then to Jett. Neither of them answers me. Jett glares at me, his nostrils flaring like he’s about to lose his shit. A low growl comes from him, but I’m not scared of him. “Guess I’m staying here then,” I say, leaning back to make myself more comfortable.

Before I know what’s happening, Jett reaches in and grabs me by the waist, hauling me out of the car and over his shoulder like I weigh nothing at all. He knocks the wind out of my lungs, and it takes me a second to fight back.

“Put me down!” I hit his back as hard as I can. I’m not getting on a plane. “Jett, I’m warning you,” I say, knowing I have nothing I can really threaten him with, but this is humiliating. He stalks past his brothers and up the stairs of the private plane, not stopping until we’re inside, where he deposits me onto a plush, latte-colored leather seat.

My body bounces. I sit up quickly, pulling my legs up to my chest, hugging them protectively. I stare up at him, furious. How dare he treat me like this. Pushing me around, not communicating with me. He doesn’t own me, I’m not a fucking toy he can play with and control. This is bullshit. But I already know it doesn’t matter what I say or do right now, the fucking Riveras will do whatever the hell they want. And for whatever reason, they want me out of town.

Jett drops down into the seat beside me and lets out a labored sigh.

Probably pulled a muscle dragging my body across the tarmac. It would serve him right.

I glance out the little window into the darkness of the night, feeling more alone than I ever have in my life. I wish I had taken my opportunity to take off to LA to stay with Ruby instead of going after Liam. I could be sipping cocktails in a funky bar with my bestie right now.

“Can I get you anything, Mr. Rivera?” I hear a pleasant-sounding female voice ask. I glance at her. Perfect hair and make-up, all dolled up in a pencil skirt and silk blouse. The hostess looks at him like she’s about to offer her body to him as a part of the menu. And maybe she is. Maybe that’s the kind of treatment he’s used to getting. An attractive single man in his thirties with more money than he knows what to do with. I’m sure it is.

“Whiskey,” he tells her.

I peek at him, surprised. Jett doesn’t drink. I’ve never seen him indulge in anything other than his gross green smoothies. Not even when the others have come around for a meal, they all drink, but he doesn’t.

“And you, Mrs. King?” She smiles at me, and I shudder at the mention of my married name.

“It’s Martinez,” I correct her. I might still technically be married, but I will never go by that name again.

“Sorry, Ms. Martinez.”

“No, thank you,” I tell her. I could go for something strong to wipe my memory of tonight, but I need to have my wits about me. I have no idea where this plane is taking us or what to expect when I get there. And since the asshole next to me won’t communicate, I need to start paying attention.

The hostess sways over to her tray, swinging her ass as she does. Slowly, she pours Jett’s drink then returns, placing it on the table in front of him. “We

will take off in five minutes once our pilot has done his final checks. If there is anything else I can help you with, please let me know.” Her smile toward him is sugary sweet, and I roll my eyes automatically, irritated by her falseness.

“Thank you. This will be all,” he says, his words short and snippy. It appears to be more than just me he doesn’t want to talk to.

“You don’t drink,” I say, unable to stop myself from stating the obvious.

He glares at me. “Do you have any idea the kind of preparation it takes to be ready for a title fight like the one I had planned tonight?”

“No,” I say, feeling uneasy. I didn’t mean to mess up his chance of fighting tonight. I wasn’t thinking about him at all. Actually, that’s a lie. I was thinking how pissed off I was with him for getting me all hot, then leaving me hanging. I was thinking about the fact that he had me swooning over him, wanting to give up my plans because I was so distracted by him that I was starting to forget what was important to me. And mostly, I was thinking fuck him, he deserved for me to take off after the way he treated me.

“I’ve been working toward this particular fight relentlessly for two years, since the last time Zamora beat me. And in one night, all that training is for nothing,” he mutters, the devastation showing through more with each word. I’m not sure his disappointment is even aimed at me still. He polishes off his drink in one go and motions to the hostess for another.

In a way, I know exactly how he feels. It’s been two awful years since I was forced to marry Liam King. And every day I was in his house, I plotted my escape. Planned the way I would destroy him and make sure he suffered. “Two years is a long time,” I agree. “That’s how long I was married to that monster. I might not understand what it takes to prepare for a fight like the one you had tonight, but I get it. It aches like a motherfucking bitch when all

your planning is for nothing,” I snip, trying to get even with him. He might be all messed up over his fight, but my *life* is messed up, and that is worse.

He glares back at me coldly, like he has more to say, but he doesn't. Instead, he turns away from me, picking up his fresh drink. Both of us lost tonight. I guess there isn't really anything more to say.

I shift my gaze back toward the window, determined not to let him guilt trip me into feeling bad that he missed his fight because he came to save me. I knew what I was doing tonight. I would have gotten in there and finished him off then got out no problem. I didn't need Jett or my brother to save me.

They haven't seen what I have or experienced what it's really like to live with a member of the Kings gang. At first, I thought Liam wasn't all that bad. Far too old for me and involved in a crime organization I knew nothing about, I was a little scared of him. But he spent the first few weeks showering me with gifts, roses, diamonds, expensive clothes. I'm sure he spent hundreds of thousands of dollars. He did everything he could to try and make me happy. I even started to trust him and accept my fate. Thought I could be someone's wife and do a good job of it. That was until the first night he turned his anger on me.

I don't know what went wrong for him that night or why he came home so furious, but he was drunk off his nut and raging like a bull, and I was the only one there to cop the brunt of it. The next morning, I could hardly move I was so bruised. I stayed in bed for three days, too scared to leave. He coaxed me out of there with a heartfelt apology and the keys to my new Porsche. It was then I knew the only way out was if I killed him.

That's when I started taking more notice of everything going on around me, compiling any information about him and his organization that could help me bring him undone. I wipe away a stray tear that's escaped down my cheek at

the memory then lean my head against the window and close my eyes, trying to shut it all out. What else can I do?



# Chapter 20

## JETT

**IT'S EARLY MORNING WHEN our plane touches down on the tarmac and the engines gradually wind to a halt. I glance over at Hazel, her green hair falling softly over her face, partly covering her closed eyes.**

**She's pretending to sleep, but I know neither of us got a wink on the four-hour flight. The tension between us is intense, and her anger toward me and probably her brother is still simmering under her sleepy facade. I've spent enough time with her over the last month to know all her moods and mannerisms. Her body is tense, her long nails digging into the pillow she has under her head. She's probably imagining she is clawing me to death, inflicting the pain I know she wants to because I ruined her murderous plans.**

**I tried to nod off myself. I had hoped the alcohol would help block her and all the problems she caused in my life out. But with my career now taking a massive nosedive, I couldn't manage to switch my brain off. I've worked so hard to get where I am, only to throw it all away to save some girl I hardly know from her own stupidity. How could someone who**

looks so angelic and innocent have the ability to not only escape one of the best security systems in the world and armed guards but also be so hellbent on murdering her husband that she completely disregards her own life?

Her pretty pink lips are pursed in a way that tells me she knows I'm watching her, but I don't care. From now on when it comes to her, I'll do whatever the fuck I want. After last night, I know my obsession with her has taken a turn. The panic I felt when I thought she was gone overrode everything else in my life. She was the only thing I cared about, and until I knew she was safely with me again, I couldn't control my actions. I know I can't ignore her like I originally planned, so I've decided to embrace whatever the fuck this is. Even if she drives me to the point of insanity in the process, I know I will do anything to keep her from harm's way.

She stretches her arms over her head and yawns sleepily. "Are you going to tell me where we are now?" She gives me her best resting bitch face as she waits for my answer.

"Savannah, Georgia," I reply dryly.

She clumsily clatters upright, her eyes going wide. I'm sure she's wondering why we're so far from home, but it's obvious she can't be trusted not to go after Liam, putting herself in danger and fucking up our plans. So, getting her as far away as I could was the only option I had left. This way, she's safe, and I can carry out Leo's new plan without having to worry about her getting herself killed in the process. Little does she know we were hours away from giving her the freedom she so desperately wanted. If she had just waited, he would be dead, and she would be free.

I rise to my feet, ready to disembark the plane. “There’s a car waiting to take us to the hotel. Are you going to walk off the plan or do I have to carry you again?”

She glares daggers at me, and I’m sure if she were able to kill me with her eyes, she would right now. She’s still fuming mad. “I will walk,” she replies, pushing the words out through clenched teeth.

“Shame, carrying you over my shoulder was so much more fun,” I say without a hint of a smile. I could kill her myself for the shit she has put me through in the last twenty-four hours. But somehow, I still want her body wrapped around mine. I would have preferred we fucked it out in the bedroom in the back of the plane than had a sleepless flight ignoring one another, but since neither of us could get our annoyance under control for long enough, I will take whatever contact I can get with her. I crave it.

She folds one arm over the other, staring up at me with detestation. “I hate you,” she seethes with more confidence than a girl in her position should have. Does she realize I have full control of her life right now?

I run a hand up her arm, leaving a trail of goosebumps in its wake. “Said like the spoiled brat you are.” My hand lands on her chin, forcing her to tilt her head so I can look deep into her blue eyes. They flare with heat. With desire. Her breathing is shallow, like it’s caught in her throat. Her body betrays her. She doesn’t hate me. She detests that she loses control when I’m around.

“You can hate me all you want, Sunshine, but this is all so much bigger than protecting your precious feelings, so forgive me for doing what’s best for everyone. If I showed you the photos Liam sent of you, you might be more understanding.” I drop her chin, giving her space to walk

by me. She can leave of her own accord, but I will be watching her every step of the way. I shouldn't have used the photos I have against her, but I don't know how else to get through to her. She has to know how serious this all is.

I motion for her to go on ahead of me. She stands, dusting off her skinny black jeans, dropping her shoulder as she passes me, making sure not to touch me. She tentatively makes her way down the metal stairs, looking around. I follow behind her, close enough that if she tries to make a run for it, I can grab her. Part of me hopes she does, just so I can hunt her down and catch her. But somehow, I don't think her running is going to be a concern now. She's far enough from home that it won't be easy, anyway.

"Good morning," Sebastian, our driver, greets her with a friendly grin.

"Morning." She offers him a small smile in return.

"I have loaded your luggage into the car, sir. I've also checked you into your hotel. You have the penthouse for the duration of your stay. Mr. Alexander sends his best and is sorry he couldn't be here to personally greet you, but he's away on business this week."

"Thank you, Sebastian."

"Anything either of you need while here can go through me," he adds before opening Hazel's door for her.

I let myself into the other side and feel my body relax knowing we're safely away from Liam.

"Who's Mr. Alexander?" she asks, looking out the dark tinted window as the car leaves the tarmac.

"Brodie Alexander is a friend who is kindly allowing us to stay in his hotel."

“Oh,” is all she says.

The drive to the Alexander Hotel is suffocatingly silent, mirroring the tense atmosphere of our plane ride. I can feel the anger radiating off her. She thinks her brother and I are stripping away her freedom, but she remains oblivious to the gravity of the situation. If she only knew the horror of what I’ve saved her from, she’d be thanking me instead of resenting me.

“What were the photos of? The ones in the envelope?”

I raise a questioning brow. I knew my earlier comment would pique her curiosity, but I’m still not sure I should tell her. That shit will stay with her. “Do you really want to know?” I ask more seriously.

“Yes,” she says softly.

“They were of you. In very little clothing.” Her eyes go wide. “The words ‘*Property of the Kings*’ were written across the photo in red marker. ‘*If she isn’t returned to me by 9am tomorrow she will have these words carved into her skin while you watch.*’ That was his threat.”

I see the fear in her eyes, she knows he would do it. She doesn’t say anything. No thank you for saving her fucking life. She turns away from me, staring out the window again.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, and I grab it, noticing Kobe’s name on the screen. “Do you want the good news or the bad news first?” Kobe’s voice echoes through the line.

“Kobe,” I grumble, not in the mood for his usual playful banter this morning.

“Fine, let’s start with the good news. Last night wasn’t a complete waste of time. One of my contacts from the local station, Caleb, managed to get a hold of Antony Acevedo’s little black book. I’ve got it right here

in my hands.” He’s so proud of himself I can hear his smug grin through the phone. And he should be.

“That’s the best news I’ve heard all week,” I admit, relief seeping into my voice. Finally, we’re one step closer to ending all of this and getting Hazel’s life back. And mine.

“Thought that would bring a smile to your face. Hazel might find you slightly less miserable now,” Kobe chuckles. “Leo’s going through it as we speak, and once he’s done, I’ll send you a copy. Trust me, this could be the key to taking down the Kings. Some of the stuff in there is so fucking good.”

“Sounds promising. Now, what’s the bad news?” I ask, bracing myself.

“It’s not all bad. You might want to turn to the girl you’re with and thank her, because it seems her distraction last night might have saved your life,” Kobe reveals. Glancing over at Hazel, I see her still staring out the window, but her ears are tuned into our conversation. She confessed her knowledge of Liam’s activities stems from her hidden observations—a little spy gathering every detail to use against us later. So, I know right now with me will be no different.

“What nonsense are you carrying on about?” I demand, my patience too thin this morning to play games.

“The fight was rigged. If Zamora failed to do the job he was paid for, Liam had one of his men in the audience ready to shoot you. His exact order was, ‘Jett Rivera is not to leave the building unless he’s in a body bag.’”

Anger bubbles through my veins. I knew he was a dirty motherfucker, but I didn’t think he would try blackmailing another professional fighter to do his dirty work for him. Sounds more like something Piper’s

brother Ace would have done. I should know, Leo had me wrapped up in his games more than once.

Liam's getting desperate. The thought makes me even more grateful Hazel and I have conveniently disappeared. "How the fuck did he manage to infiltrate the place? Our team had it secured," I seethe with frustration. My best team was in place for the night. Men I know I can trust with my life—or at least I would have thought so.

"Rob, your new head of security, recognized him and brought him in for questioning. It didn't take long to make him spill every detail. Just a little time with some bolt cutters and his mouth was spilling secrets like you wouldn't believe. Funny that, hey." He chuckles.

"Hmm," I mutter, less impressed. I'm itching to be the one inflicting pain on the men trying to fuck with us.

"This is the downside of not owning the venues; even with us being the security team, there's always room for error. Your opponent was just a pawn, and Liam had it all meticulously planned. He found a way to slip one of his men in with Zamora, posing as one of his trainers. I hate to say it, but I think we need to cancel the rest of your fights until we eliminate this threat. If you hadn't been chasing after Hazel and showed up at the fight, things could have ended differently." Kobe's voice carries the weight of the situation. He shares my pain, understanding the significance of the setback. This was supposed to be my year, my moment to seize the title I've tirelessly worked toward. "I'm sorry, man."

Hazel's head drops, and her eyes slowly meet mine. They have lost the coldness she had toward me earlier, and instead, they're full of



compassion. She just heard every damn word he said, and she actually cares, even if she's not willing to admit it.

I focus on the seat in front of me, needing to deal with one mess at a time. I can have it out with her later, when we're locked up alone in our hotel room. "Is Rob still holding him now?"

"Waiting on your instructions."

"Make an example out of him. I want fucking Liam King to know he can't mess with us, *any* of us," I glance at Hazel, "and get away with it. Make sure Liam knows what to expect when he meets his own inevitable fate." My voice is harsh and shaky as I say the words. It's not the way we like to do things since Leo took over from Ace, but the Kings have gone too far this time, and they need to be taught a lesson. The Riveras won't back down because Liam is throwing a tantrum over his missing wife. We will come down harder and make sure he regrets the day he ever decided to mess with us.

"Rob's got it covered," Kobe agrees, his voice lighter. He might be the fun-loving one, but Kobe takes pleasure in others' pain, especially when they deserve it, like the motherfucker who decided to cross us.

"Good. And get me the copy of the book today so I can start working on the next phase of our plan."

"On it." He hangs up.

Rage is coursing through my veins. I want to be the one dealing with the guy who thought he could take me out. Instead, I'm 2000 miles across the country with his wife. The thought pleases me more than it should. He might be trying to kill me, but I have the one thing he really wants and will never have again. Not only that, but I know how sweet she tastes, and this time we will be alone, with no one to interrupt us or catch

us on camera. Yeah, knowing his wife is about to be mine is even sweeter with that thought in mind.

Our car smoothly glides into the turn circle of the Alexander Hotel, coming to a stop. Without hesitation, I quickly make my way to the passenger side and open the door for her. As she steps out, her eyes widen in awe at the sight of the magnificent hotel.

“You said your friend owns this place?” she asks, her voice filled with curiosity.

“It’s been in his family for three generations.”

“He must be incredibly wealthy, this place is massive,” she remarks, her tone tinged with a mix of admiration and intrigue.

“Since his father passed away, he’s become the richest man in the entire south,” I inform her, a hint of respect evident in my voice. Brodie Alexander isn’t some arrogant heir who rides the coattails of his hardworking relatives. He’s worked his ass off to keep this place in his family and what it is today, and he deserves the wealth and notoriety it’s earned him.

“Here’s the key. I’ll bring your bags up shortly,” Sebastian tells me, handing me the room key.

I offer a nod, but my attention is with Hazel as she makes her way toward the gleaming glass doors of the lobby, her curiosity pulling her forward. Instinctively, I follow closely behind, not wanting to lose sight of her. Because of the early hour, the foyer is mostly empty, except for a cleaner diligently vacuuming the marble floor. I place a comforting hand on her back, gently guiding her toward the elevator.

The touch of my hand on her back serves as a reassurance, a silent gesture of protection, for her and for me. I don’t know why, but I need

her to know she's safe with me.

“Get your hands off me, Rivera. You lost the right to touch me when you kissed me, then pretended like it didn't happen,” she growls, her tone snippy. And it dawns on me. She's not just annoyed with me for coming to her rescue and foiling her plans. She's pissed because I didn't finish what I started the other night.

My hand stays firmly in place as the elevator doors open, and I push her forward. “Ha, do you really think you're in a position to be giving me orders, Sunshine? Right now, the only three people who know you're here are me, my friend who owns this place, and the driver who dropped us off.”

Her frantic eyes meet mine. “You didn't tell Ben where you were taking me?” Her voice shakes with panic. I think she's starting to realize just how serious this is. Or maybe it's because she's just worked out how much power I have over her.

“For our safety, I didn't even tell my own brothers,” I explain. Not because I have to but because, despite what she thinks about me, I don't want to scare her or cause her any more emotional harm. I want her to feel safe with me and know everything I'm doing is for her.

“Oh.” She swallows hard, and I can see her mind ticking over what all this really means.

The elevator doors open onto a corridor with just one white door. I scan the key and let us in. Once she's inside, I close the door and type in the security code to lock it. Brodie Alexander is a good friend because I did him a massive favor installing a top-notch security system after his father died and he renovated this place. It's also why I knew this would be the perfect place to bring her. There is no doubt in my mind she's safe

here. We're on the tenth floor, so no chance of a window escape like at my place, and she can't get in or out of this door unless I say so.

She wanders over to the window and looks out over the view, running her hands through her hair like she's combing it. She looks exhausted, almost in a daze, and I'm sure she is. "Didn't think you could outdo my last prison cell, but this view is pretty spectacular," she sighs.

The hotel suite is large and has a vast view of the picturesque Atlantic Ocean with its beautiful beaches. "It is," I agree, watching her. Now that I have her alone, I'm not sure what to do with her. The tension of earlier has eased a little, even though I know she's still mad.

She sniffs the air, looking around for where the tasty smell is coming from. I can only imagine how starving she must be after being on the run.

"Room service has been delivered if you're hungry," I tell her, hoping she has something to eat. I want her to feel comfortable here. At home, for however long we have to stay.

She wanders over to the kitchen table and picks up one of the cloches, revealing a plate of scrambled eggs and bacon. "There's a lot of food here. Are you expecting more people?"

"I thought you might be hungry." I shrug.

The door buzzes, and I answer it, finding Sebastian with our bags. "Thank you," I say gruffly.

"If you need anything else, sir, just let me know."

"I will." I close the door and wheel our bags inside, searching for my laptop bag. I'm hoping the boys have started sending me the book. "I need to get some work done. I'll be in the office down the hall if you need me." I need some space from her. With her in the same room, I can't

think straight. All I want to do is carry her to the king bed upstairs in the mezzanine bedroom and fuck her till she can't see straight. I might have pretended like nothing happened between us the other night, but it wasn't because it didn't have an effect on me. It's the opposite. She is all I can think about.

“You're not going to eat?” she asks, surprised.

“I'll have something later.”

She sits down, looking like she's running on auto pilot, lost in a daze. And rightfully so, considering she hasn't slept in two days. I watch as she mechanically heaps some eggs onto her plate, before I leave the room. The office here may be smaller than mine back at the club, but it possesses all the essentials for running my security company and keeping track of the information Leo is sending my way. It will suffice for the duration of our stay.

I open my email inbox and find that Leo has started sending pages from the Acevedo book. The first page consists of a list of contacts—some names I recognize, while others are unfamiliar. My initial task will be to determine who they are and whether they're still alive. Given that the book is likely at least six years old, considering the time since Antony Acevedo's death, not all the information will be relevant.

The name that puzzles me the most is Louis—Brandon's dad. What was his involvement, and why did he vanish on the night of the fire? I want answers for Brandon, just as much as I do for us. He deserves to know what happened to his dad.

Unravelling the truth behind his involvement and the events of that night could be the key to dismantling the web of deceit surrounding us. So much of our history was changed that night. Is Louis in witness

protection? Or was he forced to leave to keep his mouth shut about what he knows? The other option is Antony used him and discarded the evidence, and he's at the bottom of the ocean.

I immerse myself in the pages Leo has sent, meticulously studying each entry. Names, connections, and potential leads begin to form in my mind as I cross-reference the information with what I already know to be true. It becomes obvious that Piper was right, and this little black book holds secrets that could expose the underbelly of the Kings, and perhaps even shed light on Liam's elusive intentions. The ties they had with her father go back generations and are far more complicated than we ever realized.

# Chapter 21

## HAZEL

I JERK AWAKE TO the sound of a shower flowing close by. My eyes shoot open, madly searching the room. My panicked heart settles when I remember where I am. In some fancy hotel suite with Jett “my personal bodyguard” Rivera.

I’ve got no idea how long I’ve been asleep for, but the sun is low in the sky, so I can only imagine it’s late afternoon. I must have been out of it most of the day. After a few mouthfuls of breakfast, I was too tired to think about anything other than sleep, so I dragged my weary body to the closest bed I could find—the master suite upstairs on the mezzanine level. I’m actually pretty sure this is the only bedroom in the place. Downstairs, there was the door Jett closed himself off in, a full kitchen, a living room, and a bathroom. On the mezzanine level there was just this one massive room with a walk-in closet and luxury ensuite. So, unless there is some hidden door, this is it.

I stretch my arms and legs, enjoying the softness of the luxury sheets. This bed has to be the most comfortable bed I have ever slept in, and I bet I was fast asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow. Not surprising, after two



sleepless nights. The room is over-the-top lavish, with windows that run floor to ceiling with soft drapery and a mammoth bathroom with a large egg-shaped tub and a double shower.

The room whispers honeymooners, happily sipping imported wine and handfeeding each other fresh fruit. But this is no honeymoon. And by the fact that Jett has let himself in here to have a shower while I was asleep implies he thinks we're sharing it. He's had too many hard knocks to the head if he really thinks that's going to happen.

The shower shuts off, and Jett saunters into the bedroom with a towel wrapped around his waist. My eyes roam leisurely over his wet chest, momentarily forgetting how much I hate him; it's difficult to hate something so perfect to look at. He carries himself with so much confidence, not bothered I was in here asleep. If anything, it's probably the reason he's parading around half naked. I think he likes an audience. I'm pretty sure in the short time I have known him, I've seen him without a shirt more times than with one on.

"What are you doing?" I stutter out, trying to show my irritation.

"I think that's obvious," the smug asshole replies.

"Why are you walking around half naked?"

"That's what you normally do when you take a shower." He walks over to a bag, turns around, and gathers something from it. Then he drops his towel, giving me a full view of his bare ass!

I suck in a breath, trying to control my raging hormones. How on earth can he take me from furious to horny teenager in seconds? He has a *fine* ass. I try to look away, but I can't. I'm mesmerized by his gorgeous body. Why does he have to be so damn hot.

He takes his time pulling on a shirt and pants. "Don't act like you're

bothered,” he says, turning back toward me and catching me checking him out.

“We can’t share a room. You need to talk to this friend of yours and get a second room in this place,” I demand, trying to act disgusted by the thought. The truth is, I would enjoy having his hot body wrapped around mine every night, but he has made it blatantly obvious that he’s not going to give me what I want, and the temptation of having him so close and not actually being able to have him will be torture I don’t think I can survive. What I don’t understand is why is he teasing me if he doesn’t want me.

His lips turn up at the sides. “After the stunt you pulled, I’m not ever letting you out of my sight again. If you’re unhappy with the new sleeping arrangements, you only have yourself to blame,” he tuts like I’m a naughty child.

“You’re not sleeping in here with me. You can take the couch downstairs,” I almost shriek. Is he kidding me? We can’t sleep in the same bed together. It’s dangerous on so many levels. I have already let myself get closer to him than I intended to, and what has that got me? Rejected at least twice, and the third, he got me all hot and bothered, then he was a no-show. He’s a fucking pussy tease, and I won’t allow him to tempt me again.

“It’s funny you still think you have a say here, Sunshine. While we stay here at The Alexander, you will do as you’re told.” He smirks, like he actually thinks this situation is amusing. I guess it would be for him. He did orchestrate the entire thing to keep me locked away from the rest of the world, giving him all control. The power has gone to his head, and I want to slap his face for thinking he can do this to me. Asshole.

“Or what?” I bite back, intrigued as to what he thinks his punishment would be if I don’t do as I’m told.

The gleam in his eyes tells me I have just issued a challenge to him, one I already know I won't win. "Or you face the consequences."

I eye him suspiciously. Is he for real? What exactly would the consequences be? He already has me held against my will halfway across the country, with no phone or internet connection and no access to the outside world. I can't finish the job I started. I'm fucking trapped, stuck with the man who makes my heart flutter and my belly do somersaults just at the way he looks at me. He's going to walk around here teasing me with his gorgeous body, then shut me out right when things get good again.

An idea comes to me. It might be the most stupid one I have ever come up with, but I've got nothing better to do, so I'm going to run with it. Two can play this game, motherfucker. If I have to be stuck here with him, I can make him squirm just as much... then reject him. See how he likes it.

I slip my bare legs over the side of the bed and stand, stretching my arms over my head in a show of yawning, knowing all too well that my shirt rises up, showing off just enough of my ass to keep him watching me. I discarded my jeans before hopping into bed, so I'm just in a T-shirt and white lace panties. I saunter past him on my way to the bathroom, ignoring his presence, even though I can feel the heat in his stare.

Turning on the shower, I then leave the door open and shimmy out of my shirt and panties, dropping them on the floor in front of me, faking every bit of confidence I don't have. He wants to walk around half naked to get to me? I can do him one better. I turn around to face him, everything on display.

He raises a questioning brow, but from the look on his face, he's too shocked to say anything. I've rendered him speechless. Good. I'm pretty sure this is the last thing he expected me to do. What was he saying about

consequences? Yeah, I think I might come up with a few of my own, make his stay here just as uncomfortable.

“Think I might take a shower,” I say with a sassy smile, before closing the door in his face as he stares back at me.

The warm water feels amazing on my skin, I let it soak me from head to toe, unable to stop the stupid grin now on my face. I like stirring him up. It’s so easy, and when he spends so much time trying to piss me off, why wouldn’t I? The look on his face, though. I laugh to myself. And the heat in his eyes? It looked like he might burst into flames. Jett, zero; Hazel, one. I relax against the tile wall, letting the shower ease the crazy tension in my shoulders.

The door suddenly busts open, a wild Jett flying at me like a man possessed. His clothes are gone, and he pulls me toward him, forcing our bodies to collide with the shower wall behind. Skin on skin, my breath catches as his hands tangle in my hair, and he draws me closer to him. His lips meet with mine, and he steals my breath away.

His kiss is crazy possessive, and like the wild beast he is, he devours me, his tongue forcing its way inside my mouth, claiming me as his. His hands are everywhere, roaming over my body, and I run mine up his ripped arms into his hair.

I hold his face close, needing his kiss more than I even knew. I couldn’t reject him now. I want this too much. What is it about this man that makes me so irrational that I go from hating him to wanting him in the same instant?

Pulling back from me, he takes my face in his hands, his eyes ablaze with desire. “You have been nothing but trouble since you came into my life. I want you like fucking crazy, even though I know I shouldn’t,” he admits, and I can still see how torn he is. His body wants me, that much is obvious by his

massive erection digging into my side. But he's battling with some internal demons that are stopping him from giving in to his needs.

Water runs over our bodies, and I place my hands on his chest, trying to get some distance from him while I catch my breath. That was some kiss. "I've been nothing but trouble? You have basically held me prisoner the whole time," I breathe, wishing I had something better to come back at him with.

He dips his head, placing bruising kisses up my neck. "For your safety," he tells me, like he's the one who knows best.

"And is this for my safety as well?" I ask, knowing how much he's been trying to avoid us ending up like this. He's been adamant that it can't happen. What's so different today?

"This is for me. Because I might be your bodyguard, but I'm also a man with fucking needs, Hazel. And when you paraded your beautiful body around in front of me naked, you knew exactly what you were doing. I can't control myself around you, I need you to be mine," he growls.

Goosebumps break out over my skin, his possessive words making me feel all kinds of strange, mostly because it's what I want as well. For this beast of a man to claim me as his, to promise to protect me, to make me feel like I'm his everything, and without me, his life wouldn't be worth living. No man has ever made me feel that way, but with Jett, I see it in his eyes. The way he's looking at me right now. He would die for me, I know it without question. He gave up his dream to make sure I was safe. It makes me feel like a selfish bitch, but it also makes me feel some hope for the future, that he cares about me enough to give up something so important to him. I already know I will never run away from him again. I couldn't bear to.

His hand laces into my hair, and he pulls my head back, forcing me to stare straight into his eyes. They're dark and filled with so much fire. His lips meet

mine, devouring me, showing me everything I am yearning for. I relax into him, letting his tongue push my lips apart. My back is pressed into the cold shower wall, but I don't care.

"Jett," I pant breathlessly as he pulls back from me. I don't want him to go, I need him more than I have ever needed anything in my life. I'm so lost, but with him, I don't feel it. "I want you so badly, but I'm scared you'll change your mind on me again and leave me hanging."

"I'm not going anywhere. We're alone in a fancy hotel room because I organized it." He kisses me, filling my mouth with his tongue. I feel his possessiveness, and it drives me wild. I run my hands up his back, holding him tighter to me. "I could have had you shipped off somewhere with your brother or another guard, but you're here with me away from all the shit back home because this is what I wanted." He lowers his lips to mine, hovering. "This is happening, Hazel. No turning back," he whispers like he's still trying to convince himself this is the right thing to do.

"Okay," I murmur into his lips. This is happening for real this time. No turning back. A flood of excitement runs through me. He wants me just as much as I want him. I always suspected it, but now I know for sure.

He trails kisses down my clavicle, stopping when he gets to my breasts. "You have the sweetest tits on earth, so fucking perky," he growls in a voice I don't recognize from him. He takes one nipple in his mouth and sucks hard, sending a tingle of pleasure over my entire body. He digs his fingers into my skin and grips me like he's scared to let me go, one hand on my back, the other moving toward my breasts. He takes my nipple between his fingers, rolling it back and forth. It's satisfying torture, and I want more. I lean into the shower wall behind me, water falling over our bodies.

"Yes," I purr. "That feels so good." My hands go to the back of his head,

running through his hair and pulling him closer to me. I want this rough, and I need him to know he can go for it. Every move he makes is intentional and brings me to life in a way I've never felt before. Who knew having a man suck on your tits could feel so unbelievably good. Not me, that's for sure. I can't help the moan of pleasure that escapes my lips, my arousal building.

He looks up at me, my nipple still in his mouth. He releases it. "Come for me," he demands before taking the other in his mouth and sucking harder.

My knees buckle, and I crumple in his arms as something powerful washes over me. My cry echoes off the tile walls, and I cling to his back for support. What the hell was that? My body has never felt anything so amazing.

He pulls back from me, a smirk of satisfaction playing on his lips. His hand skates down my body, and he reaches between my legs and runs his fingers over my now-soaked pussy. He coats his hand in my juices and brings his fingers up to his mouth, tasting me, just like he did on his patio.

"Fuck," is all I can say as I watch him. This is so hot.

"You taste so fucking sweet." He shuts off the water and leads me to the bathroom countertop, lifting me like I weigh nothing.

"Spread your legs for me," he commands, his voice deep and guttural.

I blink back at him, suddenly feeling shy. This bathroom is very well lit and what he's asking me to do feels too intimate for what this is. He comes in closer, maneuvering his body so he's in between my legs, then he kisses my lips playfully. I can taste my own arousal. "Don't be shy with me. I want to suck the juice from your sweet little cunt."

His words do things to me that make me want to obey him. I open my legs a little more. He takes a step back, looking me over. "Wider."

I position myself back a little so I can open my legs wider for him, heat rising over my cheeks.

“Good girl. Your cunt is perfection, Hazel,” he praises me.

His approval makes me feel all warm inside. I never knew I cared what anyone thought of me down there, but with the heat of his intense stare on me and his praise, I feel validated and even more turned on than I was before.

He drops down in front of me and pushes my knees farther apart as he buries his face in my pussy. Licking his way through my folds, he teases me everywhere, finding my clit and sucking just like he did with my nipples, rough but soft at the same time. How does he get it so right. His stubbly jaw scratches at my thighs, but I don't care. Everything he's doing feels so good, I want more.

He pushes one finger inside of me with a twisting motion, as he keeps working his tongue over my clit. I rock into him, needing more. He rewards me with a second finger. “So fucking needy for me, aren't you, Sunshine.”

“Mmm.” My back arches off the counter. “Jett, I want you.” The words slip from my mouth before I can stop them. It's a plea for something I have desired for so long, and my tone holds all the desperation to prove it. I need his cock inside of me, filling me up. I'm desperate to know what it feels like.

“You're not ready yet,” he tells me, his fingers working faster, stretching me, and I know what he's saying. I'm tight, it's been a while for me, and he's massive, but I don't care.

“I am, please,” I beg, needing him inside of me. I run my fingers through his hair, and he looks up at me, his eyes hooded. He could bring me undone again like this.

He moves away from me, leaving me panting as I watch him cross the room. He goes to one of the drawers, retrieving a condom, then returns to stand in front of me.

“That was a little too convenient.” I eye him suspiciously.



“Don’t act surprised. We both knew it was only a matter of time before I fucked your brains out.”

He’s got me there. I wanted him weeks ago.

I watch as he stretches the condom over his massive cock, then he adjusts my position, holding me with his hands under my ass so he has better access. He pushes the tip of his thick cock inside of me. “Tell me if it’s too much.”

“I will,” I assure him, surprised he’s so concerned with hurting me. But I want this, I need it.

He lifts my legs over his arms and pushes in farther, filling me, and it’s nearly enough to knock the air right out of me. His lips are back on mine, devouring me as he starts to move, filling me with every thrust. Our bodies move together. I’m restricted at this angle, but I try to meet his thrusts, rolling my hips toward him, needing to feel close to him. I wrap my legs around his waist and dig my heels in. I have never wanted to be so close to another human being before, but it’s like I can’t get close enough.

He pulls out, helping me up to stand on very shaky legs. I look up at him, wondering why he’s stopped. “Turn around. I need to be deeper.”

I smile back at him. He can’t get close enough either.

His words send a fresh shiver over me. I want him deeper, so much deeper. I do as he says, and he folds me over the counter, my ass facing him. He palms it, massaging my cheeks. Our eyes meet in the mirror. For a second there is a flash of something more than lust between us, but then it’s gone, and all I see is his dark carnal need to fuck.

I feel him spreading me wide, lining himself up with my pussy and pushing in once more. He’s so deep like this, and I cry out every time he pumps into me. I feel it right through my core. Waves of pleasure roll over me with every thrust. He laces his fingers in my hair and pulls me back, forcing my lips to

meet his hungry kiss. Every tiny movement is heaven as our bodies move together, like they were made for each other.

“Keep going,” I cry. “I’m so close.”

“Such a good girl, taking my fat cock so fucking well. Just like I knew you would.” He moves with more determination, and I feel he’s just as close. “Now.” His commanding voice tips me over the edge, tingles rushing over me, my pussy pulsing, as he groans out his own release.

When I look back in the mirror, he’s watching me, studying my face. Feeling a little awkward, I offer a half-smile. I don’t know how we went from hating each other to fucking like animals, but I kinda liked it. Scrap that, I more than liked it. It was fucking amazing, and I want to do that with him every day for the rest of my life. I wonder if he feels the same way.

His gaze drops away from mine, and he pulls out of me, disposing of the condom in the trash. Then he leaves the bathroom, not even looking back.

“Jett,” I call after him, feeling like we need to talk about what just happened, but he’s already gone.

I hop back in the shower and start the water, in a daze of confusion and surprise. That was unbelievable. He was insane. I always knew he would be good, but it was so much better than I ever could have imagined. That’s how sex should feel.

I knew I had been missing out. For a while I thought something was wrong with me, that I could only really have pleasure in my fantasies. My past experience was only with Liam, and it was all about him. I learned how to get him off quickly so he would leave me alone, and until tonight, I’ve only ever had an orgasm with myself. But what Jett can do with his hands, his dirty mouth, and his cock took me to another level entirely.

There was also something else between us that gives me a little hope that

what we just shared was more than just a hot screw. There is so much more to Jett Rivera. In the last few weeks, I have barely scratched the surface, but after that, I know I want more, and I'm not going to let him shut me out again.

He's forced us into this arrangement, so he's about to get more than he bargained for locking himself up with me.

# Chapter 22

## JETT

**I THROW ON A pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt then get out of the bedroom like the place is on fire. That wasn't in my plan for day one of our stay here. My heart is racing harder than when I've gone three rounds in the octagon. My head's a mess, filled with visions of her gorgeous body. Fuck.**

**I'd hoped to have it out with her for taking off on me, not fuck her. She's a massive flight risk, and I know I can't trust her. It's part of what was holding me back. I wanted to talk it all through, understand why she took off. Tell her she can rely on me to help her. She doesn't have to go it alone to get what she wants. But I've never been good at talking, especially when it comes to the opposite sex, and Hazel is no exception. And when she took our little game of temptation too far, I couldn't help myself.**

**I practically run to the kitchen and grab a glass, filling it with water, then slam it back, trying to catch my breath. My head's spinning, she's got me all twisted up. We both need some food. She barely touched the**

breakfast I had delivered earlier, and now it's pushing six in the evening. I call up room service, ordering a feast for dinner.

I step up to the balcony door, swinging it open, craving the cool, crisp air and the salt spray coming off the water. I need to shake off the fog in my mind. Sinking into a deck chair, I run my fingers through my hair, frustration building within me. I used to have the iron discipline of a ninja, but now, I'm letting those pretty blue eyes rule my world.

My phone jolts to life, buzzing in my pocket, and Leo's name lights up the screen.

"Leo, what's the deal?"

"Is Hazel hanging around?" he asks, sounding ominous.

"She's in the shower. Spit it out!"

"Piper and I just had a sit-down with Antony Acevedo's lawyer this afternoon. Figured we might be able to persuade him to spill the beans on those contracts mentioned in the book."

"Go on..."

"Open up your email, I've sent you one of them to look over." I open my email account and find the forwarded message from Leo. Opening it, I see it's a contract between Antony and Cory King. "What the hell is this, Leo?" I stutter, my pulse suddenly racing out of control.

"It's exactly what you think it is. The agreement signing Hazel over to Liam King when she turned eighteen."

"Man, this is nuts. How could those two pull off such a contract?"

"That's exactly what we were scratching our heads over, and our new buddy, Justin, steered us toward a lead. Check out Hazel's birth certificate."

I do as he says and open the next attachment. It's Hazel's birth

certificate. I scan it over, looking for anything that's out of place. And then I see it. Her father's name is listed as Antony Acevedo. "What the fuck?" I yell down the line.

"Exactly. She's Antony's daughter, he was the one who set the whole deal up with the Kings to strengthen family ties."

My hands start to shake, adrenaline taking over. "Do you think she has any idea?" I feel sick in the guts for her. She's not the person she thinks she is.

"I doubt it. Piper didn't until today. She's still trying to come to terms with the fact she now has a sister. But between you and me, she's livid she's gone her whole life not knowing about Hazel. She said the first time she met her she felt an odd connection between them, and for her, that's saying something; she doesn't play nice with other girls. She put it down to their link with the King brothers, making them kindred spirits of sorts, but now that we know this, it all makes more sense."

I stare at the screen in front of me till my eyes go blurry. "But Hazel must have seen her own birth certificate. She would have had to," I mutter out loud.

"That was the first thing I said as well, but according to Justin, not this one. Whatever copy she's seen isn't legit."

A knock reverberates at our room's front door. "Room service," a voice calls out.

"Hold on, that's our dinner," I tell Leo, making my way to the door. I usher the attendant in, and he wheels in his trolley, setting the plates down on the table. I pass him a tip, and he scurries off.

"Are you going to tell me where you're staying?" Leo asks, brotherly concern seeping into his voice. He hasn't been quiet about his feelings

toward my relationship with Hazel. Not that he knows the half of it, but he thinks he does, and from what I can tell, he's not impressed.

"Not a chance, Brother, and you know why."

"So you can have her all to yourself, I assume."

"So no other fucker can track her down," I correct him. He should know that.

"Piper is going to want to see her as soon as possible. They have a lot to talk about."

"I don't think that's a good Idea. This is going to mess with her head. How the hell am I supposed to tell her something so life-changing? We're on rocky ground already after us foiling her plans to end her husband," I say, feeling extra protective of her. She's been hurt enough. Something like this might tip her over the edge.

"For now, maybe keep it to yourself. The only ones who know are Piper, me, and now you. Let her settle in there after the crazy couple of days she's had before you drop the bomb," he agrees.

"I can't keep this from her, it's too big," I say, flip-flopping on my original statement. I'm so conflicted. I know I should tell her, but I don't want to. I want to protect her from the truth when it's so awful. No one in their right mind would want to be a daughter of Antony Acevedo. He was a cruel man who destroyed most of our town. From what I've been told, even Piper hates him for everything he did to her, and her brother Ace was the same. He's still the most notorious underworld boss this town has ever known.

"I'll leave that up to you. You know her better than I do. When you do tell her, Piper will want to talk to her."

"Yeah, of course. They're family."



Hazel appears at the top of the stairs in a cute summery dress, her legs looking impossibly long for someone so short as she descends the stairs. Her hair is swept up into two buns on either side of her head. She's adorable and looks like she's on summer vacation. I wish that were the case, that I could take her far away from all her troubles and give her a holiday, but keeping her locked up somewhere safe is the best I can do.

For the first time since knowing her, I see it, her resemblance to Piper. It's not obvious, they have a lot of differences, but it's there.

"Got to go," I tell my brother.

"Be careful, Jett," Leo warns.

"Yep." I hang up. Too late for that speech. It was too late the first time I looked into her eyes at the hospital. She has had me under a spell ever since.

"Something smells delicious." She smiles shyly, a pink blush still on her cheeks. She's nervous about what we just did. Or maybe it was the way I left her. All of it seems so long ago now, after that conversation with my brother.

"I ordered dinner for us. Thought you might be hungry," I say as I motion to the table set for two.

"Thank you." She takes a seat tentatively, her eyes searching mine for answers. I guess as to why I left her bent over the countertop in the bathroom, her ass still in the air.

I slide into the chair across from her, my mind racing with questions. Where do I even start with this? I don't want to hide anything from her, but the ground we're on is already shaky. I want some more time with her, to figure out where we stand before dropping another life-altering

**bombshell on her. Just because I know, does that mean she needs to know right now?**

**“Are we going to pretend like that didn’t just happen or are we going to be adults and talk about it?” she asks, a sassy brow raised. Maybe she’s not so shy about it after all.**

**I snap out of my daze, realizing I’ve been locked in a trance, watching her since she settled in. “We can chat about whatever’s on your mind, Sunshine,” I manage to say, mustering a smile. Strangely, after the revelation Leo dropped on me, talking about our recent encounter seems like the simplest way forward. I lift the cloche, revealing the burger and fries I ordered. It’s real food; it feels like I’ve been living on rabbit food for ages. I grab a handful of fries and shove a couple in my mouth.**

**“What was that, Jett?” Her eyes are wide, and I know she’s not just talking about the sex. There was so much more going on between us. I felt it as well, that’s why I got out of there so quickly.**

**“If you don’t know, I don’t think I can tell you,” I mutter, not ready to spill how I really feel to the girl who took off on me only two days ago.**

**“Are we circling back to this mess again? Seriously?” She sighs and snatches her burger, taking a big bite. We both attack our food in silence, as if we haven’t eaten in days. She gobbles down her meal, stuffing fries into her mouth and taking massive bites of her burger. I’m no different, devouring my food. The tension in the air is palpable.**

**“This is incredible,” she mumbles, her words muffled by another mouthful, finishing off the burger.**

**I’m not far behind her. I could have eaten two with how empty I still feel. “Why did you do it, Hazel?” I ask her the question that’s been on the tip of my tongue since I picked her up yesterday.**

**“Do what?” she asks, all innocent. “Strip my clothes off and have a shower?”**

**“Take off like you did,” I correct her, not wanting to play her cute games.**

**“You know why. I saw an opportunity and had to go for it. You Rivera brothers were taking too long,” she says like it’s obvious. But that’s not entirely what I meant.**

**My eyes narrow in on hers. “Have you ever thought there were good reasons for it? That we had a plan about to play out?”**

**“I suspected you had your reasons, but I had mine for wanting the job done fast. It’s personal. I’m sure you of all people understand that.” She rolls her eyes, popping another fry in her mouth.**

**“You should have come to me. I would’ve helped you,” I tell her, unable to hide the irritation from my tone. Ever since she admitted to me what she wanted to do, I had been trying to work out a way the two of us could get what we wanted out of this situation. Some sort of win-win.**

**“You work for Leo Rivera. You can’t do jack unless he okays it.”**

**“That’s not entirely true. I work *with* Leo. I have a hell of a lot of say in how our operations run. And if I felt strongly enough about something, I would tell him so.” She just had to come to me instead of running as soon as my back was turned. “I thought we might have been getting somewhere, but you just proved to me what I already knew about you. That you can’t be trusted.”**

**Her gaze turns cold, and she purses her lips. “Why don’t you answer me something, Jett. Why are you so scared about Liam getting his hands on me? What are you hiding from me? Say, in envelopes in your bedside drawer?”**

I glare back at her. If she's trying to imply I'm the one who can't be trusted, it's bullshit. Everything I've done is for her. If she saw what was in there, it would have haunted her for the rest of her life.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. Don’t go throwing that word around because we both know that trust goes both ways. We might have been getting somewhere, and I was starting to think I could confide in you. That was until you kissed me then shut me out the next day. I deserved better. But it’s your pattern, right? One step forward, two back. It’s what you’re doing now. We screwed, you felt something, and now you’re trying to find a reason to pull away from me again.”

She couldn't be further from the truth. “I might not have disclosed some information, but everything I've done from the moment I met you is to keep you safe, including backing off when I realized I overstepped. How could I protect you when I was distracted while you were around? Because all I could think about was how good it would feel to have your body under mine. I couldn't. I had to distance myself from you to keep you safe.”

“You can't protect me by hiding shit from me. I need to know exactly what's going on so I can make these choices for myself. Did you ever think that if you had been honest with me in the first place, I wouldn't have taken off? I might have known exactly what was at risk and stayed.” Her sad eyes rise to meet mine, and I see the hurt she holds there, years of pain from never feeling safe. “I might have stayed because there was something to stay for.”

She would have stayed for me? “I won't apologize for doing what's in your best interest. You mean too much to me. I will do whatever it takes to keep you from harm.”

She rises from her chair, her posture tense, as if she's prepared to bolt once more. "Why, Jett? Why does it matter to you? When this is all said and done with Liam, you won't be responsible for looking out for me anymore. It'll be finished, and I'll be on my own. Maybe I thought I needed to get it all over with, to shield myself from getting hurt even more once this whole mess is behind us."

"What do you mean?" I growl out.

"This will be over. You'll have your next job to do, and I will be nothing to you," she whispers, a tear running down her cheek. She ran because she was scared of me hurting her if she got too close and this didn't all work out?

She turns to make a run for the stairs, and I grab her hand to stop her. She turns back toward me, her eyes filled with tears.

I gently lift my hand, cupping her chin, and stare deeply into her eyes. "You're something special to me, Hazel," I admit, the words heavy with sincerity. I can't promise forever because I don't do forever, but right now, I don't want to let her slip away.

She gazes up at me, and her sadness engulfs me. She left, believing she meant nothing to me. She couldn't be more wrong.

"This isn't just a job for me," I say, my voice unwavering. "And when all of this is said and done, I won't want to let you go."

"But you will," she responds, her voice carrying a tinge of resignation.

I draw her close and cup her face with both hands. "I'm standing here with you right now because I can't get you out of my head," I confess, my gaze locked on to hers. "From the instant I saw you, I knew I needed you in my life, no matter how I could have you. It's why I chose to personally watch over you instead of assigning one of my men. It's why you moved

into my place, and it's why we took that flight halfway across the country so we could be alone together."

Her lips tug up at the corners, her pretty eyes glistening through her tears. "You know how crazy all that sounds, right?" She looks at me, her eyes searching for something. "Why, though? What's driving you to help me?"

I take a deep breath, trying to put into words something that even baffles me. "There's just something about you, Hazel," I confess. "I can't explain it, but from the moment I laid eyes on you, I've been drawn to you in a way that goes against my better judgment."

"Yeah, I get it. This is embarrassing, but I felt it too, instantly. So much that I had a full-on sex dream about you when I was in the hospital. I mean, I was on some pretty great pain meds, but it was intense, and it felt so real." She smirks, biting into her lip, trying not to laugh at herself.

"You wanted me from the second you saw me?" I burst into laughter, recalling the moment when she woke up and puked over the edge of her hospital bed. I hope that wasn't a reflection of her dream.

"I guess subconsciously." She pops up onto her tippy-toes and places a soft kiss on my lips. "How do we make this work? You don't trust me, and I certainly don't trust you."

"We spend this time wisely, get to know each other a little better. Have a little fun while we're at it."

"I don't think us fucking again will help, Jett." She blinks up at me with her long lashes, and I know she can't deny it's what she wants.

"It can't hurt." I smirk in amusement. She's adorable when she's all moody, and right now I know she wants some promise of something more, but she's right, there's no trust here. The only thing I can promise

**her is how much fun we can have together locked up in this fancy hotel suite.**

# Chapter 23



## HAZEL

HIS LIPS ARE ON mine before I have a chance to say it just might hurt. A lot.

I already know this is a terrible idea, that he's keeping stuff from me. Before I came down the stairs, I was trying to listen in on his phone conversation. And while I couldn't make out most of what he was saying, it was obvious he was on the phone with one of his brothers, and they were talking about me, because what I did hear was, "*I can't keep this from her, it's too big.*" And since I don't think he is in contact with any other female at this point, I'm pretty positive he was talking about me. I wonder if it has something to do with Ben. He's my family, or did they work out why my father was hanging around Queen of Hearts inebriated?

Jett runs his hands over my arms as our kiss deepens, distracting me. Why does he have to be so good with his mouth? I melt into him. I can get all my answers out of him another time. Right now, I want him to make me feel as good as he did up in the shower. That kind of sex is life-changing.

He nudges me back until my butt hits the glass window behind me, then he lifts me, our lips still pressed together. I wrap my legs around his waist instinctively. I need to be close to him. Skating up his neck, I wrap my hands around him, absentmindedly running them through his hair. He's so strong, and I feel safe in his arms. His tongue parts my lips, tangling with mine. His body is hot, like it's burning up, scorching my skin where our bodies meet.

I tug at his shirt, wanting it off so I can run my hands over his smooth skin. He wiggles out of it, staring back at me with so much heat. "You desperate to have me stretch you again so soon, Sunshine?"

"Yes," I whimper, his dirty words sending a fresh wave of dampness to my lady parts.

He lowers me to standing and strips my dress off over my head before pressing me back into the cold glass window, exposing my bare breasts to the cool ocean breeze coming through the open sliding door. Goosebumps break out over my skin, and he warms me with his large hands roaming over my body, rubbing them away as his mouth follows them, placing delicate kisses over my skin. Down my neck, over each breast and down my tummy, he worships every inch of me, making me feel more desired than I ever have. And fuck, it feels good.

Every kiss, every lick of the tongue is deliberate and brings my body to life, making me realize that before this I was nothing but a shell of a body walking around like a zombie with one thing on my mind. But sharing this moment with him makes me see there is so much more to life, so much to enjoy that I've been missing out on. I want him to show me it all, everything he knows about sex, and I'm sure it's a lot.

His hands are back on my skin, touching me everywhere, skating over my breast and stomach. "You're so beautiful." He looks at me with more

admiration than I feel like I deserve. He's being so sweet; this isn't what I expected from him at all.

"I want to taste you," I whisper, feeling shy to ask but knowing exactly what I want. Ever since I saw his massive cock in the shower earlier, all I can think of is wrapping my lips around it, fucking him with my mouth and making him come undone the way he did me.

He growls a needy sound around my lips as he removes his pants quickly. My hands travel down his body, and I pull away from his kiss to drop down to my knees. He leans into the window. I look up at him, so much heat between us. I take his long thick length in my palm and stroke him, sliding over his silky-smooth skin, then rubbing my thumb over the tip and spreading the bead of precum that's formed. His cock is beautiful, long and thick, throbbing with need for me.

He hisses, staring down at me like he's about to lose control from just my hand on him, but he's trying his best to keep his cool. I love that I can have that effect on him.

I lower my head and run my tongue along his length, from his balls to the tip, running circles around the head before opening my mouth and swallowing him as far down as I can.

"Good girl," he praises me, and I feel a tingle right down to my clit. His hand comes to the back of my head, taking a handful of my hair, and I think he's going to use it to force me to fuck him harder with my mouth. But he surprises me, undoing my buns and instead combing his fingers through my hair softly, letting me set my own pace. I cup his balls, massaging them with one hand as I move back and forth with the other, taking him as deep as I can manage into my mouth without choking.

He groans, his fingers digging into my scalp a little harder. "Fuck, Hazel,

you're a queen at giving head."

I blush, relishing his compliment. I go on, closing my eyes, enjoying his salty arousal on my tongue. I could do this all day, pleasure him, show him just how turned on he makes me. I part my legs as I move faster, sucking him with more pressure, my pussy feeling so desperate and needy for him.

His grip on my hair tightens, and he pulls me up to standing in one move, his sweetness of before gone. His eyes are dark and filled with desperate need. "Unless you want me to jizz in your mouth, you have to stop."

"Fuck," is all I can say. My chest heaves in breaths trying to control this out-of-body experience I'm having. He's so hot like this, all dominating male, and I'm here for it.

Without warning, he takes me by the waist and throws me down on the leather couch, a dark hunger in his eyes. "I was trying to take it easy on you, but you drive me crazy, Hazel. I need to fuck you now." His words send a delicious shiver through my body, making my lady parts clench with anticipation. I'm soaking wet and ready for him.

He goes to a side table and produces a condom.

"Have you hidden those in every room of this place?" I laugh, trying to ease the crazy sexual tension between us. Did he know we would end up fucking in every room? Because it sure feels like he came prepared.

He strokes himself, watching me. "I'm not going to lie, Hazel. I've wanted to stretch your tight little pussy and make you mine for a long time."

Something he's going to be truthful about. If only I could trust him with my feelings as much as I can with my body. "Not as long as I have wanted to feel your massive cock inside of me," I whisper, the look on his face stealing the breath from my lungs. He's so intense, his words dirty, and I love it.

He shoves my legs apart, his fingers digging into the soft flesh of my

thighs. Then he takes hold of his enormous cock and pushes inside me quickly, balls deep, making me gasp in surprise.

“Are you okay?” he asks, concern in his voice.

“Just a little sore from earlier. You’re rather large.” I bite into my lip, wiggling my body to adjust.

There’s a hint of a smile on his lips, and he pulls out of me then slowly slides back in, teasing me with his cock. “You’ll get used to me,” he says, rocking his hips in a way that stretches me nicely.

My eyes flutter shut as I focus on what he’s doing. It’s a delicious pain, one I would be very happy to become accustomed to. “I’m sure I will.” I smirk back at him, moving my hips to meet his deep thrusts.

The way he looks at me, it’s like he owns me, and part of me wants him to, wants him to own every part of me in a way no one else ever has. It’s totally irrational, and I can’t work out why I feel like this with him, especially knowing I can’t trust him. But my greedy pussy throbs with need. I want him to claim me, to fuck me senseless, to do unspeakable things to me just because it’s him, Jett Rivera, and because of the way he looks at me. “You look possessed,” I tell him.

“I am, by you. You put me under a fucking spell where you’re all I see.” He lifts my legs higher, pinning them together by the ankles, and pushes in deeper.

I know we’re mid fucking and he would probably say just about anything for this to continue, but I believe him. He’s obsessed with me, and I love it. I love his eyes on me like he wants to eat me. I love his body dominating me. I love everything about this man fucking me senseless. Or at least I do right now in this moment. I cover my mouth, trying to stop the out-of-control

moans coming from me. This is out of this world. He's so deep, and I can hardly believe I can take him like this. But I can, we fit perfectly together.

He shoves my hand out of the way. "I want to hear you scream. Scream my name, scream obscenities, whatever I make you feel when I thrust into you. I need to hear you come apart."

"Fuck, Jett," I moan as he hits me harder, feeling like his cock is going to destroy my insides. I bite into my lip, my body trembling all over. He's so deep, making me feel so unbelievably full.

With his other hand, he roughly grabs my breast, toying with my nipple, playing with me and sending flushes of pleasure through my body. This is sweet torture that builds and builds like an avalanche.

"Come for me, Hazel, now," he demands, his voice low and raspy like he is holding on to the edge of his own release and he is about to lose control. He rolls my nipple and pumps into me with more force. My body trembles, waves of pleasure rolling over me, sending me over the edge. And I take him with me, both of us crying out.

He stills, leaning over me, his face searching mine. "Are you alright?" he asks, his voice heavy with concern.

"Yes," I whisper, still riding the waves of pleasure as my pussy throbs.

He drops his head. "I lost control. I was worried I might have hurt you."

I pull his face to mine so I can kiss him. "Not in any way I didn't want you to. I'm not a fragile little butterfly, Jett. I like you fucking me hard, it lets me know how much you want me. And that feels out-of-this-world amazing. Okay? You don't have to go easy on me," I try to assure him, but I can see the worry still etched in his features, that inner turmoil he's fighting.

"If I ever go too far and you need me to stop, promise me you will tell me," he says, desperate.

“I promise.”

“I’m serious, Hazel. I know I’m rough and hard. I can lose control easily, and with you, it’s even more impossible to control myself. I need to know I’m not going to hurt you. Not really, anyway.”

I lace my hands in his hair and pull his face closer to mine. “You have my word.” I kiss him again. My body and my heart, I’m so fucking screwed by this complicated man.

# Chapter 24



## JETT

**I OPEN MY EYES to find Hazel staring at me, her face too bright and cheerful for this hour of the morning.**

**“Are you going to take me out of this place or are we stuck in here all day long again? I might go crazy if we are.”**

**“Morning, Sunshine.” I yawn, scrubbing a hand over my face, trying to wake up.**

**“Morning.” She smiles sweetly; she can be so nice when she wants to be. “So, do we get to go explore the town or go to the beach? I noticed you packed my bikini,” she says, with way too much excitement in her voice for my liking.**

**Fuck, she’s getting all excited that this is some holiday when it’s not. Of course, I would enjoy taking her out to see the sights, but I can’t. “That was for me only.”**

**She gives me a look. “I don’t think my teeny-tiny bikini will look very good on you, Jett.” She runs her hands up my arm, squeezing my bicep. “You’re kinda ripped.”**

**“You know what I mean, Hazel. You can wear it around the suite, sun yourself on the deck while I get some work done today,” I say, getting frustrated. Has she already forgotten the threat?**

**“That sounds like fun,” she tuts, sarcasm dripping off her tongue. She rolls her eyes, turning away from me, her happy smile from earlier gone.**

**I roll on top of her, forcing her onto her back and pinning her beneath my weight. “Don’t roll your eyes at me, Sunshine,” I warn.**

**She stares back up at me, irritated. “Or what, Jett, you will ground me and take away all my devices? Bit late for threats when I literally have nothing left to lose.” She pouts, pulling the sheets up around her protectively.**

**“That’s where you’re wrong.” I pin her hands over her head. “I could take these away and give you a good spanking for being such a brat.”**

**“You would like that, wouldn’t you. Keep me tied up in your bed, ready and waiting for you to finish work for the day so I can satisfy your every need. A little sex slave locked away in a tower just for your pleasure,” she spits angrily. And again, we have gone from happy Hazel to the fiery one in seconds.**

**I get hard at the thought and hate myself for it. After what her husband did to her, I shouldn’t even joke about spanking her, even though the thought has crossed my mind more than a few times when she sasses me. I release her hands. “You’re more messed up than me if that’s what you think,” I tell her, rolling off her. I need space before I go through with my threats.**

**“It’s not what I think.” She sighs heavily, getting out of bed and going over to the window, glancing out. “This place is just so beautiful, it would be a shame not to go exploring.”**

**“It’s too dangerous, Hazel,” I huff. She’s never going to win this argument with me. Of course I would prefer to be outside enjoying the scenery, but there is too much at stake. Not to mention I have a job to do, and if she ever wants to return home, I need to start on it today.**

**“We’re halfway across the country. Liam’s not going to find me here.”**

**“And what if he implanted a tracking device in your wrist or something?”**

**Her eyes go wide. “Oh my God, do you think he did something like that?” she asks, inspecting her wrists, sounding mortified at the thought.**

**I step closer to her, gently placing my hands on her shoulders. “No, probably not, but I can’t take the risk.” I cup her face, running my fingers over her cheeks. She’s so lovely, even first thing in the morning.**

**She pulls away from me. “Please, Jett, I’m going to go insane while you work all day.”**

**“That’s why I brought your iPad with us. You can finish your designs for Amelia. Or had you forgotten about the deadline for your dream job?”**

**“I hadn’t forgotten, I just thought... I thought I fucked up my chance when I ran.” She drops her head, ashamed.**

**“Amelia doesn’t know what happened. As far as she is concerned, you will be sending her your designs next Thursday like the two of you planned.”**

**A smile returns to her face, and that familiar twinkle sparkles in her eyes, the one she gets when she’s about to immerse herself in her designs. “I guess I better get to work then,” she says with renewed determination.**

**“You’d better,” I agree. From what I have seen, she has this job in the bag, but what would I know about fashion.**

**“Shower with me first.” I pull her back toward me and kiss her forehead. Last night was insanely hot, but there is no way I will ever get my fill of this girl.**

**“You’re such a demanding asshole, you know that, right?” She smirks, enjoying every bit of my bossy side.**

**“You don’t look all that bothered about this demand.”**

**“That’s because your body is hot to watch water run over, and since it’s the only entertainment I get today, guess I better make the most of it.”**

**After a long hot shower with Hazel, her coming apart in my hands, then me eating her for breakfast later, I’m sitting at my desk working my way through Antony’s little black book. I’m still finding it hard to process the fact that Hazel is an Acevedo and Piper’s half-sister. What I can’t understand is why her father stayed with her mother if he knew Hazel wasn’t his. But maybe he didn’t know and that’s why he disappeared. Left his job and cheating wife when Hazel turned eighteen and the truth came out. Silvia wouldn’t have been able to keep it from him then.**

**When Ben ran into Rafael a few weeks ago at Queen of Hearts, he said Rafael kept ranting about not wanting to hurt Hazel. He came out of hiding to track Ben down and tell him, which was risky. And now with what I know, it makes more sense. Was he trying to tell Ben the truth? About time if he was, but why did he wait so long and where the hell has he been for the last two years? Kobe’s friend at the station couldn’t enlighten us. He said he’d spent time with him on a job a few years back and he was a good man, but he knew as much as us when it came to his disappearance. He did point me in the direction of a brother in Mexico. I**

remember Hazel mentioning she had an uncle in Mexico when she first came to stay with me; she wanted to go live with him. I wonder if her father had the same idea when he was forced to leave town.

Let's see what Mateo has to say. I dial the number we have in the system and wait.

*"Reparaciones de Autos Hermanos Martínez,"* says the gruff male voice on the other end of the phone. *Martinez Brothers' Car Repairs.*

"I'm looking for Rafael," I take a stab in the dark, hoping he will be there, and if not, the person on the other end of the line might be stupid enough to give something away. From what I can find, there are only two brothers, and the company started up about the same time he disappeared. Pretty big coincidence, I think.

There's silence for longer than it should take for him to answer. "Who's asking?" he grunts.

"Jett Rivera, so don't bullshit me. If he is there, I want to talk with him about his daughter."

"Hazel, is she in trouble?" the voice on the other end sounds frantic.

"Why don't you put him on, and I'll fill him in," I reply calmly.

"This is him, where is she?" He sounds desperate.

"She's safe, far from Liam King's reach, which was where you left her."

"I had nothing to do with that arrangement, and no control over what happened," he insists, his voice shaky.

"So, you didn't hand her over to the Kings because of gambling debts, like both your children believe?"

"Damn it, Silvia, is that what she told them?"

"That's what happens when you take off, leaving your problems

behind. Everyone here thinks you're a coward who left your kids to fend for themselves against the Kings, all because you had a gambling problem. Now you and me, we know the truth, but your kids don't."

"You know the truth?" he asks, confused.

"I know she's not your daughter. Why don't you tell me what you know?" I throw back at him, I need him to open up and confirm what Leo found out from the Acevedo lawyer.

"I'm not telling a Rivera shit," he snaps. There's a loud bang on the other end of the phone like he has slammed his fist into something.

I sigh heavily. I had hoped he would play nice and I wouldn't have to threaten him. "That's a bad idea, Rafael. Right now, I have two men waiting for you in the café across the road from your business. If you don't comply with my demands, it won't be some rumor spread by your estranged wife that you disappeared—it will be your reality," I tell him, my voice low and menacing. And unlike him, I'm not full of shit. I will go through with my threats. After what he did to Hazel, he deserves whatever I have in store for him and more.

Silence, and I wait for him to think over what I said. After a good thirty seconds, he talks. "I brought her up thinking she was mine. My little girl. I would never have done anything to hurt her. This is all her mother's doing." He sighs.

"What did she do?" I demand.

"Made a deal with the devil. Traded Hazel to cover her own mistakes. I disappeared because I had to. Once I found out what she did, I did everything I could to stop the marriage from happening, but there was nothing left to do. I spent every last cent of my family's money trying to get her out of that contract, but it was airtight. All my life I thought I

was helping people by being a detective, thought I was making a difference, but I couldn't do anything, not when that town is run by gangs and corrupt cops."

"So, you ran?"

"I left because I couldn't stay and watch my children's lives be destroyed."

"You're a coward then."

"I am," he admits, his voice filled with sadness.

"Their lives haven't been destroyed. Ben is working with us. He's a good kid who will go far, and Hazel's under my protection. But Liam King is hellbent on destroying the whole town, so if you want to make a difference, now is the time to show your face and make up for lost time."

"I'm not on the force anymore, what could I do?"

"We have a war to win, and we need all the men we can get. Especially ones with information from both sides like you have. You talk about corrupt cops; we need your insider knowledge. Be at the Rivera estate tomorrow, Ben will be waiting for you."

"If Liam spots me, I'm as good as dead."

"I'm sure you know how to be invisible. You got through to Ben once before undetected, so do it again. Be a fucking man and show your kids they have one decent parent."

"I'll be there." He disconnects the call, and I hope I've done enough to make sure he shows up, for the Martinez kids' sake more than anything. We can win this without him... but they can't.

I crack my knuckles into my hands, trying to ease the tension that conversation just caused. Anger radiates through me for Hazel. When she finds out what her mother did, she's going to be livid. I need to put

**this frustration somewhere. I can think of exactly what would help, but somehow, I think fucking Hazel again will be out of the question. We have been going at it nonstop since we arrived, so we might have to stick to my other favorite thing.**

**I text Sebastian, instructing him to pick me up some supplies, then send off instructions to Leo to be expecting Rafael Martinez tomorrow and to prepare Ben.**

**After I finish up, I go in search of Hazel and discover her lounging on the day bed on the spacious deck. She's dressed in the silver bikini I packed for her, lying on her stomach, with a large floppy hat and shades to shield her from the sun. Her iPad rests in front of her, a pen clutched in her hand. She looks up and catches me watching her from the doorway, and a warm smile graces her lips.**

**"Don't worry, I have sunblock on this time."**

**"Good. Throwing you into the pool from here would hurt a lot more than last time."**

**"Did you miss me?" She smiles cheekily. She knows how adorable she must look right now.**

**"I need to work out. You want another training session?" I offer, knowing she won't be able to say no.**

**She rolls over to sitting and slides the pen through the top of the iPad. "Sure, just let me get changed."**

**"You can work out in that."**

**She raises an eyebrow. "I doubt it. If I stay in this, we both know we'll end up wrestling naked instead of training. First punch I throw my tits will escape." She laughs. "And I'm a little sore to go again just yet."**

**"Be quick," I tell her, knowing I need to get into it. All this talk of her**



tits and I'm hard again. If she doesn't hurry, I will be fucking her again, sore or not.

She takes off up the stairs.

Before I have time to set up the equipment and mats Sebastian brought me, she's back, dressed in her booty shorts and a baggy T-shirt. I can't say this outfit is much less enticing than her swimsuit, but I will have to just keep my hands to myself. "Here." I hand her a pair of gloves.

She slips them on and fastens the Velcro while I finish setting up.

"Do you remember what we were learning last week?"

"I think so?" She shrugs.

"Show me a jab-cross."

She executes the move to perfection. "Is it true you're called the Heartbreaker because of your signature move, and you actually break your opponents' ribs?" she asks, trying the move again, this time on the other side.

"Again," I tell her, trying to keep her on task. "Where did you hear that?"

"Ben told me," she admits, hitting a little harder this time.

"I have broken some opponents' ribs from time to time. That name was given to me by the press." I motion for her to go again, trying not to make a big deal out of her question.

Her eyes meet mine, and she pauses before striking the pad again. "Because you break hearts in the octagon as well as with the ladies?"

"That's what they say." Where is she going with this line of questioning?

She raises a brow, and I can see she is trying to read my mind. "Is it true?" Her lashes flutter. She wants to know if I'm about to break her

heart.

“I don’t break any hearts on purpose, Hazel. It can be difficult being in the public eye. Women know who I am and get attached easily, thinking I will solve all their problems, give them a lifestyle they want. But that couldn’t be further from the truth. I’m not into anything flashy, and I have never wanted anything long-term. I’m honest right from the start.”

She looks at me more seriously, and I think we’re about to have the conversation I always dread. The one where the girl I’m having fun with gets clingy and wants to know what this is. What my intentions are for the future. If I’m going to fall in love with her the way she has me. “Um, what about your crazy house?” she asks me instead.

“That was Leo. You have to look the part if you want to run the town.”

“So, you would be happy in a rundown shack? All alone for the rest of your life.”

“Not what I said. I would be comfortable with a lot less than what I have. The only thing I’ve ever really wanted is to win a title, prove I’m the best,” I tell her honestly.

She’s curious, she wants to know if I ever want to settle down, and she’s being smart about asking me. I can see right through her, though. What I don’t know is how she feels about the situation. She’s different to other girls. She doesn’t wear her heart on her sleeve. She’s more calculating, like a spy gathering her clues.

“I’m sorry I screwed that up for you. Hopefully you’ll get another chance.” She winces, like it pains her to think about what she cost me.

“Maybe one day. Now, can we focus on training?”

She shrugs. Lining her body up with mine, she lands another shot, then another.

**“Elbow strike,” I tell her, changing it up.**

**She moves with determination. “You wanna switch? You look all tense.”**

**“Sure,” I say, pulling on some gloves and handing her the pads.**

**“What’s eating at you, Jett?” she asks. She’s awful chatty today.**

**“Just work,” I tell her, knowing now would be as good a time as any to let her know about her father. But every time I go to open my mouth and say it, I stop. It’s going to crush her, and I can’t do it.**

**We go through all the moves I have taught her so far, slowing them down at first then putting them into practice. When it’s my turn, I go easy, concentrating on perfecting the moves over strength. She watches attentively. She’s improved so much since our first session.**

**I check my watch. “That’s probably enough for today. It’s been an hour.”**

**“Can we have another go tomorrow?” she asks, hopeful. I can see how much she’s getting out of this time together, and what I don’t tell her is how much I get out of it as well. I enjoy training her, watching her understand new moves and gain confidence. For someone so little, she’s a force to be reckoned with.**

**“Sure. I’m going to take a shower.”**

**“Okay,” she says, sounding a little disappointed.**

**As I move to walk away, she stops me. “Have you heard from Ben?”**

**“Not since we left.”**

**“He was furious with me. I feel so bad I hurt him. Can I call him?”**

**“It’s not a good idea.”**

**“If not Ben, then can I at least talk to Ruby-Rose? She’ll be worried about me, we talk every Tuesday, you know that.”**

I knew it wouldn't be long before she wanted to contact her friend. The two of them talk for hours once they get started, and she's right, every Tuesday since she's been in my care she's called her. But now things are different. "I don't think it's a good idea."

"Jett, I'm going to lose my mind if I don't get some contact from the outside world. Please, just let me call Ruby." Her sad eyes plead with me like a puppy who wants my leftovers. But it's risky. She and her friend have gotten into trouble together before with the Kings. "Please," she begs.

My heart constricts. I can't say no to her. "No mention of our location or anything that has been going on since we got here. Just check in with her then get off the phone."

"Well, since all we have done since getting here is fight or have sex, I think you can be reassured I'm not going to spill the intimate details," she says, being a smartass.

"Don't make me regret this, Hazel," I warn.

"I won't." She smiles sweetly, reaching up on her toes to kiss me. She slips the burner phone from my pocket and walks off with it. I watch her dial her friend's number and smile as she answers the call. I don't know if I can trust her or not, but it's as good a time as any to try.

# Chapter 25

## HAZEL

SITTING ON THE PLUSH carpeted floor of our suite, I gaze out the window as I dial Ruby's number. So much has unfolded in the past week since our arrival at this hotel. She'd better pick up, I'm desperate to have a proper conversation with her. Last week, Jett might have allowed me to call her, but instead of heading for a shower, as he claimed he would, he sat right next to me, eavesdropping on every word like a creeper. For an entire week, I've had to contain everything that's been happening with us, and I'm on the brink of bursting if I don't confide in her soon.

She picks up. "Ruby," I almost scream into the phone, I'm so excited to be talking to her again.

"Hazel! What's going on? Can you talk properly this time or is it like last week and we need to talk in code?"

"He actually let me take the phone up to our room this time, he's in the study working." I smirk through the phone, so excited to spill all the juicy details.

“Thank God, all week I’ve been dying to know what is really going on with you two. Your short answers last time gave me nothing.” She laughs.

“I know, I’m sorry. He’s being overly protective, worried that you-know-who will somehow work out where we are and come for me.”

“Can’t say I blame him, honey. Anyway, did you just say, *our* room?”

I bite my lip, unable to stop the smile. “Yes. We have been staying in the same room-slash-bed since we got here.”

“Oh my God. Hazel, what the hell is going on with you two? I need the sordid details right now.”

“I don’t know. We have crazy chemistry. Like, so hot I can’t even explain how incredible it is, but...”

“But what?” she demands, needing to know more.

“I didn’t mean to. It was literally the last thing I wanted to do.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Ruby, I’ve fallen for him,” I whisper. It’s hard to say the words out loud, even to my bestie, but I need to talk to someone about this. For days now I have been tied up in knots, feeling out of control from the way he makes me feel. “And now I’m worried about what happens when we’re not locked up together anymore. When we go back to our old lives and he goes back to his normal ways. He’s going to dump me, and I’ll be crushed like the silly girl I am for wanting something I shouldn’t.”

“Are you sure that’s what’s going to happen? Just because he wasn’t ever ready to be with one person before, that doesn’t mean he won’t be now. He might have fallen just as hard as you. And by how protective he is over you, it sounds like he has.”

“He’s just doing his job, Ruby.”

“Sounds pretty extreme for just doing his job.”

“Yeah, maybe.” I stare out at the ocean, wishing things were different, that he was a normal guy and I was a normal girl, that the fucked-up world we live in didn’t exist. But I guess if that were the case, I never would have met him in the first place, and I’m glad I did. He’s shown me there can be more to life than I ever thought.

“Just talk to him. You have plenty of time to talk, right? Just go right out and ask him,” she pushes me. Ruby has always been my voice of reason. Easier said than done with him, but she’s right. If I want to know, I have to ask him.

“Anyway, how’s LA?” I ask her to change the subject. I could talk about Jett all day, he has me so twisted up inside, but I want to hear about her exciting new life.

“It’s so amazing, Hazel. I wish you had come with me.” She pauses. “Sorry, that was insensitive. I just mean, I miss you, and I wish I could be sharing all this with you.”

“I’m so happy for you, Ruby.”

“For the first time in my life, it feels like things are falling into place. I love my new job, and staying in Auntie Susie’s apartment right in the city is so cool. There is also this guy.”

“A guy, huh?” I ask, eager for all the juicy details.

“Yeah, he’s my neighbor, and he plays soccer for the LA Wolves.”

“A soccer player. I can’t wait to meet him,” I reply with a grin.

“You have to. As soon as you’re out of that place, we’re having a girls’ weekend in LA. I won’t take no for an answer.”

“I’d love that, but it feels like I’ll never get out of here.” I sigh, frustration itching at my skin. I’ve had enough of been trapped within these four walls.



Even if it's been one of the most pleasurable weeks of my life, playing around with Jett, I'm still trapped here.

"You will. I'm sure it won't be much longer, honey," Ruby reassures me. But she doesn't know, no one does.

A knock comes at the door. "Hazel, I need my phone."

"Got to go. The big bad wolf needs his phone back," I mutter quietly.

"Call me next Tuesday." She laughs.

"I will. Love you, Ruby."

"Love you too, Hazel." She disconnects the call, and I feel sad instantly. I miss her so much, and that wasn't long enough to catch up with her properly.

Jett opens the door, approaching me. I hand him his phone.

"Everything okay?" he asks, his concern palpable.

"Yeah." I sigh.

"Is Ruby-Rose alright?" he inquires, still worried.

"She's doing great, actually. She's got a new job, a man, and she's loving the city. She's moving on with her life," I explain.

He looks down at me, a thoughtful expression on his face, then he extends a hand to help me up to standing. "You feel like you're missing out," he observes.

"A little," I admit. "She's my best friend, and I wish I were there doing it all with her."

"Then you never would have met me." He snakes a hand around the back of my neck, pulling me into him, kissing me with a dark desire I have come to expect whenever we're together. It hasn't gotten any less intense all week. If anything, it's more.

We can't keep our hands off each other. Everywhere I turn in this place, he's there, ready to jump my bones again. The last week has been

unexpectedly fun, locked up with Jett. We don't have a lot in common, but where we lack similarities, we make up for it with steaming-hot chemistry. I crave his hands on me at all times. And today is no different.

He pulls back from me, staring into my eyes. "I guess that's true," I say with a shrug, like it's no big deal. I can't admit to him how I really feel. When I was talking to Ruby, it felt possible, but now staring into his eyes, I know it's not. Our realities are worlds apart. He's passing time with me. This will end when we get home. It has to.

"What do you mean, you guess?" He picks me up and throws me back on the bed, crawling over me possessively as I squirm to escape him.

"I just mean I might have met some hot soccer star like Ruby if I were in LA, not locked up with you," I torment him with the idea.

His eyes go dark. Homicidal, even. "Some soccer star wouldn't know how to handle you like I do." His lips meet with mine, forcing them open so he can plunge his tongue inside my mouth possessively. I think I just made him jealous.

My fingertips skate over his back, digging into his flesh and drawing him closer to me as I wrap my legs around him. I can feel he's rock hard for me again already. I know what he wants, but I feel too emotional, too clingy to be intimate with him. "Jett, I'm never going to run away from you again. I promise. What I did that night was selfish, and I'm sorry for causing so much trouble."

He gazes down at me, his forehead creasing. It was probably the last thing he expected me to say, but I've been carrying the guilt around with me, and I need him to know it was a mistake. He's changing me. "Honestly, I'm sorry you felt like you had to run in the first place. I know I was a jerk to you that week. It won't happen again."

“Even when we go home, you know we can’t stay here in this bliss forever, right?”

“I know.” He sighs heavily. He’s thought about this as well.

“So, what happens when we get home? Are you going to tell the rest of them, Leo, Kobe, my brother that this is happening? That we’re a thing? Or is the Heartbreaker going to strike again?”

He gives me a serious look, one I can’t read. Did I just overstep the mark? I couldn’t help but ask the words that have been on the tip of my tongue since I realized this is more than just fucking for me. But I have been too nervous to bring it up in case he disappears on me again. “I’ll tell them whatever you want me to, Sunshine. Your brother already had an inkling something was going on between us. The little shit even threatened me that if I hurt you, I would have him to deal with.”

“Sounds like him.” I laugh, imagining the scene. Jett probably growled in his face. “So, this isn’t just some fling, just a bit of fun because we are locked up together?” I ask, needing him to reassure me.

“Hazel, I thought I made it clear the other day. I’m never letting you go.”

Butterflies take off through my entire body. I tamed the Heartbreaker, who would have thought. Not me, that’s for sure. And I’m still not sure if I one hundred percent believe him. He doesn’t do mushy stuff, he’s admitted it himself. And I think him saying he will never let me go is him showing me he wants to be with me forever, but part of me sees through him, and it’s more that he wants to have control over me. Protect me. He just can’t show me his true colors because he’s stuck here with me. But right now, I will take what I can get. Maybe after a little more time here, he will fall in love with me the same as I have with him.

“Can I tell you a secret?” I bite into my bottom lip, not sure if I should

reveal this or not.

“Shoot.”

“I’ve got this feeling, like I might have made this all happen.”

“You’re going to have to elaborate, Sunshine.”

“When I was... living in hell, I used to watch your fights on TV. You looked so strong and powerful, so determined. You looked like someone who could save me.”

“You wished for me to be your knight in shining armor?” He chuckles, thinking I’m making it up.

“I used to pray for it every single night. And when I woke up in the hospital and it was you standing there, I couldn’t believe my eyes. At first, I thought I was dead.”

“Hazel, I will never let anything bad happen to you again. Do you understand? I promise you, I will keep you safe forever.” I see it in the way he looks at me, he wants this with me, all of it. I didn’t freak him out with my confession; if anything, I think it made him want all this more. Maybe there is hope for us when we get home.

“I didn’t expect you to be so mushy, though. Might not have prayed for you if I did.” I laugh, trying to ease the tension he just created.

“You little shit.” He laughs, pinning me below him and smashing his mouth into mine again.

Ruby was right, talking to him did make me feel better. I just hope that once we do get back to Palm Springs, he doesn’t change his mind and pull away from me when reality hits.

# Chapter 26

## HAZEL

I TAP SOFTLY ON his office door, hoping I'm not interrupting anything important. Normally when he comes down here to work, I leave him be and get on with my design work. He glances up from his computer, an eyebrow raised in question.

“Can I get you to send these to Amelia?” I hold up my iPad with my designs on it. “She wanted them back by today, and since I don't have access to internet or technology, other than sending them by carrier pigeon, I'm at a loss as to how I get them to her.”

“Bring them over here.” I hand my iPad full of designs to him, and he flicks through each one. “I don't know a lot about fashion, but I suspect she's going to love these. You have such a knack for drawing. I can't believe these are freehand.”

I shrug, like the compliment is nothing, but really, it's everything. I have no idea if these are any good or not, and he is the first one to see them, so it means the world to me he thinks they look good—even if he doesn't have an eye for it. “Thanks, I've just always been okay at drawing, anything creative

really. I hope she likes them. I want to work with her so badly. It would be a dream come true.”

He flicks my designs across to his laptop via airdrop. “She would be lucky to have you as a part of her team.”

I watch as he brings up a new email document and addresses it to Amelia. “Can I write it?” I ask, knowing how much more authentic it would be coming from me. I also want to give her a little description about my inspiration behind my designs like she had asked for.

He assesses me, his face serious, and I shake my head. When he let me call Ruby alone, I thought for sure we had turned a corner, but no.

“Sure,” he answers reluctantly, standing and giving me access to his chair so I can sit down and write.

I place my hands on the keyboard, trying to think of the best words to articulate how grateful I am she gave me this opportunity, but nothing comes to mind. It also doesn’t help that I have Jett looking over my shoulder, watching me. I glance back at him. “Do you mind?”

“You can’t write with me watching you?” He huffs.

“No, you’re putting me off. Surely, I can be trusted to send one little email to a friend of yours without you looking over my shoulder,” I whine.

He considers me, taking his time to make up his mind.

“You still don’t trust me, do you?” I sigh, feeling defeated. I had thought this week might have proven to him I’m not an untrustworthy person. I just did what I had to because I was desperate to finish what I started, but I’m resigned to the fact I will never be the one to get to finish off Liam now. And the truth is, this week has helped me to let go a little bit. I don’t feel as angry anymore. I’m starting to see a glimmer of hope for a different future than I thought, and I like the way it looks. Jett in my life and a possibility of my

dream career. This might have all worked out differently than I had originally considered, but I might just be getting my life back on track.

“Do you blame me? The first chance you got you cleared out of my place. Trust is earned, Hazel, and you haven’t proven yourself to me.”

“Give me a chance to then. If it makes you feel better, I’ll let you read it before I hit send.” I give him my best smile, trying to coax him into letting me have this. To let me prove I’m not who he thinks I am, not really. That was just a desperate girl grasping at straws.

He sighs heavily, like I stress him the fuck out. And I’m sure I do, but come on, this is getting ridiculous. “Okay. I’ll be making a smoothie. You have five minutes, then I’m taking back my computer, so you better be done,” he says like the grump he is.

“Thank you,” I singsong. Normally I would roll my eyes at his attitude, but I’m so happy he’s giving me a little freedom. I grin to myself stupidly.

I type out my email with ease, thanking Amelia as many times as I can in one email without sounding desperate or like I’m trying to suck up too much, even though I really am. I want this job so badly. That’s if I’m ever allowed to leave the presence of Jett’s security to actually go to work. Part of me thinks, even when this is all over, he will still be keeping a tight leash on me.

I imagine what our lives could be like in the future. I can see us together. In fact, I can’t imagine myself with anyone else. But can I see us having an actual future together like a normal couple? Getting married? Having kids? I don’t know. Does he even want any of that? Does his lifestyle have room for it? Probably not, but a girl can daydream. It’s all something I wanted for real, before Liam destroyed marriage for me. Now I don’t even know if it’s what I want.

I feel his presence before I glance up to see him in the doorway, a smile



playing on his lips. “What do you want more than anything in this world?” he asks, sounding ominous.

I think for a second, wondering why he would ask me such a strange question. There are a lot of things I would like right now, freedom for one. This job for another. But there is one thing that stands out from all the rest. “To make Liam pay for the way he treated me,” I say with certainty.

His lips turn up at the side in that sardonic smile he gets that almost makes him look a little psycho, but it’s one of the things I like about him so much. He’s crazy for me, and that’s so hot. “I was hoping that’s what you would say. Come and sit with me, I think you’ll get a kick out of what I’m working on.”

I stand up so we can trade places, and he pulls me onto his lap, wrapping his arms around either side of me so he can type on his keyboard, tattooed fingers dancing along the keys quickly. He knows his way around a computer.

“I know you had big ideas of how you were going to kill Liam, and we ruined them by saving you.”

“And locking me up here, yes, that’s right. Also, I didn’t need saving, I had it under control,” I add, being a smartass.

“Hmm. Well, not everything has to be face to face these days. I have some other ideas about how we can hit him where it hurts. If you really want to make him pay? Let’s destroy everything he’s been working on since Antony Acevedo died. Make it all fall apart right in front of his face. Then when he’s suffering, we go in for the kill.” His smile is menacing. I’ve seen Jett in the octagon, and I thought that was magnificent, but this, this is something else. He’s giving me what I want. What he knows I need.

“I’ve never been more attracted to you than I am right now.” I plant a kiss

on his lips to thank him for including me.

“I thought you would like that idea.”

“Where do we start?” I ask, rubbing my hands together. Finally, I can do something that’s not going to make me feel so isolated and far away from reaching one of my goals—as morbid as they are, I know.

He scans over the email I typed out to Amelia then hits send. Then he brings up another screen. “These are all his personal bank statements.”

I stare at the screen, shocked. This was all just sitting minimized at the top of the screen, I had no idea. No wonder he was reluctant to leave the room with me on his computer. He’s hacked into Liam’s personal accounts. In the two years we were married I never got to see these.

I scan over them, not seeing anything that would be helpful, at least not that I know of. “He won’t be stupid enough to leave anything there for just anyone to find,” I tell him, wondering why he’s even bothering with personal bank statements. For someone like Liam, they would be menial, more of a way to keep the cops off his back than an indication of what he is really doing with his millions.

“You’re right, these are all squeaky clean. But this...” He brings up an offshore account. “This is where it’s all happening.” He smiles, proud of what he’s showing me.

I sit up a little straighter, scanning the pages. “Yes, I remember something about this account. It was set up by Antony Acevedo and taken over by the Kings when he was killed. He said no one knew about it except him and his dad. I overheard him telling Kylo about it when he got out of prison, but I was hiding in the bathroom at the time, so I didn’t catch the name of the bank or anything real to go off.”

“Of course you did,” he says, unimpressed. Probably something I should

have told him.

“Sorry I didn’t mention it. I don’t know what’s helpful and what’s not. I have so much useless information up here. It wasn’t until you showed me the account that it triggered my memory.”

“Anything could be helpful. I found the details in Antony’s book. This account was set up twenty years ago by Antony and Cory when they made an agreement to join forces in the drug trade. Once Cory was killed, the account was handed over to Kylo, then to Liam, as an inheritance of sorts. Anything illegal ends up here. And today, we’re going to shut it down.” His expression is smug. He’s getting just as much out of this as I am.

“He’ll be screwed.” I laugh, loving the idea of it.

“This account is what’s funding him to restock his product so quickly and to pay off anyone who was put out by the recent factory fire. It’s the reason they didn’t come at him when it all went kaboom. This was his security blanket. You can see the massive nosedive it took the week after the factory got blown up. Probably why he was happy to resurface so quickly. He wasn’t hurting as much as we all thought.”

“That makes a lot of sense. What happens to the money now that we have it?”

“What would you like to do with it?”

I think it over for a second. “It should go to a charity, something to help women who have suffered from domestic violence.” It’s not something I have thought of before, but it would make me so happy to think I could help other people in the same situation I was in. Ones that are stuck and can’t help themselves.

He kisses my cheek tenderly. I know it pains him to think about what I went through. “Done. I will set you up your own charity. This can be your

first donation from an anonymous contributor,” he says, typing madly into his keyboard. The next thing I know, the screen with Liam’s insane bank balance on it has reduced to zero. Just like that, Jett has drained it.

I turn around in his lap so I’m straddling him and wrap my arms around his neck, staring into his eyes. I wish I could tell him I love him, that everything he does for me only makes me fall for him more. But I stop myself. “We need to celebrate.” I kiss his neck, trailing kisses up his stubbly jaw to his ear.

“Don’t you want to see what I have planned next? This is just the start. Next, we make his men turn on him.”

“Yes, but first I need to fuck you.” I roll my hips over him, feeling how hard he is already; he can’t deny he has the same urge. “I’m all of a sudden desperate,” I admit, feeling strangely out of control. All I know is I need Jett to fill me up, tell me I’m his, show me how obsessed he is with me. I need to feel it.

I fiddle with his fly, pulling his cock out. Wrapping my fingers around him, I stroke up and down his length. He’s massive, hard and thick, and fuck, he feels good to touch.

“Fuck,” he growls, reaching between my legs and digging his fingers into the soft fabric of my panties. “So wet already,” he groans, tearing the delicate fabric in two, giving himself better access to me.

“Jett, I liked those,” I complain with a laugh.

“I’ll get you some more.” He pulls my body back over his lap, lifting me and impaling me on his cock in one move.

I let out a whimper, my pussy being stretched without warning. This is what I needed, to be manhandled by this beast of a man. His fingers dig into my ass as he encourages me to ride him, and I do slowly, rocking over his length, stretching myself. I’m glad we decided to ditch the condoms a few days ago.

I had the depo shot, and he assures me he's clean. I also had some tests run while I was at the hospital, since there is no way I could have trusted Liam, so there was nothing stopping us.

He tugs at my shirt, dragging it over my head and throwing it on the ground. His hands going to my tits, he massages them through the thin lace fabric of my bra. He slips the straps over my shoulders and pulls the front down, exposing my nipples to the cold air. He dips his head, taking one in his mouth at a time, rolling his tongue over my nipple then sucking. The sensation, alongside of me rocking over his enormous cock, is heavenly. I have tingles running over my entire body.

I grind on him, showing him what I want—*more*. More of him, more of this, I can't get enough of him filling me. He reaches for my swollen clit, rubbing his thumb over it with just the right pressure, sending fresh waves of arousal over me.

He sucks harder on my tits, and it verges on painful after how used my body has been the last week, but I want it. It's perfection when our bodies come together like this. All the sensations send me over the edge. My pussy clamps around his cock tight, rippling into a mammoth orgasm that just keeps going and going. "Jett," I cry out, my body trembling as I keep rocking back and forth, riding all the way through till the quivering stops.

He pulls his mouth back from me, and I rest my head on his chest. "Fuck, it's hot watching you come, feeling you pulse around my cock." He kisses my face, cupping my chin like I'm the most precious fine china in the world.

I try to get my breathing under control, but after that, I'm seeing stars, and all I can do is gaze into his eyes.

He clears some things out of the way on his desk, then lifts me off him. "Turn around. I'm not done with you yet."

I face the desk, and he helps me flatten out over the surface, my ass toward him. He strokes down my back, running his fingers slowly over my curves. “You have the most beautiful body, Hazel. I could never get tired of finding new creative ways to make you scream.”

He pushes two fingers inside me quickly. He moves in a way that has me panting, begging for more, even though I’m sensitive from coming already. “More,” I cry out, wrapping my fingers over the edge of the desk, clinging on.

He rewards me with a third thick finger, stretching me.

“Oh God, yes,” I cry, my body trembling. “More,” I beg.

He slides his fingers over my sensitive clit then runs them all the way through to my ass, spreading my juices over my puckered hole. He presses his finger over my asshole, trying to tease it open for him. I’ve never done anything like this before, but what he’s doing feels good, and he’s got me so turned on already. I want to try it.

“Yes,” I moan, giving him the go-ahead to push his thumb inside of me.

He slides in, and I’m surprised when it feels good. *Really* good. He moves his three fingers back to my pussy pushing them in. Working both holes at the same time. It feels dirty but so fucking good. He leans over me. “I want to fuck your tight little asshole, but you have to open up for me baby, okay?”

“Hmm.” I groan, wanting it too, wanting to have him inside of me there.

He kisses my lips, teasing my tongue, and I kiss him back hungrily. I’m so turned on right now, he can do whatever he wants to me. I need to feel him everywhere. He pulls away from my lips, leaving me panting for more. He removes his fingers from my pussy, pushing a second in my ass, stretching me. He strokes my back with his other hand. “Relax, Hazel,” he coaches me, trying to coax me into opening up for him.

My body involuntarily shoots forward. “Jett. Fuck,” is all I can get out.

He moves his hand from my back to my clit, rubbing the sensitive nub, coaxing me to open up more for him. I relax into his hands letting him take complete control. Then he opens his desk drawer and pulls out a bottle of lube. Coating his fingers, he tries again. This time it’s easier for him to push them in. He moves slowly, stretching me so I can adjust. “Is this, okay?” he asks, his voice low. He’s trying to hold it together, trying to make sure I’m ready for him, but I can tell how desperate he is to go for it.

“Yes,” I whimper, unable to say anything else. All I can do is concentrate on what he’s doing to me, fingers sliding in and out. He takes his time, and my body adjusts to what he’s doing, pleasure building more and more with every thrust. Then his hand is gone.

“Tell me if this is too much, we can stop. You just have to say the word, okay?” His eyes search mine, looking to see if I’m going to be honest with him, I think.

“Okay,” I stutter, too out of it to come up with other words.

I watch over my shoulder as he lubes up his cock. He’s watching me, his eyes dark with desire. The muscles of his arms bulge as he strokes himself. It’s one hell of a hot sight, and if I wasn’t already more turned on than I have ever been in my life, this would do it. Then he’s back behind me. “Up on your toes,” he commands.

I do as he says, desperate for his cock back inside of me.

He rests the tip at my entrance and slowly eases it in. I can’t help but tense up, it hurts more than his fingers. I want this, but I’m not sure I can take him there. He’s too big.

“Relax, Hazel,” he says, stroking my back again. “Just breathe, baby.”

I focus on my breathing, and he waits for me, placing tender kisses down

my back. He eases in ever so slightly, bit by bit. As I adjust, I grunt and moan and ask for more. Every time he gets a little farther in, he stops and waits for me to catch up, waits for me to adjust to his size and ask for more. Until he's completely inside of me. I feel so full.

Then he starts to move, and fuck me, it's a whole new sensation. "Is this okay?"

"Yes, don't stop," I tell him, needing this. Needing to be thoroughly fucked by this incredible man.

"Good girl," he praises me, moving inside of me slowly at first. "You're so tight, it feels so fucking unbelievable."

"You can fuck me harder, I want it," I beg, needing more, my body having adjusted to the pain, and it's now morphed into the most intense pleasure imaginable. My pussy throbs, and my insides clench, needing more friction. More of anything that will ease the tension building up inside of me.

He picks up the pace. "Fuck, you're perfect," he groans, moving with more determination, really letting me have it.

I moan and tell him I want more, as my body tingles all over. This sensation is unlike anything I have ever experienced. I think I'm having an out-of-body experience.

His hands are everywhere, rubbing my nipples one minute, stroking my back the next. He takes hold of my hair and pulls my head back so I'm looking over my shoulder at him, and he kisses me. Our lips come together in a hurried desperate kiss that I feel right through my entire body, sending me over the edge. Convulsing in waves of pleasure, I cry out, taking him with me. He pumps his release into me in slow thrusts before pulling out gently. It stings like a bitch, but it was worth it. It was worth being so close to him, doing something so intimate.



He turns me to face him, hugging me to his body closely. He strokes my hair, kissing me sweetly. My man is such a contrast of intense and rough, mixed with this tender side. He's everything I dreamt he would be and so much more. "That was..." I have no words.

"A real fucking celebration." He grins, lifting me into his arms and carrying me through the suite toward our room.

"Thank you. For understanding how important this is to me," I tell him, relaxing into his arms. I know with Jett I'm safe, he will take care of me, he wouldn't do anything to hurt me, and I will never have anything to worry about again.

# Chapter 27

## JETT

**I KISS HER FOREHEAD, hugging her body tighter to mine. We have been watching old movies all afternoon, and from the sounds of her soft breathing, she's nearly asleep in my arms.**

**I can't get enough of having her this close to me. I never thought I would be this guy. The clingy one who is happy to have his world revolve around his girl, but there is nowhere else I would rather be. The two of us are inseparable. Even in the last few days of work, she has been involved with the process, and it's made every second of plotting and implementing our plan even more enjoyable. To see the joy in her features, knowing she has a little control back, has been incredible. She needed this, and I'm so pleased I could be the one to help her destroy her estranged husband one move at a time.**

**After some data mining, I sent through a report to Detective Reader. And with a little assistance from Rafael to convince him this was the right move, highlighting all areas of interest, the police seized all Liam's assets. Hazel's dad pleasantly surprised me in his efforts, and from what**

I hear from Kobe, he and Ben are reconnecting while working together. He has been persistent in wanting to contact Hazel, but I'm putting it off until we return home. For the first time since I met her, she's blissfully happy, and I want her to stay that way for as long as possible... even though I know the consequences when I tell her the truth.

Today should be the last step of our plan. I can only imagine Liam's dealers now have word of his situation, and they will be after him, alongside the rest of the Kings gang. It's not hard when gang members are already so paranoid to drip feed information, making it look like Liam's organization is falling apart. By the end of the day yesterday, his men were forming a coup. It's only a matter of time before they destroy him for us.

My phone vibrates in my pocket. I consider ignoring it. I know our time here is coming to an end, and I'm not ready for it to be over. When we return there will be questions to answer and the pressure from our families to contend with.

"You better get it, might be one of your brothers or mine," Hazel mutters sleepily, wriggling out of my grip.

I sit up and glance at the screen. "It's Leo." I sigh, then answer it. "Hey," I greet my brother.

"Open the attachment Kobe just sent through. Hazel's going to want to see this as well," he says without a greeting. Right to the point, that's Leo.

I flick off the movie and open the attachment Kobe's sent through. Looks like a handheld camcorder or something, someone running through a massive house. "What are we watching?"

"Body cam footage Caleb got his hands on. The police ambushed the

**King house this morning.”**

**Hazel gasps, covering her mouth as she watches the scene playing out on the screen.**

**Liam comes into view, raising his firearm, but the officer reacts swiftly, taking aim and firing a shot directly into his chest. He is propelled backward by the force of the shot, and then the video abruptly cuts off.**

**“Oh my God, he’s actually dead?” Hazel mutters in shock.**

**“Are you still there?” Kobe calls down the line, bringing me back to the call. They must be together.**

**“Still here, just processing. What happened?”**

**“Caleb says the rest of the Kings turned on him, causing a riot. Something about missing funds and product. There was a police chase back to the King house, and he was shot there. The police report Caleb leaked us confirms he was shot dead.”**

**“It actually worked.” I beam, adrenaline flooding through me. I fucking killed him. Not in the way I would have liked, with my bare hands around his neck, but it’s done just the same. He will never be able to hurt Hazel again.**

**“It sure fucking did. Now you two can come home. That is, if you’re not having too much fun alone.” Kobe chuckles.**

**I almost want to join in his laughter and tell him that we are and we’re not coming back. I could take her out of this room and give her a real vacation. But as I glance over to Hazel, I realize something’s not right. “Hazel are you okay?” Her face is unreadable. She looks numb. “Guys, I’ve got to go. I’ll call you back later to work out our plans for coming home.” I hang up the phone and go to her.**

**“Is he really dead?” Her voice trembles.**

**“Yes, look at the screen. He’s dead, alright. Shot by the police.”**

**“I just... I just thought I would feel different. Elated to hear he was no longer walking the earth, waiting to get his hands on me again. But I feel strange. Maybe a little angry. I mean, I’m glad he’s gone, but... Fuck, what’s wrong with me?”** She hides her face in her hands.

**I stroke her back, trying to comfort her. I want her to be happy, to be relieved this is all over. “You didn’t get your revenge.”**

**“Not in the way I imagined,”** she mutters.

**“I understand. I would feel the same. But think of the hell we put him through before he died. You got your revenge in other ways. He’s dead because of the actions we set in place,”** I try to assure her, because this was for the best. He’s gone and she is safe.

**“I guess. At least we get to go home now.”** She sighs, and I know she doesn’t mean it. She doesn’t want to leave either. **“When will we go?”**

**“How about you go and start packing, and I’ll call the boys back and get it all lined up,”** I tell her, trying to sound enthusiastic about the prospect of going home. The idea of having my old life back isn’t as comforting to me as I thought it would be.

**“Yeah, I’ll just go pack,”** she agrees, still in a daze. This changes everything for her. She doesn’t have to live in fear of him anymore. But it also means the two of us go back to reality, and there will be questions to answer.

**She wanders up the stairs slowly, and I watch her.**

**I dial Leo. “Do we know this is for real?”** I ask just to make sure.

**“Just got off the phone from our buddy Detective Reader. He confirmed it. Liam King is dead. Reader is claiming it was his team that**

took him down, looking for some sort of medal as well,” he snarls, unimpressed.

“I bet. Fuckwit.” I told Leo not to get involved making deals with him. He might be out for revenge himself, but Reader’s a cop.

“Kobe’s booked you a plane for tonight. He wants you home to start preparing for your next fight.”

“I thought they were cancelled for the rest of the year,” I mutter, surprised and a little excited. I thought my chances at the title were over for this year at least.

“He kept this one in the hope this would all be over. It’s not Zamora, but if you beat this kid, you will have a chance at taking him on for the title again,” Leo explains.

“Guess we’re coming home today then,” I say with mixed feelings. I want this, the chance to redeem myself and get my career back on track, but I know how different our lives will be once we get off the plane. It’s inevitable.

“Hope you’re ready. And Jett, Rafael is staying at the house. It’s time to tell her, before she comes home,” Leo emphasizes, his words like a gut punch back to reality.

My heart sinks, knowing I can’t put it off. “See you later tonight.” I disconnect the call. I knew this conversation would have to happen sometime. After she’s just found out her husband has been killed doesn’t feel like good timing, but I know Leo is right, she has to know before we get back. I gather the paperwork from the office and walk upstairs, trying to find the words I can use to explain.

I find her folding clothes and packing them into a suitcase. “We leave tonight.”

**“Oh, okay,” she says, still sounding shaken.**

**I settle myself at the edge of the bed, right beside her. I want to make her feel better, take away that look of anxiety on her pretty features, but I know I have to man the fuck up and tell her the truth. “Hazel, there’s something I need to tell you before we head back home.”**

**Nervous eyes meet with mine. “You’re about to dump me, aren’t you? The Heartbreaker strikes again.” She throws the sweatshirt she was holding in her suitcase dramatically.**

**“What? No, why would you even think that?”**

**“Come on, because let’s face it, you’re not the commitment type, and now that we’re heading home, I figured you’d be over it all.” She motions between us. “Over us.”**

**“I’m not giving up on us just because we’re leaving here.” I cradle her face in my hands and plant a tender kiss on her lips. She’s right, I’m so mushy around her, but I can’t help it. She is the only girl who has ever softened me, and it’s just another reason why I know she’s the one for me. Despite all the obstacles we will face when we arrive home. “Is that why you’ve been so uneasy since you heard we were going back?”**

**“I didn’t want any of this to end. This time with you, even though we have been locked up, has been the happiest I’ve ever been. It’s like living in a fantasy.”**

**“Your idea of a fantasy is pretty twisted.” I can’t help but laugh.**

**“I know.” She shakes her head. “I guess that’s just how good you are.” She smirks cheekily, seeing the lighter side to all of this and finally relaxing, knowing I’m not about to dump her.**

**“What we have started here doesn’t have to end unless you want it to. Even then, I’m pretty sure I would have to lock you up and keep you as**



mine, because I don't want to let you go."

She slaps me across the chest playfully, and I grab her hand. "Thing is," she says, "once we're back, there'll be a bunch of external influences we have to deal with. Let's not fool ourselves into thinking it'll be the same as it is now in our little bubble."

"Don't you worry about all that shit. You leave it for me to deal with," I tell her. I'm not worried about her brother or mine; they can all just mind their own fucking business.

"Even Ben?"

"Especially Ben."

"Okay." She shrugs like it's my funeral, but she has to know he's no match for me. "So, spill it then. What were you about to tell me?"

"I need you to understand I didn't keep this from you because I wanted to. We needed to confirm the authenticity of what we found."

Her body stiffens. "Okay. Now you're scaring me." She pulls away from me, staring me down, her pretty blue eyes piercing right through me.

I close my eyes and take a breath. "Last week, Leo and Piper found out something that affects you."

She stands up, too fidgety to sit down any longer. "What did you find? I don't like the way you're looking at me Jett," she snaps.

"Didn't you always wonder why you were forced to marry Liam?" I ask her, still baffled how it all happened.

"Of course I did. None of it made any sense to me, but Ben said there was some debt our father had to pay. That was why, I was the payment. It made sense because I knew Liam had been obsessed with me for years, he always told people I belonged to him. It was fucking creepy."

**“Antony Acevedo, not Rafael Martinez,” I say, watching her face, waiting for her reaction.**

**She blinks back at me, her eyes narrowing. “What do you mean, Jett?”**

**“Antony Acevedo had a deal with the Kings, a contract assuring Cory King that on her eighteenth birthday his daughter would be married to the youngest King. I explain, waiting for her to piece it all together.**

**She blinks back at me, confusion clouding her pretty features. “I’m sorry, what...” She takes a step back. “Are you saying my father is Antony Acevedo?”**

**I drop my head, feeling the weight of my words. “I am.” When she doesn’t respond right away, I glance back at her.**

**She glares at me, angry tears prickling in her eyes.**

**She doesn’t talk, so I go on. “He and your mother had an affair resulting in a pregnancy. You.” I hand her the paperwork from my pocket so she can read it for herself. It’s the only way she will believe it. I know it would be for me. It’s too far-fetched to make sense of it otherwise. “I’m sorry, Hazel.”**

**She sits down, looking over the papers. The first one is her birth certificate. Her gaze comes to me, and there is a new anger simmering in her eyes. She swipes at the stray tears that roll down her face. “Is this some sort of a trick? Something new to control me because the old threat is now gone?” she shrieks, scrunching the papers in her fist.**

**I take her arms, trying to stop her from lashing out. Something to control her? My eyes meet hers. Who does she think I am? “No, we have checked it out properly. It’s why I didn’t tell you when we first found out. I wanted to make sure we had all the information. This has been confirmed by the Acevedo lawyer. And by the man who raised you.”**

**“You talked to my dad?” She looks like she’s about to be sick. “You talked to my dad and you didn’t tell me,” she snaps angrily.**

**I take her in my arms, trying to comfort her. I know how bad this looks.**

**“Stop.” She pulls out of my grip. “Don’t touch me,” she says, rage radiating off her. “You said if you ever hurt me to tell you. You fucking hurt me, Jett. How could you keep something like this from me?!”**

**When I told her that, I was worried I could hurt her physically without meaning it, not like this, but the devastation in her eyes tells me this is worse. “I’m sorry, Hazel. I was trying to do the right thing.”**

**“For whom. Yourself? So you could keep on having your fun. All the while you were keeping secrets from me. Life-changing fucking secrets. All this time you have been at me about trust. I have spent the last two weeks trying to earn yours back, and the entire time you have been doing all you can to keep stuff from me.” She stands and runs for the bathroom, slamming the door.**

**And I let her go.**

**She’s angry, and she should be. The poor girl has been lied to her entire life. Everything she knows is a lie. I just hope I haven’t shattered the small slither of trust we have been starting to build. Because even though she thinks I kept this from her for my own selfish reasons, I didn’t. Really, I just couldn’t see the hurt in her eyes. This is her mother’s doing, not mine, and in time, hopefully she will forgive me and see that.**

# Chapter 28

## HAZEL

MY HEAD SPINS, AND I dry retch leaning over the toilet, feeling like I'm going to empty the contents of my stomach, but nothing comes out. Instead, nausea rolls through me, making my body shudder.

I slide down the tile wall till I hit the floor, pulling my knees up to my chest and burying my head in my hands. I'm an Acevedo. I can't be. This isn't possible. My mother is so far from the kind of girl who would end up with a mob boss, it's not even funny. She grew up a good Catholic girl, from a well-to-do family. Everything about her is prim and proper and over the top. She wouldn't have had an affair with Antony Acevedo.

But even as I think it, I already know she would. If he gave her even a snippet of attention, she would have jumped on his dick faster than a flea on a dog. My entire life has been a lie.

I search the crumpled-up paperwork again, goosebumps covering my skin. The first document is a birth certificate, the second a contract between Antony and Cory King. He knew I was his daughter from the moment I was born but never once did he try and contact me or be part of my life. I was

merely an object he could trade to advance his business. I break into a white-hot sweat. My stomach churns uncomfortably again, bile rising this time. I stand abruptly and empty the contents of my stomach in the toilet. When I can't throw up anymore, shakily I grab hold of the towel rail, trying to steady myself.

Why did my bitch whore of a mother hide this from me? My whole life she let me believe my father was a detective, an upstanding member of society. How did she convince him to go along with this? I have so many questions.

I go to the sink, washing my face with my trembling hands. I meet my eyes in the mirror. Who the hell is the girl staring back at me? The daughter of a mob boss? There is no way this can be right. I don't look anything like Princess Piper Acevedo. But even as I say it, I know I kind of do. My skin is fairer and my eyes blue, but my features are similar. There is a family resemblance there. Piper is my half-sister. What the hell does she make of this?

Images flash in front of my eyes, memories that all now add up. I still remember the first time I met Liam King. I was fourteen. My bestie Ruby-Rose had come for a sleepover and the two of us had snuck out of the house and joined some of our other friends at the skate park. It was a small group, just the five of us, drinking the beer Sam, one of the boys, had swiped from his dad's fridge. It was a fun night too, until we heard the roar of motorcycle engines pulling up behind us. As the men on the bikes approached, we worked out it was the Kings gang pretty fucking quickly and our so-called friends took off, leaving the two of us girls behind.

They came right up to us, Liam King's eyes pinning me with a look I didn't understand, but I knew I didn't like it. "We will be taking you girls home," he demanded.

I grabbed Ruby's hand, getting ready to make a run for it. "Yeah, I don't think so," I told him, turning to walk away from them.

His hand came to my waist, and he pulled me around to face him so fast my head was spinning from more than just the beer I chugged. "What would your mother say if she knew you were out this late, drinking with teenage delinquents in the park?"

I shrugged like the little shit smartass I was. "That's not your concern," I sassed, staring him down. He might've been one of the Kings, but I wasn't scared of him. Not back then, anyway.

He grabbed my chin with his meaty fingers, forcing me to look up at him. I can still remember how much it hurt. I had bruises on my face when I woke up in the morning. You'd think my mother would have said something, but nope. "You need to learn to watch your mouth, little girl," he told me, his authority sending a chill down my spine.

"Get your hands off her," Ruby called from my side. One of Liam's goons grabbed her and held her away from me so she couldn't stop him.

"Let my friend go," I told him, my voice low and harsh.

"Get on my bike. I'm taking you two home," was his response. He didn't care what I said or did. He was in charge, and I was expected to fall into line like every other person he came into contact with.

"Fuck off. I'm not going anywhere with you," I spat back at him.

But before I knew what was happening, he'd grabbed my arms and was dragging me across the park toward his bike. There was nothing I could do to stop him. He was so much bigger than me. Ruby was dragged along behind us. He pushed a helmet onto my head. "Get on the bike, Hazel," he demanded.

I blinked back at him. "How do you know my name?"

“Get on the bike,” he roared, losing his temper with me.

I glanced over my shoulder to see Ruby being shoved onto the back of his friend’s bike, and I knew wherever they were taking her, I had to go too. She’s my best friend, and I needed to protect her. She wouldn’t have even come that night if it weren’t for me. I climbed onto the bike and wrapped my arms around the grumpy biker, praying this wasn’t the night I’d gone too far and ended up in a shallow grave somewhere.

But it wasn’t, we pulled up at my parents’ house five minutes later. I hopped off the bike as soon as he killed the engine, pulling the helmet off and shoving it in his direction. Ruby was by my side just as quickly, glad to be as far away from the other guy as she could.

“This is your one and only warning. If I catch you running around town with delinquents again, you will be punished,” he threatened me.

I stared back at him, my mouth agape. What the hell was he going on about? “Did my mother send you out to bring me home?” I looked at Ruby. “She’s enlisting the help of gang members now? Shit.” I laughed, thinking this shit couldn’t be for real. It was too ridiculous. Gang members didn’t talk to me or come anywhere near me. What was actually going on?

Liam grabbed my arm, his glare icy, not seeing the humor of the situation. “This is no joke, Hazel. You belong to me, and tomorrow, the whole town will know it. I won’t have you running around with just anyone. You stay in and get good grades like your mother wants you to.” His grip on my arm tightened until it was painful, and tears welled in my eyes, even though I told them not to. “Or you will see what the consequences are, you understand?” he growled, releasing me.

As we walked away, Ruby dropped her mouth to my ear. “What the hell do you think he meant by you being his?” she asked.



We got to the door, and I glanced back to see him still watching us. “I have no idea,” I replied, puzzled.

I didn’t see him again until the day I got married. But from that night on, the boys we used to hang with ignored us, and so did every other guy in town. I never heard anything from anyone, but they all avoided me like I was diseased or something. Now it all makes sense. He knew I was his, because he had been handed a contract saying so. That’s why he put out a warning to stop any other guy from touching me. He was making sure he got a good deal.

My mother spent my entire upbringing saying it was me who chased after bad boys, while knowing all along she had already traded me to the worst of them all. I hate her more than I ever did before. She’s not just a narcissistic bitch but a hypocrite. My life was destined to be destroyed from the moment I was born, and there was nothing I could do about it. And it’s all on her.

A tap comes at the door, and I jump. “Sunshine, can I come in? I’m worried about you,” comes Jett’s voice, low with concern.

I stare at the door. Jett. He knew this secret about me for over a week and didn’t tell me. It stings so much. He is all about honesty, and since we have been staying here, I have done everything I could to earn his trust because I knew how important that was to him. I don’t understand how he could keep this from me, but he did. He’s loyal to his brothers first, and I bet Leo had something to do with his deceit.

He taps again. “Please, Hazel,” he begs, sounding desperate. He should. He’ll be lucky if I ever speak to him again. But I know we have to get on a plane and travel home together tonight. I can’t ignore him in here all night as I would like.

I go to the door and flick the lock. He owes me the mother lode of

explanations, and it better be fucking brilliant. My mother has always been fucked in the head, her hurting me is a given, but him? I need to understand what he was thinking.

He opens the door. "Sunshine." He opens his arms, wrapping them around me. The small gesture causes me to burst into tears all over again. I weep into his shirt, the emotions getting to be too much for me. I feel lost and small and more vulnerable than I ever have. One threat gone, but now what will this all mean? Who even am I?

"So much of my life now makes sense," I cry.

"I know, but we can work it all out together. I will be here by your side," he whispers to me, kissing the top of my head, trying to comfort me. I know he cares about me, so why did he keep this from me?

I pull back to look at him, needing to see his face. The truth in his eyes.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you a week ago when I found out. I wanted to every day, but I kept stopping myself. I needed to protect you from the truth, even if it was just for a little while longer," he admits, his words hanging heavy in the air around us. Finally, honesty.

"You hurt me more than I ever thought you could," I cry, more tears streaming down my face.

He wipes them away with his thumbs. "I never wanted to hurt you, only to keep you safe."

I stare back at him, trying to compose myself. I can see how sorry he is. And he's right, this truth was going to hurt me, but it was my truth to learn as soon as he did. "If you want a future with me, this can never happen again. I understand what your brothers mean to you and that you think you were protecting me, but keeping secrets will only ever create distance between us. If you want to do this for real, I need to know I will be the one you come to

with your secrets and with mine. The trust has to go both ways,” I tell him, feeling stronger than I probably look right now. I know I need to stick up for myself. If I let him get away with this now, he will think it’s okay, and it’s not.

He stares at me, and I know he’s fighting an internal battle, but this is a dealbreaker for me. I have been lied to enough in my life, and I’m not a possession to be traded or protected. I’m a fucking person.

“I won’t go into a new relationship feeling like I’m in the dark, like I have to lurk around corners and listen in on phone conversations just so I have a little control over my life. I need to know my partner will treat me as an equal.”

He looks at me, lost for words. He goes to talk then pauses. “Sometimes... this world can be harsh, Hazel. I need to protect you,” he says with certainty. That’s my answer. He thinks I am his possession as well. Just like Antony Acevedo, just like Liam King. But I won’t do it. He might care about me, I can see that, but I won’t be an item that needs his protection. I can’t. I’m a person, and if he can’t treat me like one, I can’t go home with him.

“When I get back home, I’m going to go stay with Ruby in LA for a little while. I think I need some space from all of this,” I tell him, finding my voice.

His sad gaze intensifies into a glare. All warmth for me vanishes, and I see it as his walls go up. He rolls his lips. “Do what you have to do, Hazel.” He turns and walks out of the bathroom, leaving me alone.

That’s what I thought. Part of me hoped he would fight for me, that he would tell me he had fallen for me and beg me to stay with him. That we could go home and do this as equals, be like Leo and Piper, the way she said he treats her. But that’s not my reality. Me alone is more like it, and I’m

clearly not worth the hassle for him. You know what? I'm okay with it if it means I don't have to answer to another controlling male, even if my heart is shattering into a million tiny pieces right now.

I would have preferred the broken ribs; they would heal faster.

# Chapter 29

## JETT

**OUR PLANE COMES TO a halt on the tarmac at the Palm Springs private airport. My chest burns with a pain I've never experienced. We're going to get off this plane and go our separate ways. Me home to the Rivera mansion and my responsibilities, my security company, the club, and training. My real life. And she'll go off to LA to her little friend Ruby-Rose. She will move on with her life how she always wanted to, free of the shackles her late father put her in. She can have the kind of life she has always wanted, just like she should. And I have to let her go because it's what she wants.**

**The tension in the air has been palpable. Neither of us have uttered a word since she said she was leaving. What is there to say? For two weeks, I thought maybe she wanted a different reality, something possibly with me. But I was wrong. She was only with me to kill time, and as soon as it wasn't necessary, she was ready to get as far away from me as possible.**

**I know I fucked up by keeping things from her. I should have told her as soon as Leo called me, there shouldn't have been a question in my**

mind about it. She deserves better. But I can't promise I wouldn't do the same again. If push came to shove, I would do whatever it took to keep her safe, physically and emotionally. Except when I look over at her now, I know she's not okay emotionally. She's angry and hurt, and a lot of that is on me.

I pull on my cap, ready to disembark as soon as the pilot tells us we can. The whole flight I kept thinking of reasons she would have to stay, ways I could force her to come home with me. Tell her that Piper needs to see her. The kid couldn't let her leave without them having it out or the man who raised her having the chance to apologize and he's at our place waiting for her to come home. She has unfinished business with all of them, and her running to LA is running from all of them as well. They all care about her. But even though it would be the truth, it would also all just be excuses from me to get her back to my place, and that would make me no better than the asshole she was married to.

The threat is gone, but the truth is, I don't want to let her go. Not ever. The feeling is so deeply ingrained in me that it physically hurts. I never thought a girl could mess with my head and my heart like this one has. Even what Elidee did to me didn't hurt like this, but from the second I met Hazel, she's crawled under my skin and made herself at home. She corrupted me in a way I never thought possible. And I let her.

She stands, slipping on her Converse shoes, then reaches for her handbag. I watch her, torn between what's right and how I really feel about her.

"Am I free to go?" she sasses, a hand coming to her hip. She's still so pissed at me for keeping what I knew about her father from her. And now that she has had time to recover and her tears have dried up, the

attitude is back. It appears she hates me as much as the day we left this tarmac. Maybe even more.

“Yes.” I sigh. “But I need you to promise me you won’t take off. Stay with your friend but be careful,” I demand like I have the right to ask anything of her, when I don’t. I fucked up, and she has every right to leave.

“In other words, I can step off this plane a free woman, but you will still be looking over my shoulder at every turn I take.” She glares at me, an intensity in her eyes I haven’t seen before. She has all the power here, and she knows it.

“I have to know you’re safe, Hazel. And I would prefer if you came home with me,” I tell her honestly.

She stares me down in a silent stand-off. I’m not sure what she wants from me. I told her this was all up to her once we got home. What more can I say? She knows I want her to stay.

“That’s what I thought,” she huffs and starts to walk away.

“You can’t just leave.” She keeps walking. A desperation I’ve never felt before takes over. “Hazel,” I call to her, trying to get her to stop, to hear me out, turn around and look at me.

But she keeps walking.

Fuck! I run a hand through my hair, tugging at the ends, frustration causing me to shake. I don’t leave the plane right away. I can’t. Her brother brought a separate car to take her to LA tonight, and I can’t watch her drive off with him, knowing I might never see her again. I have to let her go. She doesn’t need some other asshole controlling her life.



# Chapter 30

## HAZEL

THE DRIVE TO LA has gone surprisingly fast, considering what I left behind, but the farther away I get, the more I know I made the right choice. I glance over at my brother. Or half-brother, I guess. That will never make sense to me. He's stern, distant. Driving on autopilot. "I'm so sorry for taking off that night, Ben. I still feel terrible," I tell him, my stomach still in knots over what I know I put him through.

He looks toward me briefly before his eyes return to the road. "It's okay, Hazel. I understand why you did it."

I stare out the front windshield as well. The road is quiet; it's late and most people are tucked up in bed. Ben probably thinks I'm nuts for wanting to leave tonight after just flying in, but I couldn't stay at the Rivera house. I just couldn't go back there with Jett.

Ben sets his hand on mine and gives it a squeeze. I know I'm quiet. I have been since I got in the car. "Are you sure about this, Hazel?"

"Yes. I'm free. Why wouldn't the first place I go be Ruby-Rose's place? I haven't seen her in months, and she's living her best life without me. I'm

dying to catch up with her.” I fake a smile, trying to hide my pain. I can pretend to be happy. All I have wanted for years is my freedom. Now that I have it, I feel a little lost without the beast looking over my shoulder watching my every move.

“I just mean, are you sure you want to walk away from Jett? There is obviously a spark between the two of you. At least there was before you left.”

He has been sitting on this since we left Palm Springs Airport. I know he saw my tears as I hurried away from Jett, but he let me keep some of my pride and pretended it wasn't happening. “You know how he works, Ben. They don't call him the Heartbreaker for nothing.”

“But you're the one walking away from him,” he says, confused.

I look over at my brother, knowing he's right. I could have stayed, Jett practically begged me to. But I know I can't. He wants me there with him so he can control my life. “I need the freedom to work out who I am, Ben. Does that make sense? I have spent so much time being told what to do and being manipulated by the people around me. I need time to sort out who Hazel really is.”

“Take all the time you need, you deserve it. I just hope you don't miss out on something awesome that was right in front of you.”

“Maybe, but I'm only going to be visiting Ruby for a week, two weeks tops. If he moves on that quickly, there wasn't something between us in the first place.” The thought makes me feel sick, but it's true. If he feels the same way I do, time apart won't make any difference.

The navigation announces we're pulling into Ruby-Rose's street. “Nothing has changed for me, Haze. I know a lot has happened in the time you were gone, with what you found out about Antony Acevedo being your sperm

donor, but it doesn't change who you are. And Dad still loves you. He wants to make amends for what happened. He needs you to understand."

I feel bad that I'm running away from them all. I know I should be strong enough to face them, to work through all of this, but I'm not. I need time to process before I face Dad or Piper. "I'm glad you've had time with him to reconnect. I just need a little space to work through all of this, okay? Tell Dad I will catch up with him when I get back. We can talk then."

Ben pulls up out front of the address Ruby gave me. I glance up at the opulent building in awe. "Auntie Susie must be loaded."

"Shit, yeah. This place is next-level nice," Ben agrees.

Ruby runs through the glass sliding doors of her lobby, her face lighting up with excitement as she approaches Ben's car. She must have been waiting for us just inside.

I shove open the car door and sprint to her, throwing my arms around her in a tight embrace. "I've missed you," I cry into her shoulder.

"I've missed you too. We have so much to catch up on." She squeezes me tighter.

"I love your hair," I tell her, pulling back to look at her. It's short and choppy like a pixie cut, and with the added ink running up her arms, she looks so different. Older, trendier. It suits her.

"I love yours." She beams as I fluff my hair out, and we both laugh.

"Do you want me to bring your bags up, Haze?" Ben asks, pulling them out of the trunk for me.

"Oh, hey, Ben. Do you want to come up for a hot drink or something before you take off?" Ruby greets him.

"Hey, Ruby. Maybe next time. I'm on the clock, need to get back to Palm Springs tonight."

“He’s one of them now, Ruby,” I tell her like I’m not happy about it.

Ben glares at me for the comment but doesn’t respond. He knows what I mean. I’m happy for him because he’s found his place there with them, but my relationship with the Riveras is one of love/hate.

“Next time then.” She offers him a sympathetic smile.

“Sounds good. Take care of her for me.” He places an arm around me and squeezes. He’s gotten stronger since I saw him last. I give him a look like geez, where did the muscles appear from. I guess his training schedule with Kobe has been full-on since he didn’t have Jett to train.

“She’s in good hands here. Lots of big soccer players around to make sure she’s safe.” She laughs at the thought.

Ben’s eyes flash with a warning to me, telling me not to get myself in trouble. I throw my arms around him in a tight hug. “Love you. Be safe,” I tell him. I wish I had more time to catch up with him, but I will be home in a few weeks, and we can talk everything else through then. Right now, I need to be a little selfish and do something for me.

“You too. If you need me, you have my number. I programmed it into your new phone. Along with Jett’s, just in case.”

“I won’t be needing his number, but thanks.” I smile tightly. Knowing I have his number makes me feel uneasy. Does he have mine? Did he organize for Ben to have a tracking device programmed into the phone to keep tabs on me? Probably. Knowing Jett, he wouldn’t have been able to help himself.

He hops into his fancy new car, and we watch as he drives away. I suck in a deep breath. Freedom at last.

“So, you won’t be needing Jett’s number?” she asks, picking up one of my bags.

I roll my eyes, collecting the other. “It’s a long story.” I sigh, too exhausted

to get into it with her tonight. It's well past midnight, and all I want to do is have a hot chocolate and cry myself to sleep.

"Lucky we have a week together for you to fill me in." She beams, her pretty face lighting up like she has all sorts of stories to tell me. I bet she does, and I can't wait to hear them.

We take the elevator up to the penthouse floor. "That's where Max lives," she says, pointing to a door as we walk past, a sassy grin on her face.

"Oh yeah? When do I get to meet him?" I smirk back at her cheekily. She really likes this guy. I've never seen her crush so hard over some dude.

"I'll take you to his game this weekend. You can meet the whole team."

"Sounds exciting."

She lets us in and flicks on a light. Before I have time to drop my bag, I'm nearly bowled over by a delightful flash of black and white fur. "Oh my God, she's so cute," I squeal, dropping down to my knees to pat her adorable dog.

"She is. Hazel, meet Lilly the cocker spaniel, my auntie's dog and the reason I get to stay in this incredible apartment."

"Hi, Lilly," I say, patting her as I run my eyes over the place. She's not wrong, it's crazy stylish, and the view of the city with its twinkling lights is stunning at this hour. I might just stay for the next four months with her. I can face reality later, right? Ruby looks so happy, and I want what she's got. Not the ache in my chest where my heart used to be.

# Chapter 31

## JETT

DANCE MUSIC BLARES AS I walk into Queen of Hearts. It's ten pm on a Friday night, and the place is starting to fill up. Kobe thinks we should be opening another establishment on the other side of town with how successful this place is, but I disagree. Axel Stone and his brother Hendrix run After Dark, another exclusive club across town, and I think this town isn't big enough for anything more. Besides, my interest in this place is dwindling. It doesn't have the same shine it used to. Nothing does.

I walk through the crowd, heading right for my office at the stairs and past the elite members partying on the mezzanine level. Around me, people are having the time of their lives, but I feel like I'm in a daze. I have all week. Nothing feels the same anymore.

A girl grabs hold of my arm, and I glance over my shoulder to see a regular, Dayna. "Jett, I haven't seen you in forever," she purrs.

"Sorry, yeah, been busy."



**“I’m here now,” she says like I should care, and yeah, maybe I would have three months ago, maybe I would have booked a room in the back and had a fun night with Dayna or a girl just like her, but I have no interest tonight. It’s like the lights have all dimmed and everything is clouded in shadow. Dull, uninteresting.**

**“I’m working tonight,” I tell her, shaking her off.**

**“Come find me later,” she says, hopeful.**

**“Sorry, Dayna. Got a girlfriend now,” I stutter out, surprising even myself. It’s bullshit, I can’t call the girl that took off on me my girlfriend, but I can’t stand the thought of this shit happening night after night here either. They need to know I’m off the market, because that’s how I feel.**

**She pouts like a spoiled child.**

**I walk away from her, no energy left to deal with the scene, striding toward my office with more purpose. I need to get the fuck away from all these people. Once inside my office, I slam the door closed and lean my head against it, digging my fingers into my scalp. “Fuck!” I scream. What is wrong with me? I spent so much time locked up with her that I can’t function in the outside world anymore. I take a seat on the couch and consider pouring a drink even though I know I shouldn’t, now that I’m back in training. But tonight, I need something to take the edge off, something to stop this stupid ache of emptiness.**

**Before I even have the chance to grab the bottle, my door swings open, and there stands Kobe, his face illuminated by a mischievous grin. “Did I just witness you turning down Dayna Scott? She’s an absolute goddess. Are you out of your mind, Brother?”**

**My irritation flares. “If she’s such a beauty, why don’t you go spend the night with her?”**

Kobe chuckles wickedly, a sparkle in his eye. "I just might," he teases. "Jett, seriously, man, are you alright? You haven't been yourself since you got back."

Frustration wells up within me as I snap back, "I'm fine," my voice laced with exasperation.

He flops down onto the couch beside me. "Yeah, you're fucking brilliant. You've been spineless all week in training. You mope around this place like you're in a prison and we're forcing you to be here. You're a fucking zombie." He flicks my forehead. "No life left in there."

I give him a stern, warning look, and in an attempt to ease the tension, I crack my knuckles. "I told her to stay, but she still left."

He raises an eyebrow. "You told her to stay, or you asked her to stay?"

"What's the difference?" I snap, my frustration coming through my voice. I can't hide it from him anymore. "She told me she wanted to go see her friend. I told her I needed to know she was safe, and I would prefer if she came home with me. And then she just walked away from me."

Kobe offers me a sympathetic smile, his voice softening. "She's been controlled her whole life, Jett. She probably just needs a little freedom."

My shoulders tense as I respond, "You don't think I know that? It's why I let her leave."

Kobe leans in, trying to bridge the gap. "You can be a little overbearing, Jett. She probably just needs some time to sort herself out. Her life has done a complete one-eighty this year. It's a lot to process, especially with your ugly mug looking over her shoulder."

"What do I do now? You and Leo constantly warned me about not hurting her. I did my best not to, but I still fucked it all up. What if I

have lost her forever?”

“Are you really in love with her, Jett?” Kobe asks, his eyes searching mine for sincerity.

My guard drops. “I am,” I admit, my voice filled with vulnerability. “That’s what’s been tearing me apart. She’s not just some girl I can move on from. She’s the only one, and I’m madly fucking in love with her.”

Kobe leans in closer, his expression softening. “Did you tell her that, man?” He reaches for the bottle of scotch and pours us both a glass, surprising me by shoving one in my direction. Even Kobe thinks I could do with a drink tonight.

I throw it back, slamming the glass on the coffee table when I’m done. My shoulders slump, remembering the look on her face right before she walked away from me. I wish I did things differently. I’m a fucking asshole. “I didn’t get the chance. She took off before I could.”

“But did she, really?” His tone is stern. He thinks I fucked up as well. “You had two weeks locked up with her, Jett. I’m sure you could have told her at any time while you were away.” He looks at me like I’m an idiot, and he’s right. I am.

I hang my head, the weight of my mistake heavy on my shoulders. “I... I fucked up. I knew I should have said it as she walked away, but I couldn’t.”

Kobe lets out an exasperated sigh. “Because you’re an idiot,” he scolds. Like he would have done better. What does he know about being in love?

But he’s right, there is no other explanation for it. I let the best thing that’s ever happened to me walk away because I couldn’t admit how I

felt about her. I couldn't ask her to stay because I had fallen in love with her, and I didn't want to be without her.

The kid casually walks past and glances through the open door. "Leo's looking for you two."

Kobe interjects, his tone mischievous, "Jett's having a meltdown." He chuckles, enjoying my pain.

"I'm not having a meltdown," I mutter, unimpressed. Leave it to Kobe to minimize what feels like a life-changing moment for me. "Where's Hazel tonight, Ben? Is she having fun in LA with her little friend?"

He glances between Kobe and me, looking like the cat has his tongue.

"Spit it out," I snap. What the hell does he know? Am I here pining over the girl like a lovesick fool, and she's already moved on?

He takes a step closer to the door, looking like he's about to make a run for it, and I start to sweat. "Ruby-Rose took her out tonight. They're at some bar, with some boys from a soccer team she knows."

"Fuck," I say out loud. The thought of her out partying with some fucking sports team boils my blood.

The kid gives me a look, his face serious. "Hope this isn't overstepping, Jett, but you have nothing to worry about. She's in love with you."

"How do you know?" I ask him, desperate for any scrap of information he can give me.

"She's my sister, I know. She just needs a little space to cool off. You hurt her. She'll work out that she can't live without you soon enough and come home. I'm sure of it."

He thinks she's in love with me. If she is, then what's she doing out at some bar partying? I can't stand it. "What bar's she at?" I demand,

checking my watch for the time. I could be in LA in a couple of hours. We could have it out tonight and my hell could be over.

“Don’t do it, Jett,” warns Kobe.

“Kobe’s right. I might not have as much experience with chicks as you two, but I know my sister. If you turn up there and act all overprotective of her, she will run, and you might never get her back. Trust her to come back to you. She will,” the kid says, sounding wiser than his eighteen years. “Besides, you two have an angry Leo to contend with. Apparently, another staff member has just quit from the elite floor, and he wants to know who’s to blame.”

I glare at Kobe, and he smirks back at me, cheeky-as-fuck shit-eating grin. What the fuck did he do this time?

I follow him out, thinking about what Ben said. Trust her to come back. Even after all the time we spent together, I don’t know if I can trust her, but her brother is right. If I don’t, I will lose her forever. And after a week spent feeling like I’m living in hell, I know that’s not an option. I have to trust her.

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HAZEL

RUBY AND I HAVE just sat down in the sports bar up the street from her apartment. It’s my new favorite place to eat. This is our second time coming here this week. On Wednesday we had dinner and drinks with her new boyfriend and a couple of his teammates. They’re such a cool group of people. I can see why she likes LA so much. She fits right in here.

Dinners this week have been incredible. Ruby's an amazing cook, every dish she makes is like something out of Master Chef. Fresh ingredients plucked from the farmers' market and carefully prepared, she puts my attempts at baked beans on toast to shame. But this place is what I'm craving tonight, a fun, young atmosphere and comfort food. Pizza, burgers, quesadillas, and French fries. I have no idea what I'm going to pick, all I know is with a full belly, I have to feel better than I do right now.

I thought a week away from my problems would somehow make them all go away, but really, it's just given me loads of time to think. "I'm going to miss this place when I go home." I sigh, knowing it's nearly time to pull up my big girl panties and go home to face the music.

"Not as much as me, I hope." Ruby pouts playfully.

"Never. I'll be back whenever I can, you know that." I take her hand across the table, giving it a squeeze. After a week together, we're closer than ever, and it's like the time we had apart didn't even happen. Well, kind of. The ache in my chest signals it did.

My phone rings. Checking it, I see Amelia Harper's name light up the screen. "Amelia Harper," I mouth to Ruby before answering it nervously. "Hello," I answer hesitantly.

Ruby motions that she's going to order some drinks, and I wave her off.

"Hazel, how are you?" Amelia's sweet voice comes down the line. "Hope you don't mind, Jett gave me your new number so I could contact you."

"Of course, no, I don't mind. I'm doing well. How are you?" I ask awkwardly. I haven't heard from her in the last week since I put my application and designs in. I was starting to think I had missed my opportunity with her. Now that I have her on the other end of the line, I'm so anxious my hand is literally shaking.

“Busy, they never tell you how crazy life as a parent and business owner will be.” She laughs, like she’s had the week from hell. “Normally, my second, Summer, handles our new intakes, but she’s been sick as a dog with the flu all week, and I’m just catching up tonight. Sorry to call so late on a Friday afternoon. I hope it’s okay to talk.”

“Timing’s perfect,” I tell her. She could call me at two am and I would say the same. Please let me get the job. I cross my fingers and toes, waiting for her to give me some sort of indication. My heart’s pounding in my ears I’m so damn nervous about it.

“So, I am in love with your collection,” she gushes, sounding genuine. “You have the *it* factor when it comes to design, and I would be honored if you joined my team.”

“Are you for real?” I squeal, doing a happy dance with my feet under the table.

Ruby arrives back with a bottle of wine and two glasses, and she’s smiling from ear to ear seeing my excitement.

“Sure am, sweetie. You are just what my team needs—if you still want the position, that is?”

“Yes!” I squeak, so excited I have lost my words. “I want it, when can I start?”

“I know it’s super short notice, the rest of the interns don’t start for two weeks, but could you be here on Monday? I have a different role in mind for you, and I need to fill it as soon as possible.”

“Yes, of course,” I agree, more excited than I have been in so long. Then my heart sinks when I remember that means going home, and I don’t have a home to go to. I thought I would have gotten it figured out this week, but instead of trying, I have spent all my time catching up with Ruby, and when

she was working, I walked the city streets, taking it all in. There is so much to see here, and the truth is, I wanted to avoid reality. Whenever I think of going home, all I can think of is Jett and the look on his face as I walked away. He didn't stop me. He doesn't feel the same way I do. The thought still stings, but I knew what I was getting myself into, and I only have myself to blame.

"You don't sound so sure," she says, sounding worried. "I'm sorry to drop it on you last minute."

"No, I'm super excited. It's just..." I pause, not sure how to tell her I'm homeless. "I haven't sorted out accommodation yet."

"I thought you were staying at the Rivera house."

"Yeah, that didn't work out," I say sadly, feeling it in the pit of my stomach. Why the hell does it hurt so much?

"I understand, Hazel. Trust me, I understand those boys are a handful. How about this, you come and start with me on Monday, and I will work something out for you. It's the least I can do, since you're helping me out."

"What? No, you can't do that. I will figure it out." I have no idea what, but I'm sure I can find something, even if I have to stay in a hotel until I find a place.

"Nonsense, I have just the thing. Summer lives in the same complex, it's an apartment close to work, so you can walk if you like, and the rent's affordable. I'll send you the details. Let me know if you think it will work for you."

"Thank you so much," I gush, overwhelmed with gratitude and disbelief. It's not often that things fall into place for me like this, it feels like a miracle. Now I just have to work out how I'll pay for the place.

"So, we have a deal?" she confirms. "You can start on Monday?"

A wave of excitement washes over me as I reply, "Yes, I'll be there." I



can't help but beam with joy.

"Excellent," Amelia responds. "I'll text you the details now. Thank you, Hazel. I'm super excited to have you on board with us."

"Thanks, Amelia. See you on Monday," I say before she disconnects the call.

"Oh my God, Ruby!" I squeal.

Ruby, just as excited, squeals back, "Did you just land your dream job?"

"Yes, and maybe an apartment, close to work and everything," I gush. "Amelia's going to send me the details now."

Ruby jumps up and hugs me tightly. "See, I told you it was all going to work out. Let's have a drink to celebrate." She pours us both a glass.

I chuckle, noticing the entire bottle in her hand. "You got the whole bottle?"

She laughs with me. "Hey, we've got a lot to celebrate tonight!" She tips her glass toward mine. "To us, living our best lives."

"I'll drink to that," I agree, taking a sip.

Two hours later, we're both a little tipsy as Ruby's new friends arrive. Max and his best friends Colt, Ashe, Seth, and Luna, who we met on Wednesday. They're so nice, and the couple are adorable and clearly very in love. The guys are nice, flirty, good-looking even, but they're not Jett.

My mind keeps drifting back to him; he's all I can think about. Now that I know I'm heading back to work on Monday, I need to get my head on straight and figure out what to do about him. If anything. He let me leave. He didn't throw himself at me and confess his undying love or anything. Maybe there is nothing even there.

Part of me secretly wished he would call me this week and beg me to come back, tell me he's in love with me, but deep down, I understand why he

hasn't. He told me from the start that he doesn't do love and all the mushy stuff. He was brutally honest with me. He doesn't do relationships. But I thought I was different, that I was special.

I can't help but picture him at Queen of Hearts, with some pretty girl draped over his arm like an accessory. He's happy, carefree, without the burden of worrying about me, and he can revel in his playboy lifestyle that he adores so much. It's where he belongs, and on Monday, I'll start my new life and figure out where I belong. I'm young; I can move on from him, right? People do it all the time.

But here's the problem—I don't want to move on. I only want him. I'm addicted to him; his cocky smirk, the way he'd come up with any excuse just to touch me, how he listened to me and comforted me when I was scared, and the way he looked deep into my soul like he knew the real me, the one I hide from the rest of the world, but he saw me. My heart constricts, and my chest aches painfully when I remember what it felt like to be loved by him.

Deep down, I know I'll never have anything like that ever again. The weeks I had locked up with him will stay with me forever.

# Chapter 32

## HAZEL

NERVOUS BUTTERFLIES DANCE IN my stomach. I've just been handed my security pass and am allowed to enter the Artemis Fashion headquarters. I want to squeal.

I glance at my reflection in the mirrored elevator wall. My make-up is done the way Piper showed me, my hair in a neat ponytail. I was up at five to get myself ready. Ruby offered to drive me, and I'm glad she did, as the car got closer to home, my anxiety grew. She kept me calm and stopped me from chickening out. The elevator door dings open, and I glance into the luxurious space. It smells like vanilla; even the air is better in here.

*You've got this, Hazel,* I tell myself as I take a deep breath and step into the room.

Amelia spots me as I walk through the elevator and comes rushing toward me. "Hazel, boy, am I happy to see you." She takes my hands in hers and smiles at me, looking me over. "You look adorable in this collection," she compliments me, making me blush. It's hard for me to comprehend that *the*

Amelia Harper knows my name, let alone thinks I look adorable in her designs.

“Thank you.” I chose a sage-green pleated skirt and a black tank with a leather jacket. “I wasn’t sure if it was office appropriate, but it was all I had, so I had to go with it.” But as I glance around at the other employees, I realize anything goes here. Some of the girls are super dressy in power suits, others are casual in skinny jeans. All of them wear the label, Artemis. It gives me a flutter of excitement. I’m going to be one of them. An Artemis girl.

“It’s perfect.” She smiles warmly. “Come meet our team.” I fall in line beside Amelia, still trying to process the fact this is real. I feel like I need Ruby here to pinch me so I know it is. Amelia’s in one of the power suits, white wide-legged pants, a silk camisole, and a tailored jacket. She’s stunning, the look totally suits her. And I’m fangirling.

She knocks on an office door and a bubbly-sounding girl tells us to come in. “This is my right hand, Summer. She knows everything about this place and has been with me since the start.”

Summer stands, enthusiastically holding out a hand for me to shake. “Hazel. We’re so thrilled to have you on board.”

“I’m excited to be here.” I smile back at the pretty girl with blonde bouncy curls. She’s a little older than me but looks like fun.

“This is Georgie, she’s our office assistant and knows the ins and outs of our day-to-day.”

“Hi.” She smiles up from her computer sweetly.

Amelia and Summer continue the office tour, introducing me to the pattern makers and seamstresses who make up the trial runs of the design; there is also a marketing team and a flagship store downstairs. The whole tour takes about an hour. I’m the youngest here by far, and I start to feel uneasy. Does

she realize I have no experience? The tour ends back in Amelia's office, with Georgie bringing us all a coffee before scurrying off to her desk at the front of the office. She seems nice but super shy.

“This place is like a family, Hazel, and we can see you fitting right in. As I said earlier, Summer has been with me since I started, but Georgie only started once we began expanding last year. She has been a huge asset to our family, and I know you will be as well. That's why I didn't want to offer you an intern role. Instead, I created a position just for you... as brand coordinator for our youth line. I want your designs included in our next collection. That's why you're here today. We need to get started right away. Summer will sit with you and talk you through your exact role.”

I blink back at her, in utter shock, my emotions swirling as I try to process the weight of what she's just entrusted me with. “I don't know what to say... Thank you,” I stammer, feeling a hint of tears welling up. Why is she placing so much faith and responsibility in me?

Amelia offers a reassuring smile, her confidence in me unwavering. “I know this is a big role to take on, but you will be rewarded financially, starting on a much higher pay scale than you would have imagined.”

My heart swells with gratitude. “Thank you so much. I'm incredibly thrilled to be a part of your family. I promise I won't let you down,” I reply, my excitement bubbling over. I love that she thinks of this as a family. Other than Ben, my own family let me down majorly. Maybe I will be a better fit with this one. Somehow, I already feel like this will be home for me.

Amelia's smile widens, and her warmth envelops the room. In this moment, I want to be like her, radiating happiness and success. Maybe, just maybe, this is the beginning of a new chapter in my life.

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Summer is an absolute riot, and the day has flown by with her guiding me through the intricacies of the job. I've surprisingly caught on to their computer system quite quickly, and it's becoming clearer to me why I'm here. They value my unique perspective, my differences from the rest of the team, and that's exactly what they needed.

As I read through my contract, I can hardly believe the generous compensation Amelia is offering me. I had worried when she sent me pictures of the apartment she's renting for me that I wouldn't be able to afford it. It looked so new and fancy. But now, it all makes sense. I'll be earning more than enough to comfortably make it all work. I might even be able to start saving for a holiday or something special. And I plan on paying Ben back for everything he did for me. I know he was working crazy hours so Jett would watch over me.

Summer leans over my desk, all smiles. "Millie says she wants you to finish up at four today. Apparently, the bed you ordered will be arriving at your new apartment, and she wants me to show you around and get you settled over there."

"Thank you," I reply, grateful for their continued support. What workplace lets you leave early on your first day so you can set up your new apartment? This really is more like a family. Did Jett put them up to all of this?

"Are you okay?" she asks, looking me over.

I hesitate for a moment before opening up. "Yeah, I just feel like I'm in the Twilight Zone. Can I ask you something, and it will stay just between us?"

"Shoot," she says, her tone understanding.

"Did I get this job because of Jett?" I ask, really hoping it's not the case.

“Rivera?” Summer laughs heartily. “He set up the interview, but honey, you got this job because you’re the missing piece of the puzzle. I haven’t seen Amelia this happy since she found me. And I’m freaking amazing.”

I join in her laughter, feeling reassured. I sling my bag over my shoulder. “Let’s go, then. I’m so excited to see this apartment in real life.”

As we head out, Summer turns to me, her eyes wide with curiosity. “So, what’s your connection with Jett, anyway? Can you hook me up with Kobe?” She smirks sheepishly.

I give her a skeptical glance, considering her angelic appearance. He would eat her alive. “You don’t want to go near Kobe. He might look like fun, but he’s a total man-whore.”

She raises an eyebrow, undeterred. “That’s what people used to say about Jett, but looks like you tamed him.”

A wry smile crosses my lips. I wish. “Not likely.”

Summer leans in, her eyes gleaming with gossip. “Word is, he’s off the market. He was back at Queen of Hearts last week and hid in his office the whole time.”

I’m taken aback by this news and have to know what happened while I was away. “Who did you hear that from?”

“One of my best friends, Shelby. She works over there behind the bar. She said he was walking around in a daze or something. Everyone missed him because he had been away for so long, but he wasn’t interested in any of them. He even told one girl he had a girlfriend now. That’s you, right?” Her eyes implore me to open up and spill all my secrets.

I blink back at her in shock. He’s telling people he has a girlfriend? “No,” I respond, uncertainty coloring my voice.

Summer raises an eyebrow, clearly intrigued. “You don’t sound sure.”



“I’m not,” I admit. “But the last time I saw him, things were a little rocky. That was over a week ago, and we haven’t talked since.”

“That is odd. I doubt he would have hooked up with someone else so soon.”

My thoughts are filled with concern. He better not have. “Yeah,” I mutter, disturbing thoughts taking over. Images of him with some girl, one he wants to call his girlfriend.

“Anyway,” Summer continues, changing the subject, “when you see Kobe next, put in a good word for me. I’ve only met him a couple of times, but I fell in love.”

I hesitate for a moment, not sure how much I should tell her about him. She seems like such a nice girl, and I wouldn’t want another Rivera to hurt someone so kind and caring. “Don’t. It’s a really bad idea,” I caution her, hoping she takes my warning seriously. From what I got to know about Kobe, I kind of liked him; he’s funny and lighthearted, unless you piss him off. But he’s not going to give her what she wants. She’s already admitted she’s in love with him. That was me with Jett, crushing on a man who was unattainable. It’s a really bad idea. And if I can save her my pain, I’m going to try.

“This is us,” Summer announces as we arrive at a modern-looking apartment complex with white walls and stained wood detailing. “We’re on the bottom floor. I’m in number five, and you’re in number six. I only moved in last week myself. Amelia built these with some land she got from her dad. Parking is down the stairs in an underground garage.”

I can’t help but admire Amelia’s resourcefulness and generosity. “She’s kind of amazing, isn’t she?”

Summer nods in agreement and hands me my key.

I eagerly open the door and step inside, greeted by my very own apartment.

It's a vision of warm white walls and wide hardwood floors. The kitchen boasts white cabinetry with pale green tiles in a herringbone pattern. The countertops are made of some sort of composite stone. It's gorgeous. "Wow," I squeal with excitement.

Summer shares my enthusiasm. "I know, right?"

"I feel like I won the lottery," I say, excited as I walk around the empty space, imagining how I will furnish it when I get the chance.

Summer invited me to hang at her place while we wait for the bedframe and mattress to be delivered. She also kindly offers to help me assemble it so I'll have somewhere to sleep tonight. While we waited, we ordered in Chinese takeout and chatted about what brought her here. There is a lot more to her than I first imagined. We have become fast friends, and it's good to know I will have her right next door. She even offered to walk to work with me in the morning.

While I stare up at the ceiling, in the quiet of my room, all the things that happened today replay in my head. I feel happy. I'm free from Liam, free from my awful mother, and I have just landed my dream job. I know I'm going to miss Ruby; I have a feeling that even when the four months are up and her auntie is back in town, she will stay in LA. She's just too settled there. But after today, I feel like I have a new friend, and it gives me hope that everything will be okay.

This is the life I dreamed about at night when I was stuck with Liam. I can't believe it's finally coming together for me. Yet, there's one thing missing, and it gnaws at me. I miss Jett. I knew I would. We spent every day and night together for weeks, and the nights we had at The Alexander were perfection. You don't just get over something like that in a week; my fear is it might take a lifetime.

Summer's words keep coming back to me, *he's telling everyone he has a girlfriend*. Why would he be doing that unless he does? I'm tempted to ask Ben, but that would make it obvious I was still hung up on him, and I can't be. No, I need to put any thoughts of Jett Rivera to the back of my head and focus on this new job.

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My second day at work flies by just as quickly as the first, with so much to learn. Ben kindly offers to pick me up from work and take me shopping for some essentials, an offer I can't refuse. I know I can't avoid talking to him forever. There are so many people I need to catch up with now that I'm back home, but starting with Ben seems like the right move.

Plus, I hadn't even thought about things like towels, so I'm feeling pretty desperate after having to borrow one from Summer so I could have my shower this morning. Amelia gave me an advance on my first paycheck to help me out. We just grabbed the basics to get me started, like kitchenware, a set of four of everything, utensils, plates and bowls, and some towels. The rest of the furniture will have to wait until I can save up enough for it all, but I don't mind that the place is empty for now, because it's mine.

We unload our purchases into my new apartment, stacking them on the kitchen island. "This place is sweet, Haze."

"Right?" I reply. "I couldn't believe my luck when Amelia sent me the details. There's another unit upstairs still available if you want it, Ben. Amelia owns the entire block. I'm sure I could set up a viewing for you tomorrow if you're thinking of moving out of the Rivera house." I secretly hope he'll consider it. Having him close by again would be comforting.

Ben considers my offer. “Thanks, but I think I’m going to stay with the boys.”

“Because you’re one of them now,” I tease him as I pull out my knife and start slicing open the box.

Ben takes it from my hand, inspecting it, then gives it back to me with a knowing look. I slip it into my back pocket. It’s silly, I know I don’t really need a weapon on me anymore, but because Jett gave it to me, I keep it on me all the time. It’s my prize possession, a reminder of what I lost or what could have been, I don’t know.

“I’m settled there. They have been so good to me, and Kobe really thinks I have a chance at a title fight in the next two years if I keep up my training. I want to give it a shot. I don’t want to work security jobs forever.”

“Good for you. I’m glad you know what you want.” I pull out the items one by one and stack them in the dishwasher.

“And it’s all worked out for you as well. New fashion job, fancy new apartment.” Ben smiles, genuinely happy for me. This is why he worked so hard. This is why he gave up so much to see me happy, and I will be forever in his debt.

I nod in agreement, a sigh escaping me. It has all worked out. I have everything I want—everything except the charismatic asshole who stole my heart. I’m starting to doubt that ship will ever sail back into my life. It’s been two weeks, and I haven’t heard a word from him. He’s probably back to his usual club antics with other women. Even if Summer did say he’s telling people he has a girlfriend, I find it hard to believe.

“Jett misses you, you know,” Ben says, breaking into my thoughts. “He asks about you every time he sees me.”

My eyes flick back to my brother, who’s watching me closely. How does he

always manage to read my mind? “Why isn’t he asking *me* how I am?”

“I don’t think Jett is very good with that sort of thing. He knows how to fight, not love. You know.”

Frustration builds within me as I shove the dishwasher door shut and flick on the switch. “Why are you on his side anyway? I didn’t think you would want to see us together.”

“I saw the way you looked at each other, Sis. There was something there, something real.” Ben’s voice softens, and he replies, “I want that for you. You deserve to be happy.”

“I am happy,” I snap, annoyed at the thought I need a man to complete me. I have never been that girl. But he’s right, there was something real between us.

“You know what I mean.” He sighs.

“Next time Jett asks about me, you tell him to man the fuck up and come ask me himself.”

“That’s going to go down well,” Ben mutters, clearly not wanting to be the one to piss off Jett. But Jett’s not talking to me, so I will have to leave my message in my brother’s very capable hands.

I offer a casual shrug. “Thanks for your help today.”

Ben looks at me thoughtfully. “You going to talk to Dad?”

I consider it for a moment before replying, “Maybe this weekend, Ben. I have such a crazy week ahead, learning the ropes at work, and I can’t deal with the family drama right now.”

“Dinner on Saturday night, then?” he suggests, giving me a persuasive look, and I think it over. I know I need to see him, but I’m not sure I’m ready. “Come on, Hazel. Dad wants to make amends. I think you should hear him out. Mom fucked him over pretty badly.”

“Yeah, okay,” I finally agree reluctantly. “As long as Mom stays the hell away. I can’t deal with her.”

Ben nods in understanding. “Me neither. I can promise you she won’t be there.”

# Chapter 33

## JETT

I KNOCK AT HER door and wait. I know she's in there because the light is on and there's country music blaring from speakers, something angry-sounding. I rap at the door louder this time, hoping she will hear me over the music.

The door swings open, and she stands in the way, wearing a pair of denim cutoffs and a baggy T-shirt and socks. My heart kicks up a beat at the sight of her. Fuck. How did I ever let her walk away from me?

"Jett," she squeaks, surprised. Bet I was the last person she expected to see on her doorstep. She takes a phone from her pocket and silences the music.

"Didn't pick you for a country fan."

"Songs of scorned women wanting revenge sounds right up my alley." She laughs at herself. She looks good. So fucking good, happy even. Part of me thinks I shouldn't be here. I should have just left her alone to get on with her new life, but I couldn't. My head has been a scrambled mess since she left.



“Good point,” I agree. She stares at me for an extended time. The warmth she had for me is still there, I can see it. “I miss you,” I blurt out, not able to stop the words.

She blinks back at me, her lashes doing that flutter thing I have missed like crazy. “You came down here to tell me you miss me?” She raises a brow in question.

I lean into the doorframe. “You told your brother I should come down here and tell you myself. So here I am.” This isn’t quite how I had imagined it going, but when I’m around her, it never is.

She smiles softly. “He actually passed that message on? I thought he might have been too scared to.” She laughs. “Do you want to come in?”

“Please.”

She stands aside and lets me pass her then closes the door. “Drink? I don’t have any glasses yet, but we could have this out of a mug if you’re interested. It was a housewarming gift from Amelia.” She holds up a bottle of champagne.

“I’m back in training,” I tell her, knowing right now more than ever I need to keep a clear head. I have so many things I want to tell her.

She looks disappointed. “Oh, maybe just me then.” She pours the champagne into her white porcelain mug and takes a sip, her eyes not leaving mine. “I don’t have any furniture yet, sorry I can’t offer you somewhere to sit.”

“It’s okay. The place is nice,” I tell her, glancing around. It’s modern and still smells of fresh paint. She’s done well finding it. “So, you got the job then?”

She smiles sweetly. “Amelia offered me a better one. I’m the brand coordinator for our youth line. She’s going to put my designs in her next

collection. At first, I didn't get why they wanted me, but this week has been incredible. They are all so supportive. I feel like a part of the team already." She drops her head, looking down into her mug. "Thank you for contacting her. I know I wouldn't have had the opportunity if it weren't for you." Her eyes slowly rise to meet mine.

"You did this all yourself."

She hops up onto the kitchen counter, cradling her cup in her hands. I can see her processing that new information. She takes a big swig of her drink. "So, did you just come around to tell me you miss me?" she says, changing the subject.

No, I came around with a massive fucking spiel, but now I don't know how to find the words I need to say. I can't stop staring at her. She's so fucking pretty. "I know you have a fixation with my reputation as the Heartbreaker, but that's just shit the media made up to sell newspapers."

Her eyes narrow in on me. "It's not total shit, though, is it. You go through girls like most do their underwear," she snips, unimpressed.

"I was married when I was younger," I confess, a pang of vulnerability in my voice. I wasn't sure if I should tell her or not, but I feel like she's slipping through my fingers, and I need her to know why this is so hard for me.

Her eyes search mine, desperation lurking beneath her curiosity. "What? You've never mentioned it before."

I hesitate, the weight of past mistakes heavy on my chest. "I usually don't talk about that time in my life at all. We weren't married for long. I try to pretend it didn't happen."

Her voice softens with concern. "What happened, Jett?"

**“We were young. I thought she was someone she wasn’t. She left, took all my money with her. I wasn’t always this wealthy, Hazel. After my father was murdered, the boys and I scrimped and saved to make ends meet. And after Mom died, I kind of fell apart. I blamed myself for her drug overdose. I was supposed to be watching over her while Leo was at work, and she overdosed on some drugs her new boyfriend gave her. I was out with my girlfriend Elidee instead of watching Mom, like Leo had told me to. I was thinking with my dick. Thought I was in love. I was fucking sixteen, what did I know about love? Anyway, after Mom died, I turned to her for support. Her family situation was just as bad as ours, and she needed me. I wanted to rescue her and for her to rescue me from the pain I was in.”**

**“How did it end?” Her eyes search mine.**

**“We were together for two years, and she wanted to marry me. And I thought why the fuck not. I loved her. So, we waited till we turned eighteen and off we went to the registry office to elope. Next fucking morning, she was gone with every last cent I had. She fucked me up, though, and I swore to myself I would never fall in love again. No matter how good the high, the low wasn’t worth it. That’s why I fucked around. I didn’t let anyone else get close enough to me for it to ever happen again,” I admit, knowing it doesn’t completely explain my actions, but I’m hoping telling her a little about my history will help her to see why I’m so messed up.**

**“That’s so sad. Why are you telling me this now?” Hazel’s voice quivers like she already knows the answer, but she needs to hear it from me.**

**“Because I let you in. You let me in,” I confess, my heart pounding with**

vulnerability. “I know I’m not perfect, but I’m in love with you, Hazel. I thought I could push these feelings away and spare us both, but these last few weeks have been torture.”

Her eyes glisten with unshed tears. “For me too,” she admits, calming the crazy swirling inside my head. She missed me too.

I move to stand in front of her, taking the mug out of her hands and placing it on the counter. “You’re worth it,” I say, my voice filled with conviction. “Worth the pain, worth the risk, if it means there’s a chance for us. I have to try, because despite all the obstacles standing in front of us, I love you, regardless of the outcome, and I can’t see a life without you in it.” I stare into her pretty blue eyes, making sure she knows I mean every damn word I’m saying. I can’t hold back from her anymore. This is it for me.

She stares up at me like she’s looking right into my soul. She sees me, the *real* me, the vulnerable one I don’t show anyone. And I see her. She’s so strong, so independent, but she wants me to claim her. She wants to be mine.

She moves closer to me. “I’m in love with you too,” she whispers into my lips as she kisses me. Her hands run up my neck, lacing into my hair as she pulls me closer to her. At first our kiss is soft, cautious even, but it soon turns desperate, our bodies showing each other how much we have missed this connection. And right now, I need to be inside of her.

I pull back from her. “Please tell me you have a bed. The kitchen counter will work, but I would really like to take you to bed tonight.” Somehow, a dirty kitchen fuck doesn’t feel right.

Her lips turn up at the sides into that sassy smile I have missed so much. “I have a bed.” She laughs. “And lucky for you, it’s been set up

already as well.”

I scoop her into my arms and carry her into the bedroom, throwing her down on the fresh white sheets. “Fuck, I hope you’re ready for me, Sunshine. Two weeks of pent-up sexual frustration is going to hurt.” I shove my pants off and throw my shirt on the floor as she stares up at me in awe. I could never get sick of the way she looks at me.

“Fuck, I hope so.” She rips off her shirt and wiggles off her shorts, trying to undress just as quickly.

I crawl over her, our mouths meeting again. I slip my hand inside her panties, feeling how fucking soaking wet she is already. I rip them off down her legs and shove her thighs apart. I need to worship her. I bury my head between her legs, tasting her. I’m starving for her juices. “You taste so good,” I tell her, lapping her up, licking through her folds and sucking her clit. Working her pussy with my tongue, she tastes every bit as good as I remember.

She moans and writhes under me, her hips moving off the bed to meet the thrusts of my tongue. “More,” she purrs.

I reach for her tits, palming them through her bra. She has the most perfect tits, so perky. I slip my other hand between her legs and shove two fingers inside of her hungrily. I need her ready for me, and I can’t wait much longer. Her back arches off the bed, and she grabs a pillow to cover her mouth. I stop what I’m doing and shove it aside. “I want to hear you.”

“Fuck,” she whimpers, a crazy-hot heat in her eyes. Her fingernails dig into my shoulders.

I curl my fingers, finding her G-spot, working my fingers and tongue together until I feel her body tighten around me. I need this so badly, her

orgasm on my tongue telling me she's mine.

"Jett, I'm going to..." Her body convulses as she cries out. I lap her up, licking, sucking, finger-fucking her all the way through her release. She cries out, telling me how good it is.

I don't wait for her to stop. Instead, I remove my briefs, lift her legs, and dive into her quivering pussy, filling her up in one quick thrust. Our eyes meet again, a silent message passing between us. This is it. I'm going to take care of her and love her for the rest of my life, and I know she feels the same. But first, I'm going to claim her with my cock.

"Fuck, Jett," she whimpers, rocking her hips to meet my thrusts. "Yes. I fucking need you so badly." She runs her nails down my back, scratching me as I move inside of her. She's so tight, her pussy like a fucking vice milking me, bringing me undone with every deep pump.

I pull her on top of me so I can see her better and remove her lacy bra. Freeing her tits, they bounce as she rides me, sliding her wet pussy back and forth. She takes what she needs. I dig my fingers into her hips, keeping the pace wild. I can't get close enough to her to find the relief I need.

Her mouth is slack, and her eyes roll back; she's in heaven and so am I. I could never get enough of this. Her hips rock faster as she uses the friction between our two bodies to stimulate her clit. She's moaning incoherent sounds, her body trembling. It's a delicious combination to watch. My balls tighten.

She lowers her head and kisses me, taking us both over the edge together. She's a goddess.

"I love you, Jett," she whispers into my lips.

"Not as much as I love you, Hazel." I pull her off me and wrap my

arms around her, hugging her close, kissing her soft hair. She relaxes into me. The pain I have been carrying around with me for weeks is gone, replaced with the overwhelming urge to care for her for the rest of her life. And I will.

# Chapter 34



## HAZEL

I WAKE UP WITH a startle. I have been doing that in this apartment all week. It's new, and I'm not used to the sounds of this neighborhood yet, but whatever that noise was is something different to the other sounds. Something like a tapping at the window. I sit up and glance outside into the darkness. The blinds are open, and staring back at me is Liam. I jump, my heart racing out of my chest.

What the fuck, he's dead! I rub my tired eyes, thinking I must be seeing things in the shadows of the trees. And when I look again, there is nothing there, but the sick feeling now taking over my body tells me I wasn't imagining it.

"Jett," I stutter out, worried.

He bolts upright instantly. "What's wrong?" he demands.

"You're going to think I'm crazy, but I just saw Liam watching us through the window."

He spares no time grabbing his gun from under his pillow, throwing on his jeans. "Stay here," he warns, his eyes dark with fear.

I throw on a T-shirt and my denim cutoffs, slipping my phone into my pocket, and stay in the room like he told me to, peering into the apartment. I sink my hand into my pocket and run my finger along the smooth handle of my knife. I'm losing my fucking mind. Liam is dead, we watched the body cam footage the day it all went down, and I read about his funeral in the paper. He's dead, it couldn't have been him.

There is a bang at the door, and I hear Jett race for it. "Nobody there. Must be a prank," he calls back to me.

"What the hell?" I call back. "At this hour?" I relax, thinking I must be making up scenarios in my brain, still living in fear from the year I have had. I flick on the light to use the bathroom and my blood runs cold. A shudder runs through me when I see Liam—he's inside the apartment! He's dirty, his jeans stained with mud, his shirt wet like he's spilled a keg of beer down his front. His beard is long and wild, but it's the look in his eyes that has me scared the most. He might not be dead, but they are. And he's got a gun.

"Well, isn't this sweet. You two playing house. Too bad you belong to me," he slurs, clearly intoxicated. He's come to kill us both.

"You're dead," I stutter out, not able to connect my thoughts with what I'm seeing with my own two eyes.

He throws his head back, laughing. "Yes, this is just a delusion. One where I take back what's mine."

"Over my dead body," Jett growls from the doorway, his gun drawn.

"Yeah, that's the plan." Liam's smile is sinister, making him look insane. He makes a grab for me.

Jett squeezes the trigger, making a direct shot at Liam. He stumbles back clutching his chest, then regains his balance, smirking toward us.

I break into a cold sweat realizing he came prepared. He must be wearing a

bulletproof vest. I glance at Jett, and he pulls me toward him as we make a run for the front of the apartment. We need to get out of here. We only get to the kitchen before Liam is right behind us.

Liam's finger is on his trigger, and he takes aim at Jett, but Jett shoots again, frantic to hit him somewhere else on his body that will harm him enough to stop him. But he's too late, and Liam's bullet slices right through Jett's chest. He flies forward, hitting the floor with a thud.

I scream and scream. It's like I'm watching a horror movie play out in front of me, and I can't make my limbs work to do anything about it. I run toward Jett.

"Get behind me," he grunts, still trying to protect me. I grab his gun, trying to shield him as Liam stalks toward us. I take aim, and the bullet grazes his arm, splattering blood over my fresh white wall. But it doesn't deter him. He keeps on coming toward us, fresh fury in his eyes.

I watch in horror as Liam kicks Jett in the side of the face, knocking him out cold, then turns his attention on me. I shoot again, and he rears back. I finally got him good. His thigh gushes blood, soaking into his jeans. "You little bitch." He sneers, coming at me with his meaty hand.

I try to pull the trigger again, but the cartridge is empty. I throw the gun at him instead, trying to buy myself time. I jump over the kitchen counter and make a run for the front door. If I can get out of here, I can find someone to help us. Jett's injury looks bad, and I know I need to get him help right away.

I can feel Liam right behind me. I glance back to see him dragging his leg, blood running down the side of his jeans. He aims his gun at me and shoots.

I drop down to the ground then scramble down the stairs of the underground parking garage as fast as my body will take me. I bang my leg, and the metal bites into my shin, causing me to whimper in pain, but I don't

let it stop me. I scurry behind a pillar and hide. The air down here is musty and thick, and the dampness clings to the sweat beading on my forehead.

As he descends the stairs slowly, every clunk of his heavy boot being dragged down echoes off the concrete walls and sends panic racing through me. I glance around, looking for an escape, feeling claustrophobic, like the low ceilings and cramped parking spaces are closing in on me. If he gets his hands on me, he won't kill me right away. I already know he's going to make me pay first. I can't let that happen. I won't.

“Come out from where you're hiding, Hazel. I don't want to hurt you. I know it's Jett who had you hostage all this time. He's the only one who will pay for this. I just want you back.” His voice is softer as he tries to coax me out.

Lies. All motherfucking lies. He just took a shot at me, and I know his games; I have been a part of them before. *I won't hurt you anymore, I love you.* Then the next thing, his fist is connecting with my face. I'm not that naive little girl anymore. I clutch my knife like it's my safety blanket and wedge myself behind a concrete pillar, a drip of water constantly hitting me on the head. But I can't move from this position. From here I can see the stairwell entry and his large frame as he searches the garage for me. He grips the wall as he scans the space, wincing in pain. I pray I'm well enough hidden from him.

He stumbles through the landing, searching behind cars and pillars.

I suck in a breath, fear threatening to take over now that I can see his enormous body moving toward me, closing in. I glance over my shoulder, looking for an out.

His eyes are searching for me madly, shifting from left to right. “Oh, Hazel, there aren't really a lot of places to hide now, is there.” I hear him moving

closer to me, and I know I'm well and truly screwed. He's right, there's not. The garage is mostly empty, just a few scattered cars and pillars to hide behind.

But he doesn't know which one I selected. I slip my phone out of my pocket. Making sure it's on silent, I type out a quick message to Ben and Kobe.

Hazel: Help. Liam's not dead he's at my apartment. Jett's shot.

"I'll give you five seconds. This is your last chance. If you don't come out in that time, I'm coming to get you and you will have sealed your own fate." His voice booms, echoing off the walls.

I type faster, my shaky fingers slipping over the keys.

Hazel: I'm in the underground garage. Please help me.

I hit send, praying to God one of them gets it in time, even though I know the chances of that happening are fucking slim to none. The Rivera estate and the clubs are at least ten minutes away from my current location. And I know I don't have that long before he finds me.

"One... Two..." He sneers, taking pleasure in this game of hide-and-seek.

Over to my side I see a black Jeep driving through the front entry of the garage; someone else is coming, but I could already be dead by the time they get here. They have to weave their way through the levels, if they even come this far.

"Three... Four..." He's so close now, I can smell the stench of stale beer.

I make a run for the closest car, a little red hatchback.

He takes off after me, upping his speed. "Wrong decision," I hear him yell.

I make it to the empty car faster than he can with his injured leg. I try the door handle, and to my surprise it opens. I swing it open and throw myself inside the back seat, but as I do, he gets to me, stopping me from closing the

door. He looks down on me, his nostrils flaring. “You never were very smart.” He chuckles.

His dark eyes pierce right through me. I kick at him, aiming for his groin, desperate to hurt him, to stop him in any way I can. I land one blow, but he catches my other ankle, dragging me toward him. His other hand coming to my neck, he pulls me toward his face. My gut rolls with the stench of beer, blood, and his sweat. Glaring into my eyes, they’re dark, evil, filled with hatred for me. He’s lost everything, and he’s going to make me pay for disobeying him.

“You thought you could escape me.” He laughs psychotically. His malice sends a shiver through me. Having everything taken from him, he’s hit a new low.

He shakes me like a rag doll. “I’m going to have fun watching you squirm.” His thick tongue runs over his top lip, making me shudder with disgust.

Desperately, I slide my hand into my pocket, fingers wrapping around the object I’m looking for. The blade Jett gave me.

His body weight is mostly on top of me, pinning me to his body, and he pulls my hair tighter, trying to get me to move with him. We’re so close like this, face to face. His eyes are dark and sinister, with a promise of the horror to come. A moment of clarity washes over me. This is it, the moment I have waited for. I’m smarter than he thinks, and I’m ready for this. With a flick of my hand, I open the blade and shove it into the side of his neck, aiming for the vein Jett told me about. Blood shoots out, splattering over me, and my stomach rolls again.

His eyes widen in pain. He was too focused on my face, on his anger toward me, to see what was happening right in front of him. He stumbles

back, trying to pull the knife free, but he can't. He's bleeding out too rapidly, and his feeble body crumples to the concrete below.

"Not as stupid as you once thought, am I, asshole," I get out through shaky breaths. My body shakes uncontrollably as I glare down at him. He stares up at me, the sound of blood gurgling from his mouth as he takes his final breath. I know it's morbid, but I watch him struggle, watch him fight for the last little wheeze of air filling his lungs before he goes still.

A black Jeep screeches up beside me, and Kobe flies out, running toward me, followed by a furious-looking Leo.

"Kobe," I cry as he rushes over to me. "Jett, he's upstairs," I stutter out, knowing he's the one who needs help, not me. I'm alive. Somehow, I'm still alive.

Leo runs off up the stairs, and Kobe holds me, checking me over. "Are you okay, did he hurt you?"

"No."

"You're bleeding," he says, worried, looking at my shin.

"I'm fine. But Jett's not, Liam got him. It's bad, Kobe." My words wobble out, a new fear hitting me. I need to get back upstairs to him.

Kobe takes off his jacket and helps me dress in it. "Leo will sort out Jett. He's a tough motherfucker, he's going to be fine," he tells me, his voice certain.

But he didn't see him.

Kobe bends down and inspects Liam. "Go see Jett, I'll take care of this," he tells me.

I take off for the stairs, my legs feeling like jelly. I move in slow motion, taking the stairs two at a time. When I run through the apartment, I find Leo on the ground kneeling over Jett.

“Leo,” I cry, needing him to tell me Jett’s okay. That it’s not as bad as I thought.

He glances toward me, and his face says it all. Jett’s not all right. “He’s going to be okay. You’re going to be fucking okay, Jett,” he yells at him, applying pressure to his wound. Leo’s fear scares me. If he’s worried, this is worse than I thought.

Summer appears in my doorway, and she’s on the phone. “The ambulance is pulling into our street now, tell him to hang on,” she tells Leo.

I run to her, and she wraps her spare arm around me. “Shh,” she coos, trying to calm me. I cry into her dressing gown. The look in Leo’s eyes haunts me. Jett has to be okay. We only just found each other. I can’t lose him now.

Ambulance sirens scream down our street, and they pull up out front. Two paramedics rush toward us, and Summer points them in Jett’s direction. I stand by and watch as they shoo Leo away so they can get to work on him. Leo comes toward the two of us, looking like a lost little boy. I run to him, throwing my arms around his enormous frame.

“He has to be okay,” I whisper through my tears. Leo pulls me in tighter, he needs the comfort from me just as much, but he doesn’t say anything.

The paramedics strap Jett onto a stretcher and wheel it past us. He’s so pale, not moving at all. “Someone can ride with him. The rest of you will have to meet us at Palm Springs Memorial.”

“Go. He would want you with him,” Leo tells me, releasing me. I glance back at him, knowing how difficult this is for him. He’s accepting me. He knows who I am to Jett.

“Thank you,” I whisper through my tears.

I follow them into the ambulance and sit beside him. Grabbing his hand, I



squeeze it tight, praying to God to save him. “Please stay with me, Jett, I love you,” I whisper through my tears. His hand tightens on mine, and I know he’s still here with me. He has to hang on, he can’t die because of me.

# Chapter 35

# JETT

**A BLUR OF DISORIENTING unfamiliar sounds, the sterile scent of antiseptic, and the muted hum of a heart monitor with its constant rhythmic pulse wake me. I suck in a shallow breath, clutching my chest where it burns. My muscles feel stiff all over. I feel like I've gone ten rounds in the octagon and come off second best. I wince as I feel the pain in my chest, the tightness of the bandage wrapped around it. What the fuck happened to me?**

**My eyes shoot open when I remember Hazel. I'm in a hospital bed, a white cotton blanket over my middle that feels like it's suffocating me it's so tight, and I wrestle with it to loosen its hold on me. The room is dark, lit only with light from the hall. I'm hooked up to an IV, a slender tube snaking its way into my arm.**

**"Hazel," I cry out. Panic ripples through me. Where is she? I go to get out of bed, but the searing pain stops me dead in my tracks, and I recoil, lying back. "Hazel!" I call out again.**

Turning my head, I see the small bedside table, adorned with a vase of fresh flowers and a half-empty glass of water with a straw. Outside, it's pitch-black, and I wonder how long I have been out of it. For me to be in the hospital, I know whatever Liam did to me was life-threatening. I wouldn't be here otherwise.

Then I see her. The most beautiful girl in the world. She comes toward me, the gap between us closing. At first, I think I must be dreaming because she looks so angelic.

"He's awake," she calls over her shoulder. I feel her hand in mine, squeezing, and I wrap my fingers around hers, needing her closer to me. "You're okay, you're awake," she says to me. Like she's trying to convince herself but she doesn't believe it.

"Hazel," I mutter, my voice hoarse.

She's been crying, mascara stains down her cheeks. She smiles weakly, leaning down and kissing my lips softly, and I feel her tears drop to my face. "I was so scared," she whispers, her voice trembling.

"I'm okay," I tell her, feeling like death warmed up.

A nurse appears to check my chart, approaching me with a warm but cautious smile. I know this girl's face, she's the one Kobe snuck off with when Hazel was in here. "I'm Mandy. I'll be taking care of you, Mr. Rivera. Are you comfortable at the moment?"

"I'm fine. Why am I in here?" I ask, looking between Hazel and Mandy.

They don't answer me. Hazel gives me a look like she will fill me in later, without the nurse around. Mandy goes about checking my blood pressure.

"He looks like he's in a lot of pain. Can you up his meds?" Hazel asks

her.

“He can have another dose in an hour. You will be sore for a while with your injuries. Any sign of headache? Nausea?” she asks.

“No. I’m just tired, and my chest...” I feel the bandages again, wincing. Trying to move is a bad idea.

“That’s where he shot you. Lucky your brother was around to scare the intruder off,” the nurse says.

Intruder? I wonder what she’s going on about. Did Kobe tell her some bullshit story to make himself look like a hero?

Leo and Kobe appear behind her. “You two look like shit,” I tell them. Both of them have their eyes hanging out of their heads, like they haven’t slept in days.

“You should see yourself, Brother.” Kobe laughs, pointing to my fucked-up shoulder.

Leo is more stoic. “Good to see you awake,” he says with a nod. I scared him, it’s written all over his face. And Leo doesn’t scare easily.

“I’ll be back in an hour to top up your pain meds,” the nurse says, glancing at Kobe as she walks by him.

He keeps his focus on me while he waits for her to leave.

“She better not fuck with my meds because you screwed her once in the broom closet and never called her again.”

“Kobe,” Hazel chastises him, like she’s surprised to hear that’s what he did.

“She never gave me her number,” he says, trying to defend himself to Hazel. He knows not to bother with me or Leo. We know him better.

“You wouldn’t have called her anyway.” Leo tuts, closing the door so the nurses’ station and any passersby won’t hear our conversation.

**“We’ll never know.” He shrugs with a cheeky grin; we all know he wouldn’t have. He doesn’t do second dates—or first, really.**

**I look back to Hazel. She’s in an oversized suit jacket that looks like one of Kobe’s, her T-shirt blood stained. She takes my hand, lacing it with hers. “What happened with Liam?” I stutter out, remembering I left her alone with him.**

**“She used your knife like you showed her,” Kobe says proudly. “That reminds me, I cleaned this up for you.” He slips the knife out of his pocket and hands it back to her. “For you, *Sunshine*.” He smirks as he looks my way, letting me know he saw the inscription.**

**She slips it inside her shorts pocket.**

**“You did?” I ask her. I’m not surprised, but I’m proud that she went through with it.**

**She smiles bashfully. “I had an excellent teacher, showed me how to take care of myself.”**

**“Thank fuck too, since you went and nearly died on us all,” Kobe says. Leo nudges him and growls in warning for his insensitive comment.**

**Hazel glares at him, getting annoyed, but that’s just Kobe. He’s been this way since he was little. He uses humor to cover his pain. It’s his way of coping. Hazel will get used to him. If she intends to stick around, she will have to find her own way of coping.**

**“What will happen to me? Since I... you know,” she whispers, looking between me and Leo.**

**“Since Liam faked his own death two weeks ago and the paramedics believe Jett’s injuries were from a home invasion gone wrong, absolutely nothing. Kobe took care of the mess you made, so no one will know**

anything about it except who is in this room,” Leo tells her, trying to ease her mind.

She looks relieved. That would be what the nurse was talking about earlier. Trust Leo to come up with a story on the spot to cover all our asses.

“Question is, where is our buddy Detective Reader getting his intel? And how the fuck did Liam set this all up, faking his death and getting it broadcast all over the news?” asks Kobe.

“His men turned on him,” Leo said. “He was out of fucking dirty money. Someone was hiding him, still helping him.”

My brothers are right, that’s the only explanation. Someone is still on his side. Someone who knew how to find Hazel’s new apartment. Not only that, but someone with access to a bulletproof vest. “Where’s Ben?” I ask, wondering why he’s not here with the rest of us.

“He was here earlier, but he had to go down to Queen of Hearts. There was a minor security issue tonight, couple of members got out of hand. Now that you’re awake, the two of us might join him, sort out the aftermath.”

“Keep me posted. And Kobe, go make sure that nurse doesn’t spit in my food,” I tell him more seriously.

“We will.” They leave together.

Hazel watches me, her eyes haunted. Her husband might be dead and the threat gone, but she has to live with what happened forever. And what she did. I know she wanted him dead, but the reality of wanting it and actually going through with it in an attempt to save yourself is something entirely different.

“In the back of that ambulance, I thought you were going to give up on

me. There was so much blood, Jett,” she says with fear in her voice.

“Come here.” I shuffle over in the bed, wincing as I do, but I need her close. I make enough room for her to join me. Tentatively, she sits on the edge of the bed. I pull her down so she’s lying beside me and wrap my arms around her, inhaling her hair, her sweet scent. “I’m so proud of you. It wouldn’t have been easy to do what you did, but you were brave, and you saved us.”

“I wasn’t going to let him win. At least now we know he’s definitely dead. And luckily for us, Summer called Amelia when she heard the commotion, so your brothers were there to help me quickly.”

I kiss her hair. “I love you.”

“I love you too. Please don’t ever scare me like that again.”



# Chapter 36

## HAZEL

JETT CAME OUT OF the hospital two days ago, and since I refused to go back to the mansion, he's been staying in my apartment, letting me take care of him. Part of me thought I wouldn't be able to come back here after what happened, but I'm not letting Liam take anything else away from me. This is my place, and I want to stay here.

I find Jett in my bed, propped up with two pillows behind him and his laptop on his lap. "You're not supposed to be working," I chastise him. He's never going to get better if he keeps working instead of resting like the doctor told him he has to.

"How was lunch with your brother and dad?" he says, ignoring my comment, shutting his laptop.

"It was actually nice." Better than I thought it would be. My expectations were high, but as soon as I saw him, I knew the man who raised me wasn't the evil person I had made him out to be. He was an innocent bystander who had been lied to for eighteen years. My mother destroyed his life. "Dad likes

you,” I tell him. I was surprised to hear he had made such an effort with my dad in the time I was away in LA, but according to Dad, he did.

“So he should.”

“He said you’re good for me, but I’m not so sure about that.” I smirk playfully.

“Is that right.” He pulls me down into bed with him, curling his arms around me.

“Someone is feeling more energetic.” I laugh.

“That’s right.” He grabs my ass, giving it a suggestive squeeze.

“I’m pretty sure the doctor said no vigorous activity for the next month.” I slap his arm playfully, and he captures my hand, his face more serious.

“There is no way he can expect me to refrain from fucking my sexy-as-sin girl.”

His dirty words go straight to my lady parts. My playful man is back, and I can’t deny him anything after he nearly died trying to protect me. And when he calls me his girl, my heart does backflips. I grab hold of his cock, rubbing it through his track pants. “How about I take care of you then, and you relax,” I offer as a compromise, flicking my tongue out and licking along my top lip.

The look in his eyes says no fucking chance in hell. He wants it all.

A loud bang sounds at the front door. I freeze, staring back at Jett. “Who would that be?”

“Ignore it.” He pulls me toward him, kissing me.

The loud bang comes again. “Hazel!” my mother’s shrill voice calls, sending a shiver up my spine. How did she work out this is where I am living?

“Oh, shit.” I jump off the bed. “I better shut her up before she disturbs the whole building.”

I open the door in a rush. “What are you doing here?” I demand, my tone furious, but I keep my voice hushed, not wanting to alert Jett. She is the last person I want to see. I might have been able to forgive my father today for his part in what happened, because he did what he could to try and protect me. He was up against it. But her? She’s the instigator of all the bad things that have happened in my life. If I never have to see her again it would be too soon.

“What do you think? Because of you, I’m now out of money,” she slurs like she’s had one too many champagnes with the girls from her tennis club.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, and I don’t want to know. You’re not welcome here.” I go to close the door, but she shoves her foot in the way.

Her glare is icy. “After everything I did for you,” she spits angrily.

“Everything you did for me! Forcing me to marry a man you knew I couldn’t stand, to cover up your mistake. You always used to say it was me who went for bad boys, but you were talking about yourself, weren’t you. You went for Antony Acevedo when you knew you shouldn’t have and ended up with me. A mistake baby.”

“You have to understand, Hazel, I made some bad choices. It was one night of letting loose and giving into Antony after nearly six months of him harassing me. Turning up to my work, talking to me every shift, getting to know me, and eventually I gave in to him. I went out with him just one night, but that was all it took. I got pregnant with you,” she says sadly, and I see it. I ruined her life.

All those times growing up when I thought she hated me, I was right. She did. My heart breaks again for the little girl who didn’t understand why her mother despised her so much. She would have done anything for her love, but little did she know, there was nothing she could have done.

“What about Dad?” I spit angrily. I can’t believe she is trying to justify all of this like she was an innocent party. She’s not the victim here.

Her face falls, she did love him. “Your father is a good man. I didn’t want to hurt him, so I kept the secret to myself. He never suspected you weren’t his. I thought it would all be okay, that I wouldn’t have to tell him anything and we could just get on with our lives. But four months later, Antony came into work, and as soon as he saw me, he knew I was pregnant with his baby.” A tear slips down her cheek. “He demanded I get rid of you,” she howls.

I gasp in shock. If the asshole weren’t already dead, he would be now. “How could he?” I glance over my shoulder down the hall to see if Summer is home, but luckily her light’s not on. After all the drama I caused last week, I don’t want to be known as the noisy neighbor causing disturbances.

Jett comes to my side. “Is everything okay?” he asks, looking over the woman falling apart in front of me.

“She’s just explaining how I destroyed her life,” I say, my words coming out colder than I expected, but what did she think she would get coming here to see me.

His arm snakes around my waist protectively. “This should be good.” He looks my mother over, waiting for her to go on.

“You.” She points at him, enraged. “You’re just as bad. Why couldn’t you have just stayed away from her? She was a married woman.”

“Not happily. That should be important to her mother,” he snips, and I can tell he is trying to hold his tongue. If he really tells her what he thinks, he will pop his stitches in a rage.

I squeeze his hand. “I’ll be inside soon,” I tell him, not wanting this to turn into even more of a mess than it already is. I appreciate his support but need to deal with her alone.

He looks me over, considering what I'm saying, and I think he's going to tell me he's staying. "Okay. I'll be close by if you need me." He surprises me by trusting me to handle this situation alone. I offer him a little smile in thanks, and he disappears back inside.

She glares at him until he's out of sight, then her eyes return to my face. "You have to understand, Hazel. He didn't want any evidence of his affair. He didn't want me coming to him for money. I assured him I wouldn't need to, both your father's relatives and mine were quite well off, and your dad was already working in the force. I didn't need anything from Antony, but he didn't believe me. Apparently, this wasn't the first time something like this had happened to him."

"Are you kidding me?" I rear back. Are there other kids out there like me? The thought is more than disturbing.

"I refused to get rid of my baby, I already loved you. There was no way I was giving you up. So, he came up with a deal I couldn't refuse." She shakes her head as if remembering that night. "You have to understand, I had no other choice." Her tortured eyes meet mine, she's telling the truth for once in her life.

"There is always another choice. You could have agreed then got the hell out of here with Dad. Moved away where he couldn't find us. There had to be another way."

"You know how powerful the Acevedos are. That wasn't possible. He would have killed us both."

"At the very least, why didn't you tell me what was going on? Try and prepare me for how my life was about to change. I should have been told who my father was. You just shipped me off to Liam."

"Honestly, when Antony was killed, I thought we might have gotten away

with it. That I could stop the contract when the time came.”

I narrow my eyes at her. I will not feel sorry for this woman. “But it was too late, wasn’t it, because Liam had been told, and that’s when he started watching me, bringing me home when I was out with friends, and telling the rest of the town I belonged to him.”

“Yes. He was a part of your life long before you married him. From the moment he found out about the contract, he became obsessed with you.”

She’s so full of shit. Her own story doesn’t even add up. “So, you had time to prepare me, but you chose not to. Why?” I demand, my tone furious.

“When your father found out about the contract, he spent every last cent we had trying to get us out of it. He was causing problems with the Kings, and I had to do what I could to defuse the situation. So, I got Liam to force him out of town, under the proviso that he wouldn’t hurt your dad. Liam would be able to marry you, and he would take care of us all financially.”

“This was all about money,” I snap. Dad spent their inheritance trying to save me, and she was looking for another way to keep her cushy lifestyle.

“No, I didn’t want anyone to get hurt,” she stutters out.

“Bullshit,” I fume. She knew she was throwing me to the lions, and she still did it. This was about more than Dad getting hurt.

Her guilty eyes meet mine, and I glare back at her. “There was no money left, it was accepting his help or end up on the streets,” she whimpers.

“I would choose the streets any day. You know he beat the shit out of me any chance he got, right? Your only daughter. He could have killed me. And you were concerned about keeping up appearances, making sure you had the funds to go to your country club and look good in front of all your friends. It’s disgusting. You are a disgrace of a parent. And now that your cash cow has dried up, you’re here to... what? Blame it all on me? Beg for help?”

Her eyes plead with me to understand. “This is your fault. If you had just come back to him, we could have worked it all out.”

I see red. She’s the most narcissistic person I have ever met. I see how she ended up having an affair with Antony Acevedo. She would have loved the attention he was giving her, thrived on it. He would have made her feel special, but him being the pig he was, he was just using her for a quick fuck. And she now blames me. “Can you hear yourself?” I laugh wryly. Is she fucking kidding me? “You have a problem, you need help.” Something dawns on me, and I realize there is more to this. “It was you, wasn’t it?”

Her eyes flick nervously from side to side, and she backs away from me. “What?”

“You’re the one who helped Liam these past two weeks. You had him holed up in your place just waiting for the right time to strike. What was the plan then, drag me back home to your place with the two of you? Then what?”

“He said he loved you,” she stutters, walking backwards and tripping over her own feet, falling back on the hallway floor.

I glare down at her on the ground, messing up her perfect white pants. Karma is a bitch, and it just kicked her in the ass. “So did you, but people lie. Good luck with your new life.” I turn and walk away, hoping I never have to see her face again.

“Hazel, please. What am I supposed to do?” she pleads with me.

“Get a job like the rest of us and join the real world,” I say with smug satisfaction in my voice.

She looks back at me, mortified.

“Or don’t and find some other poor bastard to take you in. I don’t care.” I slam the door, finding Jett waiting for me.



“Are you okay?” he asks, his voice filled with concern.

I take a breath. My hands are shaky from the altercation and everything she just admitted to me, but I am okay. “Yeah, I’m going to be just fine.” I snake my hands around his neck. “Because I have you.” I kiss him with everything I have. I love this man so much, and I know he adores me back just the same. I found him under the most unlikely circumstances. I used to think I was so unlucky for the way my life was playing out, but now I know I had to go through it all so I could find him.

He cups my face in his hands, forcing me to look up at him. “And I have you. I’m going to love you till the day I die, Sunshine,” he says more seriously, and I feel the weight of his words.

I slip my hand down the front of his pants. “Where were we?” I smile against his lips, needing to lighten the tension and make my man feel better. I know he will.

# Epilogue

## HAZEL-Six months later

RUBY, AND I, ALONG with a very-pregnant Piper cheer from our place in the front row. The stadium crowd is going nuts, the atmosphere totally charged with excitement and anticipation. Fans eagerly await the action to continue.

Round three is called, and Jett looks right at me and winks. This is it. It begins, and the buzz in the arena is palpable. There's a sense that anything can happen; it's been so even until now. My stomach churns, I'm so nervous for him. Fans are chanting his name, *Heartbreaker, Heartbreaker*, on repeat. It's funny, I used to hate that name, but now I see it for what it is. A silly nickname the fans and media gave him. It's a persona, not the real him. Only I know the real man behind the name.

Jett comes out stronger than he was the first two rounds and hits Zamora with a Heartstrike, his signature move; a lightning-fast spinning backfist that leaves opponents dazed and disoriented—and it works like a charm. Zamora rocks on the spot, looking like he might go down.

Piper grabs my arm. “This is it,” she gasps nervously.

Jett doesn't waste any time before wrestling him to the ground, taking him in a rupture hold, and choking him with an armbar. Zamora puts up a fight, but Jett is stronger, and Zamora can't escape the hold he has. He taps out.

The three of us jump up and cheer for Jett. The crowd roars, the stadium erupting with pride for the hometown hero. I turn to the girls, the three of us screaming in excitement. "He did it!"

The announcer calls the fight, giving the title to Jett. Kobe runs into the octagon, throwing his arms around his brother, celebrating with him. Jett finds me in the crowd, giving me a sexy-as-fuck smirk, telling me I'm going to get it when we get home. And I can't fucking wait.

"You coming to the back?" Piper asks the two of us.

We nod, and she takes my hand, and I grab Ruby's as we move off through the still-chanting crowd.

Rob, Jett's head of security, is waiting by the door to his dressing room. "Ladies." He nods, standing aside for us to enter the room.

As soon as Jett sees me, he runs for me, picking me up. "I fucking did it," he says, spinning me around in celebration.

I kiss him. "And you were amazing," I tell him, so proud. He's now the middleweight champion. All the blood, sweat, and tears of the last six months have been worth it. When he first told his doctor that he intended to fight so soon after his injury, he was hit with a hard no. He was deflated, but by the next morning, he had a plan—to prove the doctor wrong. He wanted this so badly, and he did everything he could to make it happen. I kiss him again. So proud of his determination.

Kobe cracks open the fridge and hands out beers to the crew that's gathered.

"To Jett," he says with a proud smile.

“To *us*, we make an unstoppable team.” Jett clinks his bottle with his brother’s. “And kid, you’re next.” He clinks bottles with Ben.

“Sure am,” Ben agrees. He has his own fight booked for later in the year. And I think after this one, Jett’s plan is to put his focus on Ben. He needed this fight for himself, but now he wants to help him.

I look up at my man, so happy. “We both got what we wanted this year.” I beam, so happy for him.

“Not everything yet.” He smirks, looking toward Piper. I know what he wants, a baby, but I’m way too young, and I’m doing so well at work. He knows I’m not ready yet.

“You know my answer to that.”

“In a few years.” He kisses me.

“That’s right. You gotta put a ring on this first,” I say, pointing to my ring finger with a sassy smile.

“That might be happening sooner than you think.”

My eyes go wide. Is he just teasing me or is he for real?

A knock comes at the door, so loud it can be heard over the commotion of our celebration. The door opens, and we all turn to face it, seeing a guy in a suit I don’t recognize.

“Detective Reader, what can we do for you?” purrs Leo, a fake pleasantness in his tone.

“Sorry to interrupt the festivities. Congratulations, Jett,” the detective calls in our direction. Alongside of him stands Bella, one of the girls who has been working shifts at Queen of Hearts. The boys had me make friends with her under suspicions that she might be an undercover cop. Looks like they were right. It’s disappointing cause I was growing to really like the girl. And Kobe, well, he more than likes her.

Jett glares at Reader with something like a snarl. He hates this guy. I know I have heard the name thrown around a bit but never actually met him, and since everything that went down with Liam six months ago, we haven't had any need for the police. The war that Liam and his brother started died with them, and all the drug problems that went with it also disappeared.

“Sorry to break up the party. I'm Detective Reader, and this is Constable Arabella Hamilton with the Palm Springs narcotics department.

Kobe looks at the girl, disappointment registering on his features.

“What's going on?” Kobe asks her, his voice filled with concern.

She looks guilty as fuck. There is something more going on here. He was aware she could be a cop, but he's acting shocked that she's here alongside the detective. I watch the scene play out like a movie, everyone in the room too shaken to do anything but gawk.

“Kobe Rivera, you are under arrest for theft of police property,” Constable Hamilton says, approaching him. “The Acevedo little black book has been found in your possession.”

Kobe looks to Leo, a knowing look passing between them. She forces Kobe to spin around. “Please place your hands behind your back,” she asserts, her Aussie accent coming through strong. She locks the handcuffs firmly in place behind his back.

“You have the right to remain silent, anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford one, one will be provided for you,” she tells him. “Do you understand your rights?” she asks, her voice tight like she's almost ashamed of what she's doing. And she should be. He doesn't deserve this.

“This sounds like a bullshit charge, Reader,” Jett snaps, furious. “You have no evidence to prove he has that book.”

The officer looks at Arabella, and her head drops.

“We have all the evidence we need. We got a warrant to search the club while you were all down here at the fight. The lovely lady behind the bar cooperated with all our requests.” He smirks arrogantly. This guy is disgusting. “Jett, Leo.” He nods his head.

Then they walk off with Kobe in cuffs. He’s quiet, too quiet for Kobe.

“We will fix this, Kobe. You will be out by tonight,” Leo calls as they take him away.

“What the fuck,” Jett snaps, running a hand through his hair, obviously frustrated. The high we were on after watching him win is now replaced with the sick sinking feeling that we’re all about to be fucked over. “I fucking told you, didn’t I. You don’t make deals with asshole cops. Kobe thought he had her under control, but fucking Reader has had it in for us since the beginning,” Jett snaps at Leo.

“Piper, you still got your dad’s lawyer, Justin’s, number? Call him, get him down the station as soon as possible,” he tells her, all business. “I’ll call Kobe’s friend Caleb, see what he knows.” Leo grabs his phone, stalking from the room, furious.

I feel the heavy weight of disappointment for him. Arabella is the only girl I have ever seen Kobe look at like he wanted something more. You could see it in his eyes, he really liked her. A text pings on my phone, and I check it.

**Bella:** I’m so sorry.

That’s all it says. What the hell. I know there is no way she wanted to arrest him today. What’s really going on?

The End

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**Find out what happens to Kobe in his and Arabella's book, Undercover  
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*Undercover*  
**DESIRES**

**A. K. STEEL**

# About The Book

**ARABELLA HAMILTON. INDEPENDENT. SHARP-WITTED.  
Strikingly beautiful. An undercover cop, and I'm her prime target.**

The Australian beauty, with glowing skin and hair spun from silk, thinks she has me wrapped around her little finger, hanging on her every word. In a way she does, so captivatingly beautiful, I couldn't look away from her if I wanted to. But what she doesn't know is that I have eyes and ears everywhere in this town. I'm aware she took a job at my club to manipulate me. What she fails to realize is that you can't play the ultimate playboy.

**I don't get close to women for one reason—they can't be trusted. And this one is no different.**

In my experience, the more attractive, the more deceitful, and this one... well, she takes the cake. But I'll indulge her game. How does the saying go? Keep your friends close and your enemies closer. Yeah, I'm going to keep Arabella really close.

She won't be able to resist my charm for long. And when I have her right where I want her, I'll expose her for who she is. Only problem is, the closer I

get to her, the more entangled I become in her web of lies. The lines get blurred, and I don't know what's real anymore.

The only girl I have ever wanted something real with, I can't truly have. Not only that, but if I let her, she will destroy me and everything my brothers and I have worked so hard for.

# Chapter 1

## ARABELLA

I'VE NEVER LET FEAR stand in the way of what I want. I seize life by the horns and ride that stubborn beast until it throws me off. And when it does, I glare right back at it, dust myself off, and mount up again, ready for another go.

I am in a standoff with the most repugnant man I've encountered since my recent move to Palm Springs three days ago. His eyes bore into mine, nostrils flaring as he assesses me. I arch an eyebrow, baffled by his behavior. This has to be one of the oddest job interviews I've ever experienced.

It shouldn't even be an interview at all. My training officer transferred me to this department after I successfully completed my probation at the LA Police Department. The job is already mine, but Detective Reader insists on this one-on-one interview before they complete the paperwork. I have to bite my tongue to resist giving him a piece of my mind. I can't stand the judgmental way he's scrutinizing me. He's clearly an old-school cop, a my-way-or-the-highway type.

"You won't do," he grumbles, his irritation palpable.

“Excuse me?” I snap, unable to hold back my annoyance. He may be the one calling the shots here, but I’ve fought tooth and nail to secure this position. I’m not about to walk away just because he believes I don’t meet his standards, whatever those might be.

“A 5’6” leggy blonde is not having the last position on my team,” he remarks condescendingly. “You can go back to LA. They can find you something more suited, although I don’t know what they’ll do with you there. You’d be better off as a…” He trails off, his glare intensifying. “Anything but this.”

I shove my chair back, the sound of it scraping on the cheap linoleum floor barely registering in my ears. I’m outraged, and I spring to my feet, ready for a fight. “Are you kidding me right now? You sexist old prick. I have just as much balls as any of the other men out there. Just because I wasn’t born with them doesn’t mean I didn’t grow a pair and intend to damn well use them.” My face burns with heat, and I’ve never felt so insulted so quickly after meeting someone in my life. I’ve been through the academy, field training, and probation, accumulating all the experience required for this position.

“See, even the accent? I can’t take you seriously. It’s like you’re playing a character in a movie. No one out there will respect you.” He gestures disdainfully to the office cubicles. “You can’t be a part of our team.” He sneers, attempting to dismiss me.

“Even the accent is a problem for you? You can’t take me seriously because I sound different?” I gesture toward the office cubicles. “That’s incredibly close-minded. Hit the jackpot with this station, didn’t I?” I cross my arms over my chest, take a deep breath, and stare him down. Does this sort of tactic usually work for him, hurling insults at a recruit until they retreat with their tail between their legs? Not with this little blonde chick. “I’ve got news

for you. I have no plans to leave, so you should find me a spot on your team, or I will go over your head.”

“Sit down, Constable,” he bellows, his voice echoing off the walls. “No one talks to me in my office with such disrespect.”

I abruptly drop back down into my seat, realizing that I’ve already pushed my luck. But he started it by being such an insufferable jerk. The truth is, no matter how important this job is to me, I’ve never been one to hold my tongue when someone is out of line; I have to call them out. And he was out of line.

“Stay here,” he orders, pointing at me as though I’m a misbehaving child in need of control. He stands and storms out of the room, his heavy footsteps causing the water in a glass on his desk to ripple, much like the approach of a Jurassic Park dinosaur.

Where else would I go? It’s not like I have a desk or a partner here yet. My training officer gave me the heads-up that Detective Reader could be a little abrupt. The two of them worked together a few years back, but he said once you get used to him, he’s easy enough to work with. I’m not so sure I believe him anymore.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath, attempting to rein in the rage bubbling up inside of me. Deep, calming breaths, just as my therapist Cindy taught me all those years ago. “Don’t screw this up, Arabella,” I remind myself. “This is your dream job. You’ve worked your ass off at the academy, graduating with top grades, to get this far. Don’t ruin it all now by pissing off your superior. A few years taking orders, rack up some hours, and then you can aim for the promotion you want.”

When I approached my superior at the LAPD about this promotion, I thought he would tell me I wasn’t ready yet. But he was supportive and on



board from the moment I mentioned it. I was over the moon. As it was, I was running out of ideas for how to maintain my current living conditions, and this job in Palm Springs was my solution.

Outside the office, I hear things being slammed around and an enraged voice shouting profanity. Detective Reader. It sounds like he's having one hell of a bad day. Through the venetian blinds of the office window, I spot him on the phone, wearing a hole in the ratty carpet as he paces back and forth. I wouldn't want to be the person on the receiving end of that call; they're catching an earful. He hangs up the phone and runs a meaty hand over his sweaty forehead. He's perspiring profusely. Sure, it's heading out of summer, and the desert can get scorching this time of year, but it's not that hot today, and this building is air-conditioned. The man needs to lose his suit jacket to cope.

He marches back into his office, slamming his mobile phone onto the desk. His face is redder than the desert sand, and I can practically see the steam coming from his ears. The stench of sweat lingers in the air from where he passed me. I glance over my shoulder, briefly contemplating if I should call for medical assistance. He looks like he might have a heart attack at any second. The humming cubicles behind me continue as though this kind of display from him is normal. No one even glimpses our way.

"Look, I think we've gotten off on the wrong foot," I finally speak up, doing my best to bite back my anger and frustration. "I graduated top of my class, and I know I might not look the part you were expecting, but I can do this job. Contact my boss in Los Angeles for a reference if you're not sure." I don't want to be shipped off somewhere else. I may have only been in Palm Springs for a few days, but I'm already quite fond of this place. I have grand plans for Nanna's house, and it's geographically far enough away from my

old life that I should be able to move on without being constantly hassled. This is the change I need, and I can already feel it.

He slumps into his leather office chair, which creaks under his weight. His beady eyes scrutinize me, scanning me from head to toe. I bristle, wondering if he's going to make another offensive comment.

But then, to my surprise, he taps his fingers along the table, as if he's had an idea. A wry smile forms on his lips. "Right. I have a job for you," he says, sounding more confident, even pleased with himself.

I relax a little. He has a place for me, and with time, I'm determined to prove just how capable I am.

"It's not technically narcotics, but it's related—an undercover assignment. You'll be working alone and reporting back to me directly," he explains.

Working alone? He's gone from not wanting me here to trusting me to work without a partner. "Okay. What are the details?"

He motions toward the door, and I stand up to close it before taking my seat again. "Have you heard of the Rivera brothers?" he inquires.

"No, sorry," I respond. "I only moved to town three days ago. Are they a band of some sort?"

"Funny," he remarks with a forced smile. But I wasn't trying to be funny, I have no clue who he's talking about. "They're the motherfuckers who think they run this town." He goes on, his dislike for them obvious. "They own half of Palm Springs and treat it like their own personal playground, doing whatever the hell they like. Drug trafficking, cybercrime, money laundering, corruption, prostitution, protection rackets, illegal gambling, loan sharking. You name it and I'm sure they are involved in it one way or another. And it's time to bring their organization crashing down."

My eyes narrow. "Organization?" Is he talking about an underground

syndicate, a mafia-type organization? This feels way above my pay grade.

“Are you game? I need assurance of unwavering dedication for this job. We’re dealing with Palm Springs’ most notorious trio here.”

Now I’m listening. He’s serious. He wants me to help him bring down these guys. “I’m up for it. What do I need to know?” I ask enthusiastically, ready to make a start on my first assignment. This is the chance I’ve been longing for. I’m desperate for it. Since childhood, I’ve aspired to be a police officer like my father, despite the naysayers. I wasn’t smart enough, fit enough, or emotionally stable enough after what happened to him. People gave me the same look as Detective Reader. A blonde bombshell can’t do a man’s job. Their lack of confidence in me only fueled my determination to prove them wrong and make my father proud. I showed them at my last station, and now I’ll show Detective Reader as well.

“I don’t know why I didn’t think of this sooner. You’re perfect for this job. You look just like one of the club bunnies that follows them around. Here is the file we have on them. They primarily work at their club, Queen of Hearts, but occasionally at The Joker, a bar on the outskirts of town. I need a man or woman on the inside, watching their every move,” he emphasizes, narrowing his eyes.

“Club bunnies? Who are these guys?” I ask out loud, trying to understand more about this strange assignment. “How do I do that?” I expect he’ll give me more detailed instructions for a job as important as this.

“You’re a smart girl, top of your class, right? Work it out,” he responds, tossing a USB stick across the table to me. I snatch it up, my mind racing with questions. “Keep this to yourself. I cannot trust everyone in this office, so until I identify who might be collaborating with the Riveras, we must keep

this case confidential between us... Got it?" His beady eyes narrow in warning. He's intimidating, and I definitely don't want to get on his bad side.

He can't trust other officers working with us? That thought is a little unnerving. What kind of organization are these boys running. Guess he did list off corruption as one of their skills. I nod in agreement with him. I can work this out, I know I can. But why do I feel like a lamb being thrown to the wolves? Is it the lip twitch or the constant finger drumming?

"Follow me," he snaps, making me jump. I stand and follow him through the cubicles until we reach an empty one. "This is your spot. I want a progress report next Monday. Don't disappoint me, or I will have you transferred," he warns, with literal spit flying from his mouth. Then he storms off to ruin another poor soul's day.

I wipe my face to remove the saliva and slump down in my chair, pondering what I've just gotten myself into. He didn't mention murder, but I can only imagine that would top the list. These guys are into some serious shit.

"What did you do to him?" A young guy, who doesn't look much older than me, rolls his chair back, leaning toward me with an outstretched hand. "I'm Caleb Cross," he says, offering a friendly smile. He looks pleasant, sharply dressed in a navy-blue suit, with neat light brown hair kept short and warm eyes.

Thank God they're not all like the boss. I shake his hand firmly. "Arabella Hamilton," I introduce myself with a smile.

"Nice to meet you, Arabella. You're shaking; are you okay?" He assesses me, like he actually cares.

"Yeah, I think I'm just in shock. Is he always so unpleasant?" I ask, eager for any information that might help me navigate this new workplace.

“Actually, I think you caught him on a good day.” Caleb laughs, trying to lighten the mood and make me feel more comfortable.

I give him a worried look. “If this is his good day, I can’t wait to see how bad it gets,” I mutter sarcastically as I open my computer and plug in the USB with the Rivera file on it.

“Just ignore him,” he says with a shrug. “That’s what I do.”

“Noted.” I nod, appreciating the wisdom from a colleague. He rolls his chair back to his desk, and I follow suit, diving into the file and preparing to immerse myself in the complex underworld of the Riveras.

An array of images of the Rivera brothers stare back at me. No mugshots in sight, these are all surveillance or candid images taken from someone who was watching from afar. I study each of them. Leo is the oldest of three brothers, according to the file. Well dressed in a suit, with dark, almost-black hair and an icy glare that tells me he doesn’t mince his words. He’s the one in charge.

I click over to the next brother, Jett. His coloring is lighter, and he has a more athletic look about him, always in a T-shirt and jeans or workout gear with a cap. His eyes are more piercing than deadly, but there is something about him that still feels threatening.

Then there is Kobe, the youngest, with dark hair and brown eyes, but they’re not threatening; his eyes smile, and he carries a playfulness to him. In all the images of him he’s laughing or smirking while he talks. It’s easy to see why Detective Reader referred to their followers as “club bunnies.” These men are incredibly attractive, ruggedly handsome, with impressive buff physiques.

Despite the file being created a few years ago, there are no charges against them. Detective Reader obtained a search warrant for Queen of Hearts after a

series of drug overdoses resulted in deaths about eight months ago, but the search yielded nothing of use.

I focus on the images of their club, Queen of Hearts. It appears dark and moody, but also quite expensive-looking, with gold trim and red velvet couches. These guys are far from your average underworld bosses. Curious, I jump online to look into them further. Their businesses mainly comprise of clubs and restaurants, all quite popular within the community. Newspaper stories describe their venues as the place to be on a Friday night, with lines stretching for two blocks as eager patrons wait for their chance to rub shoulders with the rich and famous. It's quite different from what I had initially pictured when Detective Reader talked about them. I had been expecting some shady-looking clubhouse run by tattooed men riding motorcycles. This is a whole new ball game.

It also seems, on top of their businesses, that the two younger brothers are heavily involved in the MMA scene, Jett as a fighter and Kobe looks to be his trainer. On the surface, they present themselves as entrepreneurs, running opulent businesses that are beloved by the community. But I'm skeptical and don't take things at face value. It's when you dig that you find the real, hidden information. The underbelly of this town and all the illegal activity they are up to. Detective Reader must be interested in the unseen, as I don't find any other motive to investigate them apart from the failed raid last year. It's like he's going off a hunch, a reputation that hasn't been justified yet.

This case already feels more complicated than I expected, and If I want to get to the bottom of what's really going on, I need to be one of them. No one knows me in this town. I'm the perfect person to slip into their world.

# Chapter 2

## ARABELLA

AFTER WAITING IN LINE for nearly an hour, with the young and beautiful people of Palm Springs, I finally reach the front of the line. I flash my best smile at the burly security guy guarding the door to Queen of Hearts. “ID,” he mutters gruffly, like my presence is an interruption to his night.

I pass him my fake ID, and he eyes me skeptically. Yes, I know I look young; I’ve heard it a million times before. Holding my breath, I wait for his decision, knowing that this ID isn’t legit. I’m undercover, and this is my alias, Bella Jones. He could kick me to the curb right now and I would have to go back to the drawing board.

He passes the ID back to me and motions with his head for me to enter the club. I breathe a sigh of relief as I pass him. This is the first step of my plan, and truthfully, the only one I had. I’m here tonight to scope out the place and look for an opportunity to get close to the Rivera brothers. I’ve dolled myself up to look like the women who frequent this kind of place, with my long blonde hair styled in loose waves down my back. I’m wearing a fitted white sheath dress that accentuates my long legs, especially when it’s teamed with



the highest stilettos my minimal wardrobe holds. I even indulged in a little makeup, with dark smoky eyes and red lips to set off the look. I look good, and it gives me the confidence I need to pull tonight off. All day, I've had one thing on my mind: bringing down the Rivera brothers. A lot is riding on this assignment, and I need to prove that I can do it. For myself and my dad.

The vibration of dance music travels through my body, and I sway my hips to the beat as I take in my surrounds. From the looks of it, downstairs is mostly a massive dance floor with the ratio of women to men seventy-thirty. The men are well dressed in suits and dress pants and the chicks wear cocktail dresses and stilettos. The waft of the kind of perfume I could never afford to own travels through the air. I have been out in some pretty fancy places in LA but never somewhere quite like this before. I can see the attraction. I feel more affluent just standing in this place.

Across the lively room I spot one of my targets at the bar, chatting up some chick who looks like a Barbie, with fake tits, fake tan, and even faker hair extensions. It's obvious from this far away that she is phony all over, but she's clearly caught his fancy. So, I guess she's doing something correctly. My boss was right; he has a type. I thank my lucky stars I wore my Wonderbra tonight, because my B cups need a little extra boost to compete.

After doing my research, I now understand why Reader assigned me to this job. These guys have a weakness for women, especially pretty ones. Everything my boss dismissed me for when I first walked into his office is precisely why I'm here. It's insulting, but I can't afford to be sensitive right now. I have the job, and I just need to prove that I'm more than just a pretty face.

Kobe Rivera exudes an irresistible charm, and it's apparent in his confident, cocky demeanor. He's undoubtedly the most attractive man in the place, and

he's well aware of it. With his two brothers off the dating market, he's practically a local celebrity, and I didn't have to wait long in the lengthy line outside the club to figure that out. Every woman under forty seems to want a piece of him. Women vie for his attention, and men regard him with a mix of jealousy and curiosity. He's the town's biggest playboy, wealthier than Elon Musk and possessing more charisma than Ryan Gosling. The world is at his feet, but I intend to bring him to his knees.

It's hard to believe my luck that this is my very first assignment. It's thrilling and scary at the same time. It also makes me wish my father was still around. I would kill to share with him what I'm doing with my life.

I approach the bar near where Kobe is standing with the doll, head held high and shoulders back, feeling confident. It's not long before the middle-aged bartender notices me. "What can I get for you, sweetheart?" He smiles kindly.

The nickname makes me cringe. "I'll have a shot of tequila. Thanks, mate," I reply, pulling up a stool so I can observe the crowd.

"Nice accent, are you Aussie?" He smirks, as if my accent makes me some sort of sparkly unicorn.

"Sure am." I smile back at him sweetly. He places my shot down in front of me and I throw it back, placing the empty glass on the bar. From this spot I can see the entire room. The place is packed, and it's even more noticeable from here. It's a Friday night, and the dance floor is pumping with sweaty bodies rubbing up against one another. There is a roped-off golden staircase that leads to a mezzanine level. It's dark and mysterious up there, and I wonder what you have to do to get into that part of the club. I bet that's where all the action is.

"She'll have another," a deep male voice says from behind me.

I glance over my shoulder to see Mr. Smooth himself. Man, the accent works like a charm. It's like fucking catnip to these shmucks. He was chatting up Bimbo Barbie five seconds ago. "You're too kind." I flash my teeth in a sugary-sweet smile.

Our bartender—Henry, according to his name tag—places another shot in front of me. Kobe gives me a look like he's challenging me to drink it. I suck it back. My lips twitch with the burn as it slides down. Challenge accepted. Bet I could drink this pussy under the table. I have been shooting tequila since I was seventeen.

"What's your name? I haven't seen you in my bar before?" His grin is sexy as sin. He's used that line before, and he knows it works. Chicks probably flock to him over it. *His bar*. I want to roll my eyes, but I stop myself.

"You wouldn't have. I flew in yesterday. This is my first American bar. Did you just say you own the place?" I look at him, wide-eyed. "Wow, I'm impressed," I gush, playing along.

He taps the bar. "Another, Henry. And two for me, I need to catch up."

"You're playing a dangerous game, my friend," I tell him with a chuckle. This was too easy. He's ditched Barbie and pulls up a chair beside me, clearly fascinated.

"I'm up for the challenge."

"I'm sure you are." I grin. It's hard not to. He's a sexy mother fucker, even if I know what's really behind those warm brown eyes.

He leans in closer, and his scent hits my nostrils; he smells divine. Fresh, like body wash and expensive fabric. "You flew in from Australia yesterday? What brings you here? Family, friends?" His eyes light up when he talks in a charming boy-next-door kind of way that makes me feel instantly comfortable around him.

“Neither. I needed a change of scenery. Things at home were boring. I wanted to explore the world, maybe learn a little about myself.” I shrug like it’s no big deal.

He raises a brow; he likes that answer. “How long are you here for?” He runs his hand up my thigh.

I swallow hard, his touch going right to my lady parts. He’s smooth, so damn smooth. “As long as I want. I have a work visa. I was hoping to find a job. Stay for a while in Palm Springs, then move on when I’m bored again.” I try to act like I’m easygoing, a drifter type, happy to blow in and out with the wind. It couldn’t be further from the truth, but I like the idea of being this girl. She sounds fun and reckless. The type of chick a guy like Kobe would be interested in getting to know.

His hand remains on my leg as he watches me talk, nodding along like I’m the most fascinating person in the room. “What kind of work can you do? I run a few businesses here in town. I’m sure I could find you something if you’re looking.”

My lips turn up at the side, excited at the prospect. This is all going way too easily. “I was hoping for some bar work. That’s what I was doing back home while I saved for my trip.” I look up at him like he could be my hero.

“You fill those bartender jobs you had advertised?” he calls over his shoulder in Henry’s direction.

“Yesterday.” He shrugs apologetically.

Kobe rubs his stubbly jaw. His eyes run the length of my body, from my long blonde hair right down my fitted white sheath dress, to the silver stiletto heels on my feet. Then back to my eyes. He smiles a knowing smile. It’s an *‘I’m going to get you a job so you’re so appreciative you suck my cock for the opportunity’* kind of smile.

“What?” I say playfully, fluttering my lashes.

“You want to work here?” he asks, sounding a little too excited by the idea.

“Looks like I’m too late,” I say with a pout, trying to show my disappointment.

He stands, holding out a hand. “Come with me.”

I glance at Henry, wondering what he has in store for me. Henry shrugs again like he has no idea.

“I won’t bite, sugar. You want a job? Come with me, I’ll get you one.” His dark eyes challenge me to trust him.

What kind of job is he about to offer me? The list of criminal activities Detective Reader gave me plays through my head again. I swallow the nervous lump in my throat. “Okay,” I answer him tentatively. Slipping my hand in his, I feel anything but okay. Electricity buzzes between us. Something unexpected. I put it down to anxiety. I act confident on the outside, but really, the prospect of doing something like this tonight scares the hell out of me. If these guys are as dangerous as Detective Reader thinks, I need to be careful. But something in the way Kobe looks at me makes me want to trust him.

He guides me through the busy club of dancing partygoers to the roped-off area with the upstairs lit in gold. He nods at the two security guards, and they let us pass. They watch me with a scrutiny I don’t like. Have they already worked out who I am?

I climb the stairs with my hand still in his. It feels strangely comfortable when I know it shouldn’t. And that makes me feel very uneasy. I don’t do random hookups; I don’t go to bars and hold strange men’s hands. I know this is an undercover mission to work out my way into their world, but I

agreed to come with him so easily, and that sends a flush of panic running through me.

This floor is larger than it looks from downstairs, with a number of different sections. We walk past a couple of girls dancing on an elevated stage for a small gathering of suited men, and Kobe stops when we get to another bar. This one is fancier than the main bar downstairs. There are only women working behind the lit-up showcase of expensive liquor. All attractive, super-model types. Tall, with their long hair in neat high ponytails. Their black silk shirts have plunging necklines that don't leave a lot to the imagination, the lace of their bras showing. Their skirts are short and fitted. They are all stunningly sexy. So much that I can't help but stare at them.

"Wait here," he tells me, leaving me by the bar as he slides behind it, straight over to a pretty brunette with tattoos running up her arms. He drops his head, whispering in her ear, and she smirks playfully. Her eyes come to me, and she nods.

He returns, walking toward me with so much swagger, if I weren't trying to play along, I would have to laugh out loud. He hands me a cocktail, something green, then motions for me to take a seat in one of the plush red velvet booths. He sits across from me. "Xavier will have you up here in our elite lounge."

"Huh?" I ask, confused.

"You want a bar job? You can work up here. Be one of the elite girls."

I glance back over at the other stunners. I know I'm attractive, but I'm not that kind of attractive, and they are all wearing practically nothing. "Um, I don't think I would fit in here," I say, not sure how else to put it. I know I need a job here so I can start investigating them, but as one of the elite girls,

it's just not going to work. He would see right through me instantly. I need to fit in, not stand out.

His eyes roam over my body leisurely. He takes his time checking out every part of me. Heat warms my cheeks under his assessment. Why do I want his approval? "You would be the pick of them all," he says smoothly, and I don't know why, but his attention makes me feel all warm inside.

I like his eyes on me. He's so handsome, and when he tells me he finds me attractive, it makes me feel special. That must be his game. Make them feel special so he can take what he wants. He's for real. He wants me to work up here. What would that position even be? I have read about this club and its private rooms. It's one thing the boss wants investigated. "What would the job involve?"

"Working behind the bar. There are other opportunities for you to make more money, topless waitress, stripping, or spending time in the elite rooms, but that's entirely up to you. The job I'm offering is bartender."

I can feel my eyes widen as he lists off the other jobs in this place, and I wonder what kind of money those positions pay. Not that I would be tempted to take them up, I'm just curious. "Would I have to wear that?" I motion to one of the other girls serving a drink to a table of men in suits. As she bends over in her tall heels, I can practically see her underwear. If she's even wearing any.

His eyes hold mine, and I can tell he's picturing it. "You would look sexy as sin in that uniform."

*Uniform*, it could hardly be called that. "Um..." I think about it. Can I really do this? The job posting I saw in the paper, for working downstairs, looked a hell of a lot more up my alley. Less intimidating.

"Unless you want to work Tuesdays? Tuesdays we have topless waitress

night.” He has a menacing gleam in his eyes as he says it.

“Not available on Tuesdays,” I blurt out, making it clear where I stand on the topless thing. Wearing a skimpy outfit is one thing, but having my tits out on full display is another matter entirely.

He shrugs like it’s my loss. “The hourly rate up here is twice what it is downstairs, \$40 an hour, and the tips are generous. This part of the club is for members only, exclusive. The patrons expect a certain type of service and anonymity, and in return, they reward the girls who work here generously.”

I take a gulp of my cocktail. It tastes like a margarita with a little Midori added, loaded with alcohol but delicious. “For just serving them drinks?” I ask again, making sure I’m not about to sign myself up for one of the stripping jobs or some sex-on-demand kind of arrangement. Reader mentioned prostitution; is that what goes on behind these walls?

He scoffs at me like he can read my mind. “That’s right. When you look like that,” he motions toward me like I’m something special, “they would be ecstatic to have you serve them all night. Don’t get me wrong sugar plum, I’m sure they will offer you more substantial amounts to visit one of our private rooms or give them a lap dance, but you don’t have to do anything that you’re not comfortable with. The job I’m offering you is just serving drinks. If you can handle that, then it’s yours.”

My heart hammers in my chest, adrenaline coursing through my veins mixed with the alcohol. I’ve never done anything like this before. Sure, I worked in a bar back in LA while I was doing my training at the academy, but this is something different entirely. This place is like a playground for the rich men in this town. Even contemplating his offer feels a bit reckless. But my real job hangs in the balance if I can’t secure an in, and he’s offering me one wrapped up in a nice paycheck as well. One I truly need after the mess I



have myself in financially. If the clientele are the type who have a pricey membership, then I'm sure this place would be a playing field for all the illegal dealings the brothers have going on. I could see deals taking place in dark corners and find out what really happens in those rooms. If stuff goes down, I'll be here to witness it firsthand. I need this opportunity, so I'm going to have to pull up my big-girl panties and work out how to become one of them. "What did you say your name was?" I ask him.

He smiles with a sexy confidence that makes my belly flutter. He knows he has me. His offer is too good to be true. "Kobe Rivera." He holds out his hand for me to shake. "And you are?"

"Bella." I smile sweetly, wishing I had even a fraction of his self-assuredness. Though I suppose having most of the town either intimidated by you or indebted to you would naturally instill such confidence.

He keeps his hand in mine, staring right into my eyes. "Well, Bella, no last name. What will it be? You coming to work for me or not? I can assure you this is a fun place to work, the elite girls are treated like the queens they are. We run themed nights, live entertainment, gaming nights, and four times a year we do a charity auction."

I pull my hand free, rolling my lips. This might be the most stupid thing I have ever done, but I don't see any other way of getting inside this organization. I clink my glass with his. "To trying something new." I throw back the rest of my cocktail.

"And maybe learning something about yourself." He winks. And the way he says my words from earlier and the look in his eyes, oh my God, that look says he wants to be the something new I try. And damn, if I didn't know who he really was, I would be all for it. He could be just the type to help me move on from my ex. God knows I have been trying, but back home it was

impossible with Wyatt so close by. I felt like every time I tried, he was right there looking over my shoulder.

I stand in a rush. Kobe makes my stomach do somersaults in a fun way I haven't experienced in so long. I need to call it a night before I agree to doing something really stupid with him. Something my body has been begging me to do since he sat down with me at the main bar. This is work. Just a way in. I have to convince myself. He looks at every girl the way he is me right now, it's part of his appeal. It's his thing, using his good looks to charm and get what he wants. *Don't fall for his façade, Arabella, you're smarter than that.*

"I should get going," I say, feeling the effects of the alcohol more than I thought I would. What is in this drink? "When do you want me to start?"

"Tomorrow. Three. I'll show you round. Then you can work the early shift so Xavier can show you the ropes. She's the elite floor manager."

I slide myself out of the booth. "Okay. Thanks for the drinks. And the job."

He follows me, standing before me, eyes meeting mine and lingering for longer than they should. He holds out a hand for me to shake. "Look forward to working with you, Bella."

I slip mine into his and feel it again. Electricity. His eyes light up with excitement. He feels it too.

I reclaim my hand and wander away from him, letting the beat of the music carry me back through the club down the stairs and past the main floor. I'm in a daze. What the hell just happened? I can see why that man is so dangerous. He's gorgeous and charismatic and all kinds of swoony. I would have sucked his dick and been grateful for the opportunity. Probably right there at the table if he'd asked me to.

What the hell has come over me?

I shake my head and walk faster. I need to take a shower and perhaps book

a doctor's appointment for a head examination, because something came over me tonight that I don't understand. And I don't like it. I pride myself on being in control. I have to be. This job can be life and death, and tonight, I let the charming Kobe Rivera make me forget my training.

Never again.

# Chapter 3

## KOBE

**IT'S ALMOST THREE. I roll up the sleeves of my black Egyptian cotton shirt, feeling like the cuffs are strangling my arms. Leo has our suits custom-made in Italy so they will fit over my muscles perfectly. I've only had the thing on for an hour and I feel like it's restricting my circulation. Maybe I need to take it a little easier in the gym this week. My focus should be on Jett anyway, with his next fight just around the corner.**

**In my head, I go over our session this morning. I'm impressed at how well our recruit Ben is doing with my vigorous training schedule and keeping up with security shifts in the club. He's a mini-Jett, and I can see him following his footsteps in no time. I need to look into scheduling him a fight. I make a note in my daybook then lock up my office before strolling through the elite floor of Queen of Hearts. The place smells of disinfectant, the cleaning crew having only just left.**

**I lean over the railing, watching as the sexy Australian girl I met last night strolls through my club, glancing around at the space curiously.**

She seems totally unaware that I'm watching her from the mezzanine level above. She's dressed casually in faded skinny jeans, a white tank top, and kicks. On any other girl, this might be a rather plain outfit, but this girl has a way of making even the simplest clothes look smoking hot. Her long, silky ponytail swings as she walks, a subtle bounce in her step. I can't help but admire her confidence. She's a woman who knows who she is and what she wants from life, and that's an essential quality for the job she's agreed to take on in my club. Though she may not fully understand what she's signed up for, she will soon enough. The first shift in this place tends to make or break most girls, and if they survive the night, they typically stick around for a while.

Bella glances up and notices me, her full, luscious lips curving into a sassy smile. It's clear she's pleased to see me, and rightfully so, as I've just given her one of the best bar jobs in town. Most girls have to earn their way up here, but she's getting a unique opportunity right from the start.

"Come on up," I call down to her with a charming smile, happy to see her. Part of me thought she might be a no-show. Thought over my offer and worked out it wasn't for her.

The club is relatively quiet, with only our management staff preparing for the upcoming busy Saturday night. It's the ideal time to train a newcomer. Since she already has bar experience, I hope there won't be much to teach her, just our specific way of doing things.

"Bella, you made it, and right on time too," I say, checking my watch as she reaches the top step.

"Can't stand it when people are late." Her eyes are sharp as she takes me in.

**“Me neither,” I agree. “I’ll give you a rundown of your job expectations, then a walk-through of the club. At four pm, Xavier will start her shift, and you can shadow her for the night. She has more experience than all the other girls in the place put together, a sharp tongue, and one hell of a left hook if you ever need someone sorted out.”**

**“Good to know.” She nods, appearing impressed. And she should be. Xavier is one of the best staff members I’ve ever had, and Bella will learn a lot from her.**

**“Bar.” I motion to the bar as we walk past. She would have seen it last night, but she looked like a deer in the headlights the entire time I had her up here, so I feel like a full tour is best today. “The first door on the right is our staff headquarters; changing room with a kitchen and sitting area for all the staff on this level.” I push open the door to give her a look around. “Most of the girls hang out in here before and after their shifts. The door on the left is for the bar staff, and the right is where our dancers get ready for their shows. The one down at the end is a treatment room; feel free to book in, all the services are included in your contract.”**

**I push open the bar staff changing room, knowing no one will be in here at this hour. She follows me in, walking toward the uniforms, and she runs her hand along the soft fabric, inspecting it. “We will launder your uniform, so you’ll need to change before and after your shifts. We don’t let the girls leave this place in their uniforms for safety reasons. This is your locker, and your uniform is in there, ready to go for tonight.” The thought of seeing her in it gives me a semi. She’s going to look scorching hot. I spend a fuck-load of time around nice-looking girls but not one of them has ever had the effect on me she does. When I**

spotted her at the bar last night, I knew I had to go and talk to her. She's been on my mind since.

"What safety reasons?" she finally asks curiously, her innocence adorable. It's clear that last night was the first time she'd ever been in a place like this. Even if she's worked behind a bar before, this isn't just any bar.

"I don't know what the bar was like where you worked last, but this place is more than just pouring drinks," I explain. "You can make decent money in this line of work, baby doll, but some men will also want to take advantage of you because of it. In that uniform, you portray a certain aesthetic, and some people don't know how to take no for an answer. We do everything we can to protect our girls, and you have to keep up your end of the bargain as well. That means changing here, limiting the people who know you work at this place, and getting a lift to and from work or having one of the security staff walk you to your car."

She nods as if understanding. "That should be easy; I don't know anyone here." She laughs lightheartedly, not appearing worried by my speech. She passes the first test. Skittish girls might run for it at the thought of what takes place up here, but she seems open to it and not scared.

"Don't let that on," I say a little more seriously. "Make friends quickly with the other girls. They'll be like a family to you, and they all look out for each other. If you have any drama, let someone know. If you can't find one of them, my office is the third door on the right. I'll take care of whatever your problems are." It wouldn't be the first time I or one of the boys had to sort out a patron who was overly enthusiastic on the drink and too touchy. It's a pretty regular occurrence, but the thought of



someone being too handsy with her makes my neck twitch and my hands clench into fists. I would take pleasure in fucking up that guy.

“What was that face?” she asks, assessing me.

“I don’t want to scare you, just make you aware that we need to be careful,” I tell her, not feeling the need to tell her all our secrets just yet.

She studies me, her pretty features hardening, a hand going to her hip. “Has something happened in the past to make you so wary?” Her eyes narrow in on me.

“Nothing you need to worry about,” I respond, continuing to walk back through to the staff lounge, not wanting to dwell on the past. She follows me out, glancing around the room. “As you can see, it’s a pleasant space. If you need a break, come back here and hang out. We work long shifts, and it can get a little much out there at times. The fridge is stocked daily with drinks, fresh fruit, sandwiches, and wraps. We look after our staff.”

I notice a hint of surprise in her expression as she raises an eyebrow in response to my comment. She walks around the space, taking it all in, then stops when she notices the jar of condoms on the counter and picks it up, her lips quirked up at the sides.

“Safety first.” I smirk cheekily.

She tilts her head, assessing me. “What kind of club is this, Kobe?” Her eyes sparkle with intrigue, and I already know she’ll be the kind of girl to make it through her first shift.

“We’ll get to that, and it’s Mr. Rivera now that you work for me,” I say, motioning for her to have a seat. I take one opposite. “I have your employment contract. I just need a license to complete it. Do you have a US one yet?”

“Yes.” She feels around in her bag, pulls out her wallet, and hands me

her license.

I run my finger over it, scanning the details. “Bella Jones.” She’s twenty-five. Doesn’t look a day over twenty.

I look her over, and she smiles at me with her show-stopping grin. She’s sweet as sugar; she’s going to get a lot of attention. She looks younger, but her ID appears legit, and I should know—I see pretty decent fakes on the regular. Just to be sure, I jot down her license number so I can cross-check it with a friend in the force later tonight.

“Have a read over your contract, then I’ll show you around the club,” I say, handing her the paperwork for her to sign. As I do, our fingers touch, sending a strange tingling sensation right through my body. She blinks back at me, like she felt it too. I stare into her green eyes, lost momentarily in another dimension. Who the hell is this beauty? The same thing happened last night, and it knocked me off balance just as much.

“Better look at this thing,” she mutters, pulling her gaze away from me and focusing on the paperwork. She takes her time reading over every point.

I watch her, unable to take my eyes away for even a second. She has a dusting of freckles over her nose. Her skin is sun-kissed. “We will initially employ you casually, and if it works out, we can discuss a permanent contract.”

“Casual works for me. I’m not sure how long I’m going to stick around in Palm Springs.”

“You got a permanent address here, or are you staying with friends?” I ask her, even though I know I shouldn’t. It’s none of my business, but something makes me want to know everything about her.

**“I’m renting an apartment not too far from here. I’ll be here for at least six months.”**

**“How is it so easy for you to work in America?” I ask, feeling like something’s not quite adding up with this girl.**

**“Dual citizenship, my dad’s American,” she says as she clicks her fingers for a pen to sign the contract.**

**A little piece of the Bella puzzle falls into place.**

**“A non-disclosure agreement?” She raises a brow.**

**“We have a lot of high-profile men with membership to our elite club who wouldn’t want what they get up to here splashed along page three of the Palm Springs Times. It protects you girls just as much. All members also have to sign the same paperwork.”**

**“Oh, okay.” She glances over the paperwork again and scribbles down her signature.**

**She hands me the paperwork back. “Questions?” I ask her, knowing most girls have a ton. *How can I make more money?* is normally number one.**

**“Can you show me around now?” Her eyes twinkle with delight.**

**I stand, motioning for her to lead the way out of the room, and I am rewarded with the sway of her hips. Her ass looks incredible in those jeans. And again, I question why I didn’t try harder to get this girl into bed when I had the chance last night. I guess I was trying to do my good deed for the year. Help a damsel in distress with a job instead of a hot one-night stand. My dick sure hates me for it now, but my therapist, Maeve, will be proud. *Progress*, she will say when I see her next week.**

**“To the left are the management offices. As I said, I’m the third door on the right.”**

**“I don’t get a tour of your office?” She smiles playfully, and I’m not sure what she’s implying, but I’m sure I’ll have reason to show her my office soon enough, especially with that sassy look on her face. Makes me want to show her exactly what takes place in there. Something along the lines of bending her over my desk and spanking her for having the hide to be so fucking unforgettable that she’s all I can think about.**

**“Maybe another time sugar,” I tell her, using every bit of restraint I have to stop myself from inviting her back there right now. She just signed the contract. She’s now an employee, and that means off-limits. According to my brother Leo, anyway.**

**We walk back through the bar and seating area and past the dance floor where our dancers perform, to the other side of the first floor. This is the part I’ve been dying to show her. “Down here is where all the fun takes place.”**

**“Oh yeah, how’s that?”**

**I shove open the door to the first of our elite rooms, flick on the light, and wait for her reaction.**

**For a second, she says nothing, just examines the space, taking it all in. “So, this place is a sex club, nice.” She smirks like the idea is thrilling to her.**

***Nice.* Her reaction is nice? Fuck, this girl is perfection. “This floor is an elite members-only club, and yes, sometimes our members will indulge in the full services on offer.”**

**She wanders round the room, running her hand along the soft leather of the bolster. “People really into all this kinky stuff, hey?” She picks up a flogger, running the tassels through her fingers. She’s utterly fascinated.**

**“Our clientele pays upwards of 200,000 a year just for membership to this floor. What they do when they book these rooms is none of my business.” I take the flogger from her, placing it back on the hook it came from.**

**“Forgive my ignorance, but how does that work?”**

**“We have a selection of girls signed up to participate in our elite room experience. The interested parties will offer a bid on the girl of his choosing, and the girl will approve it. The room is booked for a couple of hours or the night if that’s what takes their fancy.”**

**“How does that work for you?”**

**“We take our cut off the top. Twenty percent of the bid, and the rest goes to the girl.”**

**“Sounds lucrative for you. What kind of money are we talking? Just out of interest’s sake.”**

**“As little as five as much as twenty. Really, they could bid whatever they wanted.”**

**She tilts her head, watching me. “What about you? You book this room in, from time to time? I’m sure a busy entrepreneur like yourself doesn’t have time for relationships, and this must be the sweetest part of running this club. Right?”**

**I place my hand on the small of her back, showing her out of the room. She’s seen enough for tonight. I drop my mouth to her ear as we walk. “You shouldn’t ask questions you don’t really want the answer to,” I whisper.**

**I see the goosebumps scatter over her skin. She’s majorly turned on right now. “Oh, but I do want the answer to that question. I’m dying to know what Mr. Rivera does in his downtime. I bet you’re kinky.”**

**This girl. Fuck me. She's something else. Especially when she says Mr. Rivera. I get a vision of her on her knees before me, begging me to give her what she wants. I give her a look, telling her to behave, then check my watch. "Might be time for you to get ready for your shift," I tell her, avoiding heading down the dark road she's taking me. I've been there before, and it never ends well. The girl gets attached when all I was after was a little fun with someone new who shares the same sexual interests as me. It's a bad idea on so many levels, and as much as I despise Leo's new rules. I know he's right. Getting involved with staff only leads to trouble.**

**"If that's what you want, Mr. Rivera," she purrs, swaying her hips as she walks towards the staffroom, and I can't help but watch her. She knows I am too. It's what she wants. She's a temptress. Hiring her may have been a mistake, but it's too late now.**

**I head right for the bar, pouring myself a whiskey.**

**"Mr. Rivera, this is my bar, scotch," Xavier's bubbly voice chirps from behind me.**

**I put my hands up in defense and back away with my drink.**

**"Our newbie all signed in?" she asks curiously.**

**"Sure is. She's in the staffroom changing into her uniform as we speak."**

**"Won't last the night. Way too pure." Xavier shakes her head, disappointed in me.**

**"She might look innocent, but I can assure you, she will surprise you." I smirk, telling her I know more than I should.**

**"Oh, come on. Don't tell me your cock slipped into her while you were giving her the grand tour again. Leo's going to be pissed," she snips,**

unimpressed. “And I’m going to have to clean up another mess. You know I hate dealing with the tears.”

“Chill, Xav. Geez. Nice to know whose side you’re on. You know I pay your wages, right?”

She eyes me suspiciously, like she doesn’t believe me. The two of us have become good friends over the last couple of years. She’s the only staff member who can give me shit and get away with it.

“I didn’t touch her, I swear.” I laugh.

Her glare intensifies. “I can never tell if you’re messing with me or not,” she says seriously.

“I’m not. She’s all yours. I won’t lay a finger on her. You have my word.” I cross my heart to prove it.

“It’s not your fingers I’m worried about,” she snips, and I can tell she’s not convinced. But she should worry about them, I can do all sorts of damage with these digits.

Jett pulls up a stool beside me. His baseball cap, T-shirt, and jeans seem quite out of place in our upscale establishment, but he pulls it off. No one would be brave enough to question him on it, and even Leo gave up trying to get him to stick to our club’s dress code. Jett does what he wants, he always has. Tonight, he likely just finished his second gym session for the day. With his next MMA fight less than two months away, training is his priority. He could give two fucks about dressing to impress.

“Who’s the blonde you were showing around?” he inquires with a hint of curiosity in his tone.

“Bella Jones, a knockout, right?”

“Absolutely. What’s she doing up here?” he asks, his eyebrows raising

in genuine curiosity. He knows me well enough to know I'm up to something.

"I hired her. She's traveling from Australia; met her last night while I was making the rounds downstairs. Glad I covered your shift now." I was pissed last night because I had plans at The Joker, one of our bars across town, but Jett needed a night off with his new girlfriend, Hazel. I will never get used to him being all loved up. For so long it was the two of us partying together. He was like my wingman. Now I have to go it alone. Or not at all, if it was up to Maeve. She thinks I have a problem. I couldn't be happier with my life; as far as I'm concerned, it's the rest of them who have it wrong. Answering to another person. Having to rely on them and take care of them. Nope, that shit's not for me. I like being on my own.

"I bet. So, you offered her a non-existent job? How kind of you," Jett says, his tone laced with a touch of sarcasm.

"Xavier's going to train her up here. The ground floor is full, but we could use another girl up here. They've been run off their feet the last few weeks, especially on Friday and Saturday nights." I glance at Xavier for support, and she nods at us while drying off glasses, a slight smile on her face.

"Nothing to do with you wanting to fuck her." Jett gives me a knowing look. "Did she turn down your charming pickup lines last night?" he asks, a mischievous twinkle in his eye. My brother knows me too well.

I break into a chuckle. "She was playing hard to get."

"So, you gave her a job?" he grumbles, unimpressed.

"I was just securing another chance to see her," I play along, enjoying messing with Jett. Sometimes he takes life way too seriously. He needs



me around to keep it fun.

“Every shift! You know that staff meeting earlier in the week was aimed at you. Leo is pretty strong on the ‘no fooling around with your staff’ policy,” he reminds me, his tone stern.

“He wasn’t serious about it.” I laugh, knowing Leo goes on these rants from time to time. I’ve never let them affect me too much before.

“Deadly serious, Brother. He’s not losing another hard-working staff member because of your romantic escapades. Those were his exact words. Don’t you remember?”

“Nope. I tune out when Leo rants. It’s quite convenient that this rule comes into play now that you two are already partnered up,” I reply, feigning forgetfulness. But I remember, and I had intended to stay true to my word. It’s not like I have a shortage of other options.

“Actually, I think it has more to do with him finding out that he and Piper are having a girl. He’s feeling sorry for the women you pursue,” Jett remarks, raising an eyebrow in my direction, as if he agrees with Leo.

“I don’t have to chase them; they come to me. Anyway, what if she’s different? What if she’s the one? I could miss out because of his silly rule,” I mutter, knowing I’m talking directly from my dick. I’m hot for her dirty mouth and her fine ass. It’s nothing to do with fate or romance. My two brothers are the ones dumb enough to fall for that shit. Not me. I’m going to be single forever. And now that they are partnered up, this town is my playground.

“Yeah, she’s the one you want to fuck this week. I’m sure she is, Brother.” He chuckles.

“That’s not what I meant,” I mutter.

**“We both know that’s all this will be. She looks all shiny and new to you right now, but after you fuck her, that shine will fade. And it will leave us looking for new staff again.”**

**“You’re probably right,” I agree with him, knowing I need to stay away from her.**

**“You know I am,” he grumbles.**

**Bella walks out of the staffroom dressed in her work uniform. She looks even better than she did in that white dress last night. My dick goes instantly hard, and I have to adjust my pants to sit more comfortably.**

**Jett slaps me on the back. He notices her as well. “Fuck. Wouldn’t want to be you, Brother. The attention that girl’s going to get will drive you crazy.” He laughs at my pain. Now he thinks this is funny.**

**He’s not wrong, though. Bella is going to cause some trouble for me. I can feel it. My hands clench at the thought of other men ogling her. I crack my knuckles to ease the tension. She’s sexy as sin with a dirty mouth, and when she says Mr. Rivera, all I can picture is her on her knees begging me to fuck her pretty little mouth. Staying away from her is going to be impossible.**

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**Find out what happens to Kobe in his and Arabella’s book, Undercover Desires, releasing on January 4th, 2024, pre-order now [here](#).**

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# About the Author



A. K. STEEL IS a steamy contemporary romance and romantic suspense author. She lives on the beautiful South Coast of NSW, Australia, with her partner and three pre-teens, a Cocker Spaniel, and a Lovebird. When she's not writing or daydreaming about new story ideas, you can find her playing with flowers at the local flower shop or kicking a soccer ball around with her team.

A. K. takes readers on thrilling escapes from reality into her captivating world. With an intoxicating blend of danger and desire, her stories plunge readers into unforgettable journeys where they surrender to the dangerous charms of irresistible heroes and the fierce heroines they love. Lose yourself in fiery chemistry, delectable plot twists, and edge-of-your-seat adventures that culminate in satisfying happily ever afters.